

Rediscovering the Importance of Geography

By ALEXANDER B. MURPHY -- **Chronicle of Higher Education** -- October 30, 1998

As Americans struggle to understand their place in a world characterized by instant global communications, shifting geopolitical relationships, and growing evidence of environmental change, it is not surprising that the venerable discipline of geography is experiencing a renaissance in the United States. More elementary and secondary schools now require courses in geography, and the College Board is adding the subject to its Advanced Placement program. In higher education, students are enrolling in geography courses in unprecedented numbers. Between 1985-86 and 1994-95, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in geography increased from 3,056 to 4,295. Not coincidentally, more businesses are looking for employees with expertise in geographical analysis, to help them analyze possible new markets or environmental issues.

In light of these developments, institutions of higher education cannot afford simply to ignore geography, as some of them have, or to assume that existing programs are adequate. College administrators should recognize the academic and practical advantages of enhancing their offerings in geography, particularly if they are going to meet the demand for more and better geography instruction in primary and secondary schools. We cannot afford to know so little about the other countries and peoples with which we now interact with such frequency, or about the dramatic environmental changes unfolding around us.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, most academics in the United States considered geography a marginal discipline, although it remained a core subject in most other countries. The familiar academic divide in the United States between the physical sciences, on one hand, and the social sciences and humanities, on the other, left little room for a discipline concerned with how things are organized and relate to one another on the surface of the earth -- a concern that necessarily bridges the physical and cultural spheres. Moreover, beginning in the 1960s, the U.S. social-science agenda came to be dominated by pursuit of more-scientific explanations for human phenomena, based on assumptions about global similarities in human institutions, motivations, and actions. Accordingly, regional differences often were seen as idiosyncrasies of declining significance.

Although academic administrators and scholars in other disciplines might have marginalized geography, they could not kill it, for any attempt to make sense of the world must be based on some understanding of the changing human and physical patterns that shape its evolution -- be they shifting vegetation zones or expanding economic contacts across international boundaries. Hence, some U.S. colleges and universities continued to teach geography, and the discipline was often in the background of many policy issues -- for example, the need to assess the risks associated with foreign investment in various parts of the world.

By the late 1980s, Americans' general ignorance of geography had become too widespread to ignore. Newspapers regularly published reports of surveys demonstrating that many Americans could not identify major countries or oceans on a map. The real problem, of course, was not the inability to answer simple questions that might be asked on *Jeopardy!*; instead, it was what that inability demonstrated about our collective understanding of the globe.

Geography's renaissance in the United States is due to the growing recognition that physical and human processes such as soil erosion and ethnic unrest are inextricably tied to their geographical context. To understand modern Iraq, it is not enough to know who is in power and how the political system functions. We also need to know something about the country's ethnic groups and their settlement patterns, the different physical environments and resources within the country, and its ties to surrounding countries and trading partners.

Those matters are sometimes addressed by practitioners of other disciplines, of course, but they are rarely central to the analysis. Instead, generalizations are often made at the level of the state, and little attention is given to spatial patterns and practices that play out on local levels or across international boundaries. Such preoccupations help to explain why many scholars were caught off guard by the explosion of ethnic unrest in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Similarly, comprehending the dynamics of El Niño requires more than knowledge of the behavior of ocean and air currents; it is also important to understand how those currents are situated with respect to land masses and how they relate to other climatic patterns, some of which have been altered by the burning of fossil fuels and other human activities. And any attempt to understand the nature and extent of humans' impact on the environment requires consideration of the relationship between human and physical contributions to environmental change. The factories and cars in a city produce smog, but surrounding mountains may trap it, increasing air pollution significantly.

Today, academics in fields including history, economics, and conservation biology are turning to geographers for help with some of their concerns. Paul Krugman, a noted economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, has turned conventional wisdom on its head by pointing out the role of historically rooted regional inequities in how international trade is structured.

Geographers work on issues ranging from climate change to ethnic conflict to urban sprawl. What unites their work is its focus on the shifting organization and character of the earth's surface. Geographers examine changing patterns of vegetation to study global warming; they analyze where ethnic groups live in Bosnia to help understand the pros and cons of competing administrative solutions to the civil war there; they map AIDS cases in Africa to learn how to reduce the spread of the disease.

Geography is reclaiming attention because it addresses such questions in their relevant spatial and environmental contexts. A growing number of scholars in other disciplines are realizing that it is a mistake to treat all places as if they were essentially the same (think of the assumptions in most economic models), or to undertake research on the environment that does not include consideration of the relationships between human and physical processes in particular regions.

Still, the challenges to the discipline are great. Only a small number of primary- and secondary-school teachers have enough training in geography to offer students an exciting introduction to the subject. At the college level, many geography departments are small; they are absent altogether at some high-profile universities.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to overcome the public's view of geography as a simple exercise in place-name recognition. Much of geography's power **lies in the insights it sheds on the nature and meaning of the evolving spatial arrangements and landscapes that make up our world.** The importance of those insights should not be underestimated at a time of changing political boundaries, accelerated human alteration of the environment, and rapidly shifting patterns of human interaction.

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