Looking Backwards into the Future with Brian Berry

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Imagine a place and time when, unless you lived in the Ozarks, you had not heard of Wal-Mart; when people drove station wagons, not sport utility vehicles; when the lament “windows crashed” meant kids were playing baseball in the empty lots outside; a time when using a computer meant lugging stacks or boxes of cards with little holes strategically punched in them. Even in this prehistoric time (1970), Brian Berry predicted the world as we know it—with surprising accuracy.

Berry’s article on “The Geography of the United States in the year 2000” was one of the first statements by a geographer examining what alternative futures might look like. It was published at roughly the same time as Alvin Toffler’s Future Shock (1970) and two issues of Daedalus (1967, 1968) were devoted to studying futures. It was also a year of continuing campus protests against the U.S. war in Vietnam and student deaths at Kent State and Jackson State Universities. In his prescient statement, Berry admonished geographers to begin “to develop the capacity” to predict future geographies, to determine the most desirable future geography, and to assess the likely geographies that result from alternative public policies—in short, “to perform in policy-relevant terms” (21). He was also among the first scholars to introduce both the concept of a postindustrial society and the rudiments of a national space economy to the discipline. And he discussed time-space compression ideas, which were later pursued by others (Abler et al. 1975; Brunn and Leinbach 1990). Nested within the paper were a couple of dozen maps, including the daily urban systems, metropolitan commuting fields, and television viewing sheds, which formed the basis of many of his projections. These predictions were based on technological changes he foresaw as affecting national economic development.

Berry’s article discussed some of the leading scholars at the time studying regional economic and demographic futures (Wilbur Thompson and Harvey Perloff) as well as alternative futures (Herman Kahn and Daniel Bell). He also cited the work of John Borchert, who outlined a series of major epochs in urban processes during the previous two centuries, processes stimulated by changes in technology. Using these studies and his own experiences in the academy and as an international consultant, he crafted an insightful and thought-provoking statement on the country’s urban and regional futures. For example, he predicted that distance-decay would continue to lessen, a finding confirmed by subsequent research. He correctly foresaw the process of suburbanization and the abandonment of the central city, which have continued unabated since the 1960s. He acknowledged the continued importance of physical amenities in stimulating economic and demographic growth in Florida, Arizona, and California, arguing that shifts in population and changes in technology were accounting for economic growth in these states. Instead of the continued growth of BoWash, ChiPitts, and SanSan that others had predicted, Berry foresaw an inversion of American geography, a shift from the traditional city-centered organization of economic activities. By the time of his writing, it was clear that ChiPitts and the rest of the heartland no longer played the leading role they had previously held. In general, the rise of the South and cities such as Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami, and Phoenix...
have overwhelmed many other patterns in the U.S. urban system. Berry addressed these phenomena only tangentially through the “footloose” industries and the rise of the “quaternary” sector. The extent to which technology and services drive the American economy remains a matter of debate, but their role has certainly grown during the past four decades. Despite continuing exurban settlement by people escaping their cities, a widespread inversion has not occurred.

Berry did provide some crude thinking about fiberoptics and networks, and he recognized that knowledge would emerge as a significant factor in regional growth. Part of the reason for this development, as Townsend (2001) acknowledges, is the rise of “new network cities” that have captured much of the benefit of the Internet economy and its flows. Berry introduced the concept of an “era of telemobility” (21), which marks a society changing from one that is mechanical to one that is electronic. His perception into the virtual worlds experienced during teleconferencing was prophetic. He used the term “sensate culture,” borrowed from Daniel Bell, to discuss “the hypnotic domination of leisure time,” which brings both universality and new social frameworks. We can see this feature in the emergence of “infotainment” promoted by Hollywood, the gaming industry, and computer software developers. Creative regions, today referred to also as “knowledge regions,” were introduced as new features in these economies in which the public and private sectors collaborate. Growth in these regions can have both high- and low-tech features.

In other words, the growth patterns in regional and national economies are more than simply hierarchical—the principal theme of Berry’s article. Nevertheless, much of the growth that occurs and will occur remains hierarchical, and hierarchical diffusion remains the general pattern for the “series of revolutionary electronic innovations that will reflect American in the years to come” (Berry 1970, 46). These innovations, it could be argued, have not shortened the working week, but have allowed it to become fragmented and disintegrated in new ways (Couclelis 2000) and have contributed to some degree of disjuncture between personal interactions, the machine and personal identity, the work, home, entertainment, and political worlds. Who we are, what we are, and where we are in these geolimnal worlds are among the nagging questions for which no easy answers exist.

One phenomenon that Berry missed—and that blind-sided nearly everyone—was the Internet. Although many people were users of BITNET, the primitive e-mail precursor, e-mail has been far and away the greatest use of the Internet. Although Berry did not foresee the Internet per se, his hints at it—among them telemobility and electronic environments—were remarkable. Berry (1970, 50) jumped, however to the conclusion to which many others have jumped: the likelihood that face-to-face contacts and physical movements would be “replaced by a thin film of electrons spread over the countryside.” After three decades of fitting the new technologies into the realm of human nature, it has become clear that many face-to-face contacts—which Leamer and Storper (2001, 653) call “handshakes”—cannot be replaced by electronic conversations. Instead, there are complex interdependencies between telemediated activities and physical geography (Goddard and Richardson 1996), between telepresence and local presence (Mitchell 1999). So there is little chance that BoWash, ChiPitts, and SanSan actually will vanish. The Internet combines point-to-point and broadcast capability within a single network. It can be a telephone, a library, a soapbox, or a conventional mass medium—and it can be all of these settings at once” (DiMaggio et al. 2001, 327). Perhaps a better way to understand the diffusion of these technologies Berry described is to see them not simply as technologies, but as two different phenomena: information goods, such as radios, televisions, and other consumer electronic products; and information services, such as electrification, cable television, the telephone, and Internet services. Information goods are standard innovations of the type on which diffusion research has long focused (Schement 1999). Geographers are major contributors to the new fields of information and communication technologies (ICT) at all scales: personal, neighborhood, and cities. We have yet to see in what ways the Internet transforms our cities and urban residents (Kopomaa 2000). The greatest risk, perhaps, is the creation of splintered metropolises, in which the wealthy rub elbows with the poor even less than they traditionally have done (Graham and Marvin 2001).
Not unexpectedly, there were other changes in society, technology, regional and national economies, and policies that Berry did not anticipate and probably could not have foreseen, but neither did many of the disciplinary or interdisciplinary futurists at the time (Daedalus 1967, 1968). Berry could not have anticipated the entirely new lexicon associated with work, society, and technology. These terms refer to the role of the computer and related computer language, a language that is used and understood by many of today's children, youth and adults. These include multiple words beginning with “cyber,” “tele,” “virtual,” and “digital”—cybercrime and cyberspace, telemedicine and teleshopping, virtual communities, virtual reality, and digital divides. In geography we have geographic information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), cybermaps, and digital databases. And we have Fordism and post-Fordism, deindustrialization, gentrification, and Silicon Valleys and other electronic geomorphologies around the world. Also, we have come to rely on more than simply economists for forecasting. We have sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and many hybrid scholars—including political economists, environmental psychologists, regional sociologists, and environmental scientists—commenting on regional and national policy questions. These experts advise large state governors and big city mayors, new and old minority groups, and local and global actors on a wide range of technology/policy/society topics. Related to the above, there are entirely new inventions and innovations since the 1970s that have affected human interaction, work/living-place experiences, and the production and transfer of knowledge. Here we refer to the impacts of the computer, the mobile telephone, the Internet, and the World Wide Web, and the rapid diffusion of these technologies throughout a culture where the boundaries between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations and regions are fluid and blurring.

Berry could not have anticipated the 1970s energy crisis and the short-term focus on alternative soft energy sources (the “greening of America”). Nor could he have envisioned the consequences of a nation heavily dependent on foreign oil, or the major public opposition during much of the 1970s to continued construction of nuclear power plants. And he could not have anticipated the federal and private investments in rebuilding many inner cities through programs promoting gentrification, urban homesteading, sports stadiums, and corporate office towers. Urban boosterism, or the national and regional competition for urban investment—whether in banking, entertainment, or tourism—was in its infancy during the late 1960s. In addition, with respect to the Sun Belt, Berry could not have projected the tremendous influence that that region would have on national politics, not only in selecting presidents, but in setting the social and political agenda for the coming decades, including issues related to the North American Free Trade Agreement, immigration, pollution, water quality, and defense spending. Finally, he did not anticipate the tremendous growth in scholarly literature on national and regional policy issues, a literature to which geographers have been major contributors. The publication of new books and series and new disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals for academics and trade markets, coupled with the production of popular television programs and films related to urban America and specific cities, has been phenomenal during the past three decades. In short, the knowledge explosion that drives the post-industrial economies Berry described is much in evidence in the academic and popular marketplaces.

In conclusion, we believe Berry's article still provides challenging opportunities for intellectual reflection and stimulation. We need to understand what technologies can do, rather than to succumb to myths and overgeneralizations. Berry’s predictions are a model to follow—that is, well grounded in previous predictions of future geographies and based on a careful examination of recent empirical trends and an understanding of technologies and their diffusion. We are pleased with the contributions geographers have made to technological and electronic worlds during the past two decades. Many of the most recent geography books (Dodge and Kitchin 2000, 2001; Ducatel, Webster, and Hermann 2000; Janelle and Hodge 2000; Wheeler, Aoyama, and Warf 2000; Wilson and Corey 2000; Leinbach and Brunn 2001; Kellerman 2002) and special journals with contributions by geographers (American Behavioral Scientist 2000; NETCOM 2000; Environment and Planning B 2001; Journal of Urban Technology
Looking Backwards into the Future with Brian Berry

2002; *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 2002; *Urban Studies* 2002) owe their intellectual heritage to Berry’s article. Predictions and forecasting trends are not easy tasks. Differences of opinion appear to surface when measuring the costs and benefits of digital divides, of exurban subdivisions, or of electronic infrastructures to peripheral regions—of bowling together or alone. We hope there will always be ample elbow room in the discipline for constructive and instructive examinations of who said and wrote what, and why. In this way, our discipline, with its very catholic membership, will continue to secure its place in the academic marketplace and the social-policy arena.

Notes

1 He did not mention the phrase “Sun Belt,” which became popular during the 1970s; in the late 1960s, the phrase used to describe these processes was “new urbanization” (Greer et al. 1968).

Literature Cited


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