A VIEW OF GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT. What is the intellectual character and core of geography? An answer, from a broadly humanist viewpoint, that may satisfy the genuinely curious and literate public lies in the definition of the field as the study of the earth as the home of people. Home is the key, unifying word for all the principal subdivisions of geography, because home, in the large sense, is physical, economic, psychological, and moral; it is the whole physical earth and a specific neighborhood; it is constraint and freedom—place, location, and space.

COLLEAGUES in other disciplines have asked me, out of genuine curiosity, What is geography? and, specifically, How do you consider what you do geography? It may be that other geographers have been so questioned, although I suspect that those of us who work at the extreme human end of the field are especially likely to be approached. My reply naturally reflects my own line of work. I have tried, however, to embed what I have called "a view of geography" in the broadest possible context so that it can be of interest not only to geographers but also to scholars in other disciplines and, more generally, to the literate public. What I state here makes no appeal to geography's usefulness to society in the narrow sense: everyone by now knows or should know that "places and their products" are an integral part of every modern citizen's education. I wish to satisfy well-read and thoughtful persons who, having already accepted the field's practical value, would like to be better acquainted with its intellectual core.

I start with a definition popular during the late 1940s and early 1950s: geography is the study of the earth as the home of people. I like this definition for a number of reasons, one of which is that it makes immediately clear that geography, for all the technical sophistication of its specialized subfields, is not remote or esoteric knowledge but rather a basic human concern. Humans everywhere seek to understand the nature of their home. When this understanding is articulated in words or as sketches and maps, however primitive, it constitutes geography. So long as humans exist, there will always be such understanding—such geographies (Sauer 1956).

EARTH

Consider three key words in the definition. The first is earth. Geography is the study of the earth as a human home. What is the earth like? What are its physical characteristics? No human group can survive unless it makes sense of its environs—its Airs, Waters, and Places, as Hippocrates put it. Physical geographers have built on this basic curiosity and need. They have tried to understand the earth as the physical or natural entity on which

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humans live. Physical geography can be a pure physical science that scarcely mentions people and their works (Leighly 1955). Yet, for all its rightful claim to being a physical science, it remains a science tied, at a fundamental level, to the human scale (Hartshorne 1959, 41–47). Thus, whereas physical geographers may study the earth as a whole or its parts, the parts they study rarely, if ever, reach the microscale of, say, the molecular structure of minerals or the turbulences of air over leaves of different shape. Physical geographers examine the surface and the upper crust of the earth but almost never its core, which is too remote from ordinary human interest. They study landforms, climates, and biological organisms of the last two million years, but rarely those of more distant geological times. They restrict themselves to the Quaternary period, with special emphasis on the Holocene (Knox 1985), because it is then that the earth has become the home of the human species.

Because the Quaternary is also the period of humans and their ancestors, there is a tendency for physical geography to dovetail with prehistoric human geography. The livelihoods of remote forebears cannot be understood without a detailed knowledge of the environments of the past (Holliday 1988). A geographer of prehistoric migrations must also be a competent physical geographer to postulate open corridors in the ice sheets or available coastal routes on elevated marine terraces (Sauer 1944).

Humans

Now that I have introduced humans onto the scene, let me explore their importance, because they constitute the third key term in the definition. Early in the twentieth century geographers, especially ones trained in geology, tended to view humans largely as geological agents: their significance, it was argued, lies in their ability to transform the surface of the earth. Later, people were considered as cultural or sociopolitical beings and, still later, as psychological beings and even as individuals capable of wisdom or folly (Vale 1988). As geographical conceptualization of humans gained complexity, they themselves moved closer to the center stage of interest. To the extent that such a move has occurred, geographers enter the ranks of humanists. True humanist geographers explore the earth less for its own sake than for what it can tell of its human residents and their character. Without doubt much of human character is revealed in the innumerable ways that people traffic with external reality. To geographers it is revealed, above all, in the synergies of land and life.

Let me give an example. A chief theme in geographical scholarship is the role of humans in changing the face of the earth (Thomas 1956; Goudie 1990). Traditionally, attention is directed to the earth that has been altered. Even when geographers turn to humans rather than to wind and water as agents of change, the focus remains the earth: geography therefore remains an earth science. But suppose the focus is shifted. The study of transformed nature then becomes one of the routes toward a better understanding of

people and society. To the question, What is such a people like? a geographer may reply that they are the sort that foul their own nest (environmental pollution), or the sort that show remarkable ingenuity and energy in creating ridged fields in tropical wetlands (Parsons and Denevan 1967). In the measure any scholar pursues the question, Why do people act toward nature the way they do? the thinking is that of a humanist geographer, and the discoveries that are a consequence of geography's distinctive perspective are a contribution to the humanist enterprise.

Let me take the idea a step further. I have noted that geographers now show an interest in the human being's psychological dimension. One way for geographers to explore this dimension is to study how humans have playfully transformed nature: for example, water in fountains is forced to jump, and wilderness is miniaturized into bonsai. In the careful examination of these activities, human distortion of plants and animals as well as the pleasure in and affection for them is evident, with a vividness beyond the capability of abstract cogitation. Pleasure in the great gardens of the world can so command the foreground of consciousness that their admirers quite forget their source in the playful, that is, willful or arbitrary exercise of power (Tuan 1984).

Home

Of the three key terms in the definition of geography, home occupies the central position, and it can perhaps be argued that to the degree that geographers move from the idea of home, they shift from the core of their field. This notion appears to have the backing of intuition and common sense. Physical geographers may be described as earth scientists who happen to be drawn to those layers of the earth—from the lithographic mantle to the stratosphere—that are closest to human needs; intuitively, they have confined their research to upper and lower limits that still fall within a commonsensical notion of the earth as home.

Home is a very broad, elastic concept. The field of study that seeks to comprehend its totality must therefore also be broad and elastic. Home obviously has a physical component. At one end of the spectrum, the planet earth is a physical or natural entity. At the other end, the house is a material structure. Between them, the bounded spaces of the humanized world, from fenced fields to political states protected by radar screens, are all tangible realities. What are the material characteristics of this home? People must know if a unit of space is to offer the familiarity and material support of home; they must know the layout of home, its spatial character, how one part differs from another. They must know its resources and their location, and how to maintain its material integrity. The skill of an applied geographer is, in essence, the skill of every person who has a home and the responsibility to manage it. The difference is one of scale and of sophistication. For instance, with regard to the quantity and quality of information needed to manage a

home, a householder's simple plan and inventory of the property become, at the scale of region and country, an elaborate landuse survey (Stamp 1951) and a contemporary geographer's computerized geographic information system.

Home obviously means much more than a natural or physical setting. Especially, the term cannot be limited to a built place. A useful point of departure for understanding home may be not its material manifestation, but rather a concept: home is a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy a people's real and perceived basic biosocial needs and, beyond that, their higher aesthetic-political aspirations.

Home is created symbolically as well as materially. The most powerful and precise symbol system of humans is language. Words or speech calls homes into being. An example will make the point. Forager-hunters who barely make a dent on their natural environment nevertheless live in home space. A thoroughly humanized world is created through naming natural features, classifying them in some manner, and telling stories about them. The naming and the taxonomy are a sort of inventory of economic resources. Language, in this sense, is a practical instrument of survival. But it may be that more objects are named than are strictly necessary for survival. A home is created larger than bodily needs require; its enlargement through verbal means may be presumed to satisfy the mind. Moreover, although most words in human language carry an emotional tone that provides an automatic bond between things out there and self, some words are more emotionally charged than are others, and these may be applied to features of special importance, for instance, a prominent tree or rock.

What is briefly sketched here for forager-hunters becomes enormously more complex with large literate societies. In them, cultivated fields and settlements now hit the eye, but it should be remembered that in the settling of North America and Australia by Europeans, long before axes fell on trees to prepare the making of farms, extensive stretches of land were already appropriated through the familiarizing rites of the survey, the naming of natural features, the drawing of maps, and the writing of epics of exploration. Without these steps that symbolically transform space into home or world, material changes can hardly proceed other than haphazardly and at small scale (Carter 1988). Moreover, these symbolic procedures have to be continued and renovated if the created world is not to lose meanings that motivate people to maintain their material environment. An example of renovation, or a shift of symbolic procedure, is the making of beautiful atlases that cover total space rather than survey maps of a linear-directional thrust, and the writing of local or national histories and geographies rather than diaries, journals, and epics of exploration. And, of course, the materially altered landscape itself immediately acquires symbolic resonance: for if objects in nature, through the human magic of storytelling or dance, can vibrate with meaning, then all the more so can artifacts and humanly created environ-

ments (Langer 1967, 87, 241). Words such as home, neighborhood, ghetto, slum, town, city, farm, countryside, region, province, and nation-state are hardly neutral in meaning, hardly descriptive only of physical characteristics. They appear not as labels but as proper nouns or minipoems that evoke and enhance—render in some sense more vivid and real—the personality of places (Ward 1989).

Constraint and Freedom

Humans transform environments into worlds, nature into homes. Humans are actors and agents, but they also suffer from all degrees of passivity. People everywhere are very much aware of the impingements of external forces—floods and droughts and human enemies—on their lives. Indeed, the uncertainty of life in premodern societies and times was such that people seldom saw themselves as agents or creators. Thus a landscape of fields and crops is essentially "nature" to simple agriculturalists as well as to sophisticated premodern Europeans; it is without history, even though almost everything in it has been humanly altered extensively and progressively in the course of time (Yen 1982; Tuan 1989). Again, in Europe and China, garden is "nature," although it can be a work of the utmost artifice and sophistication. Only the city is manifestly the result of human agency. It has been viewed ambivalently as at once a proud achievement in stable human order set against nature's vicissitudes and an overweening impiety that may call upon it the anger of the gods.

Most of the constraints that circumscribe lives are unknown to humans. They are unaware of these constraints because they do not intrude as unexpected events. For instance, structures of space, time, and resources put certain limits on the action of any human group, but they may not be seen as such. Unless the group has the opportunity to compare itself with other groups, the structures that underlie its livelihood are likely to function not as constraints but as the unexamined points of departure for cultural ways of doing things. With greater awareness, humans may come to see how the sense of agency and of control promised by cultural practices is often an illusion. Thus Labrador Indians use scapulimancy to predict good hunting areas. They may think that a solemn practice enables them to control their food supply. In fact, the solemnity has little to do with locating the next area of abundant game successfully. The practice is successful because it happens to randomize the sites selected for hunting (Moore 1957).

Consider another example. Cities and towns on gently rolling plains such as the Middle West may show a hierarchical locational pattern. The pattern displayed by the location of urban centers of different size suggests overall design, but it is no more that, in the sense of emerging from a planner's mind, than is the polygonal perfection of a snowflake. Humans are not as much in control as they would like to think they are, and their frailty is exposed not only by threat of chaos but also in the existence of orderly

processes and patterns that are not part of human intention. Geographers writing in a positivist vein have been of great value to humanist geography by showing the limitations of human awareness, by teaching modern men and women to see, with a precision and range unknown to tragedians of the past, the subtle and ubiquitous operations of fate.

Humans act to achieve a goal, and it may turn out that the goal attained is not the result of intentional action but rather of larger forces of which there is no prior knowledge. Again, when humans act to achieve a goal, it may happen that the one attained, for all its temporary or local advantages, has long-range, bad consequences that cannot be predicted. One's own culture is not only a pair of glasses that enable persons to see but also glasses that are inevitably tinted and thus bias the viewing in some way. The mind makes it possible for humans to transcend the limitations of culture, but humans have come to recognize increasingly the mind's own limitations, operating as it does in the binary mode or in some other genetically determined mode that future scientists will discover.

Freedom, paradoxically, depends on the recognition of limits—of constraint. A major effort in liberal education is to teach how "unfree" humans are. It is human to impose boundaries, material and conceptual, around self and worlds. Home, neighborhood, and nation-state are all delimited spaces, and culture itself frees humans to the extent that it confines and channels their energies. Basic humanity is nurtured in the confined spaces of home and neighborhood, family and community. Even when a people feel threatened at home and escape boldly across an ocean or a continent to freedom, their purpose is still to reestablish a bounded world in which they can pursue a familiar way of life (Ostergren 1988).

During the last century, such bounded worlds have come under a new threat, in addition to the disasters of nature and sociopolitical violence long familiar to humankind. I refer to the disruptive yet potentially liberating openness of modern life and its socioeconomic order. Modern openness is good to the extent that it forces people to examine traditional places and institutions unsentimentally, but bad if it destroys the concept of boundedness—of limitation—altogether. Without that concept people would lose not only a sense of piety that makes them human but also the very power of transcending whatever bounded condition they happen to be in. Home, for the modern person, is a point of departure rather than the locus of permanent loyalty. This idea of home as a mere stopping point, which has roots in a religion or philosophy of a universalist and ascetic bent, is by now almost totally secular and hence without transcendental purpose or support. A great challenge for the contemporary geographer is to see how the forces of modernity, which include not only technical power but also critical intelligence exercised responsibly or cynically, transform a premodern world of circumscribed and rooted places into shifting patterns that, if they show

any directional thrust at all, tend toward a disorienting world of local variety and global uniformity (Sack 1988).

Home and Morality

Home, insofar as it is an intimately lived-in place, is imbued with moral meaning. Moral codes apply first of all to humans. Indeed, in folk and traditional communities, they apply foremost to the local group: outsiders, who cannot be expected to behave properly, do not enjoy the full courtesies. However, as the concept of home expands, so also expands the population for whom the moral codes are operative. In the course of time, people everywhere are seen to inhabit the same moral universe. Universal religions and philosophies subscribe to this viewpoint; in the case of Buddhism, even plants and lowly animals come under codes of behavior inspired by an overarching sense of compassion.

In a number of premodern hunting cultures, certain animals are treated with respect, even as they are killed, and among premodern agriculturalists with a world view tinged by fear, certain plants and animals are regarded as taboo. But this attitude to nonhuman living things is not the same as attributing rights and obligations to them, or as seeing them as falling under the aegis of a suprapersonal conception of justice (Kay 1985). Even today, such conceptions tend to be applied only to the human species. For instance, when geographers talk about justice they almost always have in mind social justice in a world of human strangers. Redwoods and whales are not included (Nash 1989). But what if the entire planet is taken as the human home, and we realize that there are no strangers, human or nonhuman? And what if this realization comes at a time when the religious underpinnings of morality that make deep sacrifices possible have been weakened not only by material affluence but also by rational secularist thought?

The Culture of Geography

I have tried to show that geography, for all the distinctive character of its specialties, is a coherent field of study, but I would be dishonest if I do not confess that this is not the whole picture. Geography holds together for ultralogical reasons as well, namely, that it is a tradition and a culture, a world view and even a temperament that some persons happen to have. As a tradition and an academic culture, geography has its roots in Greek thought. It has flourished at certain times more than at others, in certain parts of the world more than in others. I would say that for the culture of geography to flourish, an intimate awareness of one's own locality based on a knowledge of how places and peoples could differ profoundly, often within short distances, is combined with a more abstract appreciation of the earth as a whole. Europe, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, appears to have fulfilled this condition; not so the United States, however, where a powerful cultural-

political ideology that favored a conception of America as space and scene overwhelmed the experience and awareness of local differences and attachments (Lowenthal 1968; Jackson 1972). And yet, ironically, is not this abstract sense of earth and place precisely the phenomenon that contemporary geographers must seek to understand in order to comprehend the modern world?

I now turn to world view. Here I again emphasize the three key words: earth, home, and people. These words, and specifically the central term home, give geographers a unique perspective on reality. They are unified by this perspective, which is not so much a conscious program as a temperament or natural disposition. Thus physical geographers, if they leave geomorphology or climatology, almost always shift to human geography rather than to geology or upper-atmospheric science. For their part, human geographers, however deeply immersed they are in human reality, are inevitably attuned to the sirens of nature: they retain a curiosity as to how their colleagues in the physical branch approach the natural world, and in human geographers' own work, even if it concerns cities, there hovers in the background the pale New England sky or the merciless Florida sun.

A final observation. No matter how reductive and abstract may be an individual's line of research, geographers are never comfortable with the single vision of Newton or an economist. The reason is simple: if in every instance geographers insist on precision and quantifiability at the expense of a roundedness of view and resonance, they can never hope to understand the earth as home.

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