

MODULE 3.3

CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES TO THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHIC THOUGHT

The past few years have witnessed the emergence of an alternative to understanding the history of geography. Instead of seeing it in terms of a succession of paradigms, what is being emphasized by some is the role of what is called 'context'. Important people in this approach to the subject matter include David Livingstone and Felix Driver. 'Context' may seem vague but in fact it is a little more precisely expressed as I will attempt to show. To some degree it builds on the critiques of Kuhn that we encountered earlier: the explicit critique of Harvey and the more implicit one of Taylor. But it goes beyond them.

A second distinguishing feature of the approach is the discarding of the sharp ruptures in a discipline's history distinctive of Kuhn's sequence of normal science, scientific revolutions and a new phase of normal science under a new paradigm. Contextual approaches tend to see disciplines as dominated by concepts that appear and reappear over and over again, albeit with the important qualification that their meanings may shift: not all of the sense relations that go to define their meanings but some of them. So although a spatial scientist may have something different in mind when he/she thinks of 'space' the meaning overlaps with that of someone whose intellectual formation preceded the spatial-quantitative revolution.

Defining Features Of A Contextual Approach

The Idea of Context

"... there can only be a situated geography. For geography has meant different things to different people in different places and thus the 'nature' of geography is always negotiated. The task of geography's historians, at least in part, is thus to ascertain how and why particular practices and procedures come to be accounted geographically legitimate and hence normative at different moments in time and in different spatial settings." (Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, pp.28-29)

'...meanings and the relative importance of concepts have evolved over time as the power relations forming the field of geographical knowledge have changed and as new meanings are enforced. 'Power relations' does not refer only to the social structure of the discipline or the wider society but relates also to the power exercised by an *epistemic regime* (or system of knowing) which organizes the whole or part of the field through its dominant 'discursive practices' (favoring of certain concepts and allied meanings relative to others, association of concepts with others, modes of writing -- narrative versus analysis, topics chosen for research, etc).' (Agnew, Livingstone and Rogers, *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology* p.9)

There are three distinct elements of the power relations distinctive to a particular time and place that are being identified here:

(1) 'the social structure of the discipline': This will be familiar to us from our reading of Taylor and the importance Taylor assigns to struggles for ascendancy within academic disciplines that he describes: Harvey's 'shabby struggles for power'.

(2) 'the wider society': Again we will recognize something of this from Harvey's critique of Kuhn. Harvey, recall, is anxious to provide scientific knowledge and research with a firm materialist base. His thesis, in accord with his marxist position, is that what structures the shift from one paradigm to another is the relative capacity of alternative paradigms to facilitate human control of natural forces; though as he goes on to argue this human control is never socially neutral but advantages those who control the means of production which mediate that control of scientific knowledge. However, as Livingstone avers, '... an account that takes seriously the interpenetration of geographical knowledge and broader socio-intellectual circumstances need not be committed to a reductionist materialism' (p.27). An example of non-marxist interpretation of how geographic thought is socially situated, for example, comes from Wrigley's interpretation of the regional studies of Vidal de la Blache which we read when discussing the areal studies tradition.

(3) Finally there is what is referred to in the quote above as 'systems of knowing'. At the risk of some slight blurring of meaning here I am going to refer to this as a matter of 'intellectual

context'. Stoddart's paper on the influence of Darwin is especially interesting here. Darwin's thought was important in at least three ways. The first was the way it emphasized irreversible, time-dependent processes. The most obvious manifestation of this was Davis's cycle. The second was the use of organismic analogies. For Davis the physical landscape was likened to an organism undergoing a sequence of changes in form through time -- youth, maturity, old age¹. Similarly Herbertson saw natural regions as 'definite associations of inorganic and living matter with definite structures and functions, with as real a form and possessing as regular and orderly changes as those of a plant or an animal.'

The third way that Darwin influenced geography was through his emphasis on the relations between organisms and their natural environment: the idea of adaptation to natural environments and of a struggle for survival between different species. This broad notion was appropriated by geography in several different ways. The most obvious is the way in which geography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was structured around the idea of people-environment relations. The second was the idea of nations as species struggling for space so as to survive: something that appears in Mackinder's work and later in German geopolitics in the form of the idea of lebensraum or 'space for living'.

At this point it is also worth referring to the intellectual context in which the SQR emerged. According to some, including Harvey and Livingstone, the Cold War, the political onslaught on left thinking associated with McCarthyism, led at the time to what Daniel Bell, in a book of the same title, called 'the end of ideology.' In politics the retreat from ideology led to considerable convergence on the ends of politics. This meant a heightened attention to the different means that could be mobilized in achieving the same end and opened the way to more technocratic understandings of the world, as in so-called management science. I would add, however, that compost for the technocratic impulse was a good deal deeper than that. The 'fifties and 'sixties, after all, were what has become known as the 'golden age' of capitalism. Radical politics retreated, with the exception of the civil rights movement. In Britain a succession of defeats of

¹ This was something that was not confined to geography. Similar progressive sequences were devised in botany and in the study of soils. Moreover, in botany Clements' concept of a climax vegetation, a stable equilibrium, is analogous to Davis's concept of a peneplane as the end stage of the cycle of erosion.

the Labour Party in the 'fifties prompted the question "Must Labor Lose?"² In the US the prospect of an enduring Republican majority as a result of ongoing suburbanization was debated. The 'end of ideology'³ was announced and social science reflected this.

Continuity

On the other hand, it is important not to see the role of context in some determinist way. Agnew, Livingstone and Rogers are anxious to recognize the way in which text creates context. So (e.g.) as well as developing new understandings that then get incorporated into the existing body of concepts of the discipline, texts themselves invariably incorporate older understandings. As he says:

"The (geographical) concepts we have identified ... constitute key elements of 'geographical discourses' that have emerged historically over the past 150 years. There are no original or essential meanings to these concepts that can be privileged over others. Rather, meanings and the relative importance of concepts have evolved over time as the power relations forming the field of geographical knowledge have changed and as new meanings are enforced." (Agnew, Livingstone and Rogers, p.9 of *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology*)

And:

"... human geography does not have an 'essential' nature. Its nature changes over time as its concepts are invested with different meanings and significance. Consequently theoretical concepts can only be understood in the social and intellectual circumstances in which they are deployed. Thus, it is always appropriate to ask of any concept of theory" 'why was it put forward? Whose interests did it advance or retard? In what kind of milieu was it conceived and communicated? How adapted was it to its cognitive and social environments?" (*Ibid*, p.10)

New understandings are developed and particular individuals are important in their development. One thinks here, for instance, of the work of Massey on firm spatial divisions of labor, or of Scott on 'new industrial spaces'. Both build on existing concepts: the division of labor between places in Massey's case and the work on economies of agglomeration in Scott's. But they both

² There was a (1960) book with this title written by Mark Abrams, Rita Hiden and Richard Rose.

³ Most famously by Daniel Bell (1961).

contribute something that is new as well, as we can recognize in the citation counts. Consider likewise in this regard the creative synthesis of ideas that Schumm and Lichty arrive at in their paper on causality in geomorphology. Again, as Agnew, Livingstone and Rogers have emphasized:

"... key authors have at crucial junctures led discursive innovations that would not have happened or achieved success but for their insight, energy and charisma. One thinks in this connection, for example, of authors such as Mackinder, Vidal de la Blache, Schaefer, Harvey and Massey This is not to say that an author is the single 'source of significations that fill a work', only that the author is more than a mere 'murmur' in a stream of discourse." (*Ibid*, p.9)

It is in this way that the intellectual contexts of disciplines tend to change: not radically in the way that Kuhn believes but gradually, the old being incorporated into the new, the new building on the old and providing it with new interpretations. These new interpretations may be conditioned by changes in the broader intellectual context, as in the case of the way Darwin was married to geography's longstanding interest in space; not difficult considering the geographic explorations of Darwin and his interest in place specificity, like the unique flora and fauna of the Galapagos. They may also be conditioned by changes in the wider social context. Harvey emphasizes the role of planning in the post war period, the rise of an interest in the management of transportation for instance, as a precondition for the spatial-quantitative revolution.

Case Studies:

I: Concepts of Closed Space

A good example of contextual study is the paper by Kearns ('Closed Space and Political Practice: Frederick Jackson Turner and Halford Mackinder' *Society and Space* 2:1 (1984)). There are several important points we should note from this paper.

First, Turner and Mackinder hardly amounted to a school of thought but they both shared a distinctive conception of space: what Kearns calls closed-space. Likewise in both cases we can make sense of this conception in terms of the intellectual fashions of the day and the political problems being experienced in the US and Britain. Kearns is more convincing in the latter regard

than Hudson because both Turner and Mackinder were themselves politically involved; this makes the links easier to defend. For Turner closed-space appeared in the form of the passing of empty lands for settlement in the US; he believed this provided an important condition for social unrest in the US and class polarization since there were no safety valves left in the form of an expanding frontier. The frontier had also been the nursery of American democracy.

For Mackinder closed-space emerged in the form of the closing of the world to further possibilities of imperial expansion. In future the imperial countries could only expand at each other's expense. In both cases, however, democracy was at risk; in the American case because of the dangers of socialist revolution that had to be preempted. And in the British case because the British might become part of another empire which would take their freedom away from them.

The closed space theories of both Turner and Mackinder make use of a union of biology and geography. Kearns has some interesting things to say on why that union occurred when it did. Evolutionary biology was central to public debate in the late nineteenth century and evolutionary ideas were built into political positions. The role of biology in public thought was buttressed by the deference to science as a result of the public success of technology. Evolutionary biology symbolized most starkly the rejection of pre-scientific views and the success of the scientific method of observation and deduction.

Another feature of the contemporary intellectual environment was the presence of what Kearns calls 'a spatial imagination' in both the US and Britain. In popular accounts of American development appeal was made to the passion for space and movement: the historical role of the frontier in the formation of the national character. The British interest in other lands derived from imperialism: the Empire was an official and popular enthusiasm and an important source of national pride.

The dilemma for both Turner and Mackinder was how to bring this spatial imagination and derivative public concerns like ensuring the future of the empire in the British case and that of democracy in the US case into contact with the accepted currency of evolutionary biology. On

the one hand space had to be seen as an important requirement for the social organism. On the other space had to be at a premium. This ensured a struggle for space analogous to the competition of species and the survival of the fittest. The easiest way to do this was to argue that existing space was filled up: "...it was the need to capture the language of biology for their geographical perspectives which impelled them to adopt closed-space theories..." (p.27).

Both stressed the environment as a control in the struggle of the species. For Turner the frontier experience had resulted in the conversion of Europeans into a new species, Americans. The frontier experience produced a democratic tradition independent of imported French and English doctrines. For Mackinder, on the other hand, the natural environment was a stage for the struggle of the races.

In each instance their theories of closed spaces were used to give support to political positions. For Turner it was support of the Progressives. Given the closing of the frontier democracy was threatened by social disorder. He suggested that the old non-interventionist, laissez-faire policies would not work and supported the Progressive Party as the party of social reforms to ensure the future of democracy. Mackinder likewise argued for greater state intervention and a retreat from the laissez faire of free trade which had so influenced British policy in the nineteenth century. He feared that Britain's domestic base, in an age where domination could only proceed by the mutual cannibalization of empires owing to the completion of the partition of the world, was inadequate for maintaining its freedoms from foreign domination. He argued that in order to secure that domestic base free trade had to be jettisoned and this was the argument taken up by a wing of the Liberal Party. Free trade had to be replaced by a discriminatory trade bloc in the form of the British Empire. This would allow increased trade for Britain and an increase in British population allowing it to maintain its position of power in the world.

II: 'Lebensraum'

Ideas that are taken up in the institutionalized field of geography have complex origins. This was evident in the discussion of concepts of closed space above. So too is this the case with the idea of 'lebensraum.' The idea entered the public consciousness on a large scale during the 'twenties

and in particular during the 'thirties as a result of explicitly announced Nazi policy goals: in particular the need to achieve 'living space' for Germans elsewhere in the world, but particularly in Russia. The term itself was originally coined by the German the German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904). As we noted in Module 1.1, Ratzel was an environmental determinist but he was also influenced, as were other determinists like Ellen Semple, by the idea of race; in particular that successful races, or what Ratzel called 'peoples' or 'Völker.' are the ones that adapt most successfully to their environmental conditions. If a race, like any biological species is to continue to be successful it must continually expand the amount of space it occupies. This necessarily meant conquest, the displacement of less successful 'Völker', and colonization by peasant farmers of the successful 'Volk.' The crude influence of evolutionary theory through the ideas of social darwinianism is recognizable here. The emphasis on 'peasant farmers' is also important. Not least it resonated with a romantic agrarianism that had been developing in Germany in the course of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the context of the social convulsions that accompanied the industrial revolution.

The interest in German colonization specifically of the east, and notably Russia, rather than empire elsewhere in the world, and we should recall here that Germany did have African colonies, notably in German Southwest Africa, the Cameroons, and Tanganyika, was a development occurring immediately prior to the First World War. But its further practice reinforced the resonance of Nazi war aims and, indeed, support for the Nazi Party itself. The leading advocate of eastern expansion was a chauvinist ginger group known as the Pan-German League. A notable figure here was Friedrich von Bernhardi who wrote a book entitled *Germany and the Next War* (1912), in which he drew on Ratzel and advocated war as a means of gaining spaces in Eastern Europe for the settlement of German peasant farmers. And indeed, during the First World War they succeeded the beginnings of such a program were initiated in Western Russia. With the end of the war the settlers were evicted amidst great bitterness.

This still leaves important questions unanswered, however; notably why the focus was on peasant colonization. Certainly there was colonial settlement in the case of the British and French Empires but it was not a major political issue as it was to become in the case of Germany. One could argue that in the case of France this was because any case for population pressure on the land was negated by the fact of the slow growth of population there. In the British case,

however, ‘overpopulation’ was not an issue. Rather the common belief was that Britain could resolve its food problem – if that indeed was the problem resulting in demands for agricultural settlement elsewhere – by exporting industrial products and importing foodstuffs in exchange. However, as we will see the call for ‘lebensraum’ in order to settle peasant farmers had far more complex origins than simply producing food to feed yet other Germans. Rather, it was seen as an end in itself.⁴

As discussed by Peter Staudenmaier (see fn.4) what we find emerging in Germany during the nineteenth century is a peculiar mix of ecology, anti-industrialism, irrationalism and national chauvinism. Particularly prominent was Ernst Arndt. Arndt was concerned about the exploitation of nature subsequent to industrialism and saw the peasantry as a guardian of good environmental practice. This was mixed up, however, with a chauvinism which cherished the soil of Germany as exclusively ‘German’ and for a German people freed from the dangers of racial miscegenation. Anti-Semitism was part of this. Part of this was undoubtedly a strong anti-urbanist feeling and Jews were part of it, drawing on the old stereotypes of their cosmopolitanism and so anti-national nature, rootless and so lacking connections to the soil, and exploitative. This developed in the second half of the nineteenth century into the *völkisch* movement, which Staudenmaier describes as “... a powerful cultural disposition and social tendency which united ethnocentric populism with nature mysticism.” As he then goes on to argue: “At the heart of the *völkisch* temptation was a pathological response to modernity. In the face of the very real dislocations brought on by the triumph of industrial capitalism and national unification, *völkisch* thinkers preached a return to the land, to the simplicity and wholeness of a life attuned to nature's purity.” Subsequently he demonstrates how central these ideas about the agrarian and a return to nature were to Nazi ideology.

⁴ In what follows, I am particularly indebted to Peter Staudenmaier's paper entitled “Fascist Ecology: The ‘Green Wing’ of the Nazi Party and its Historical Antecedents”:
<http://www.spung.org/texts/places/germany/sp001630/peter.html>.

This could actually be pursued further. The whole idea of the significance of population pressure for inter-state relations is a significant theme in political geography in the 'thirties all the way up to the 'fifties and could be easily documented. When you read it today it sounds awfully unconvincing. I was struck by this recently on looking over some old texts in political geography. Walter Fitzgerald's The New Europe (1945) and the large collection of essays, The Changing World (1956) edited by W.G.East and A.E.Moodie are typical of this genre and are worth a look for this alone.

[S.T. ON BRUCE BRAUN]