

The Americanization of American geography

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Preamble

In this paper, we examine the construction of academic geography in the United States, set against a backdrop of immanent globalization. We take the latter to mean a process whereby the existing world economy develops 'the capacity to work as a unit in real time on a planetary scale' (Castells 1996: 92). The academic enterprise operates directly within this global economy in a number of ways, as we will indicate below. First, there is the direct transfer of information, which takes place between individuals and institutions. Second, there is the commodification of knowledge, which occurs as a secondary circuit of information transfer, facilitated increasingly by transnational publishing corporations (Barnett and Low 1996). And third, there is a circulation of individuals who themselves constitute a form of intellectual property, and who move from institution to institution as students, researchers and teachers.

While it is useful to think of the intellectual sector within the contexts of both time and space therefore, these material dimensions are not equally important. While the academy operates in the global context of information transfer, it would be hard to assert that much of this exchange occurs in real time, as is the case with, say, the currency markets (Sassen 1996). For example, very little of the information that leaves the classroom does so in digital form, despite a great deal of publicity that has been given to 'distance learning' via cable television and the Internet. The bulk of in-

formation generated is transferred in traditional, analogue form, such as written notes or video; much is simply lost in the creation of conversation (Harré 1984). To this point, the Internet still exists as a potential medium. For example, many instructors have Internet home pages, but these are rarely tied in to formal information exchange. In addition, several large conglomerates have begun to move into electronic publishing, but for the most part this is hampered by relatively traditional institutional expectations concerning permanent forms of publication that are evaluated for purposes of personnel review, rather than for speed or ubiquity of dissemination.

Although the allied processes of research and the education of adults are thus not fully integrated into a global information economy, they are important in another context. Globalization has also been defined as 'the process whereby the population of the world is increasingly bonded into a single society' (Albrow 1993: 248). This can occur via electronic communication, as popular culture is commodified and flows back and forth across the planet – a process of *Titanic* proportions, so to speak – but attention must also be given to the intersections of culture and capitalism, sometimes also termed McDonaldization (Ritzer 1996). As its name indicates, this construction bears very explicit overtones of American society, and there are seemingly infinite examples of the ways in which U.S. corporations have penetrated markets around the world and undermined local patterns of consumption in the process. Inevitably, this cultural neo-impe-

rialism has prompted social resistance within many societies, as nativist sentiments reject American clothes, American television, American fast food and all that is implied by these commodities. Interestingly, this has in turn contributed to the evolution of alternative forms of global thought, notably in the environmental context (e.g. Taylor 1997). Thus as we confront the existence of a global culture, we see that it is heavily influenced by US consumer goods, media images, sports, music, and language.

American academic thought does not readily conform to this sphere of cultural diffusion. Just as American contemporary classical music is little known elsewhere, the same can be said of American intellectuals. While institutions in the United States have little trouble attracting scholars from around the world due to their high salaries and advanced equipment, this does not mean that their output dominates in all fields. This would be particularly true in the humanities and social sciences, where the near monopoly enjoyed by European thinkers has been little challenged during the 'American century'. There are few rivals to figures such as Weber, Foucault or Keynes who have both emerged within the American academy and achieved a similar stature.

The discipline of geography is no exception to this tendency. American scholars are greatly outnumbered by their colleagues working in departments of geography around the world. In addition, there is a relative imbalance in the research interests displayed by geographers in different countries, with those in Europe and Asia taking the lead in the consideration of global phenomena. For instance, much has been written in the past decade about the manner in which European geographers were implicated in the early rounds of internationalization, an arguable antecedent to globalization. The imperial expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been closely scrutinized by British and Canadian disciplinary historians; indeed, so much has been written that one commentator has remarked that 'it would be quite disastrous for the theoretically inclined human geographer if the . . . discipline did *not* have a dubious imperialistic past' (Barnett 1995: 418, original emphasis).

For obvious political-economic reasons, things were manifested differently in the United States. This was a different intellectual climate, far from the British Empire, the Royal Societies of London and their travellers' tales (Robertson, Mash, Tickner, Bird, Curtis & Putnam 1994). Academics in the new universities were strongly influenced by physical geography and the new science of geomorphology, and it can be argued that these foundations produced a discipline that diverged markedly from its counterparts elsewhere (Kirby 1991). One of the hallmarks of this di-

vergence was the manner in which the behavioralist revolution was imported into the United States in the post-war period. The incorporation of social science methodologies was heralded by a Canadian and spearheaded by one of the first expatriate Europeans (Berry 1959; Burton 1962). Much the same can be said of the introduction of political-economic perspectives (Cox 1973; Harvey 1973), poststructural work (Olsson 1980), and feminist geography (Monk 1981; Penrose, Bondi, Kofman, Rose, Whatmore 1992; Bowlby, Lewis, McDowell, Foord 1992). Even one of the first studies of the emerging global economy (the traffic in television programs around the world) was undertaken by an expatriate (Gould, et al. 1984).

Grounding global processes in local places: the Association of American Geographers

In an effort to interrogate the current positioning of American geography in the global intellectual marketplace, we have focused our attentions on the traffic in ideas. This takes many forms, and we have mentioned the publication of material and the movement of scholars. There have been various studies of authors and the impacts of their publications, principally through citation analyses. However, there have also emerged numerous criticisms of these measures. Citations may not reflect endorsement, for example, while small groups of supportive scholars can readily distort their importance via a policy of mutual citation (Bodman 1991; Johnston 1991). Here, we have provided brief analyses of the interactions that occur at academic conferences. Although there are limitations to this approach, not least of which is the friction of distance, conferences are for the most part open forums of intellectual exchange that are not subject to the same vagaries of editorial control found in journals and book publication.

Over four thousand people attended the 1998 meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in Boston, Massachusetts, where over 2,400 presentations were made (AAG 1998). The scale of this gathering is perhaps more impressive than the geographical diversity of its participants; this we use as a very simple measure of the integration of American geography into a global community of scholars. As the data indicate, the conference is attended overwhelmingly by US-based geographers, with some cross-fertilization from Canadian and UK scholars, among others (see Table 1). While there is undoubtedly a large net influx of 'immigrant geographers' to the US, the authors of this paper among them, the global and/or transnational character of the discipline is questionable.

Table 1. Participation Rates (%) at AAG Meetings by Country, 1995–1997

Country base/ Year & Location	US Participants	Canadian Participants	'Foreign' Participants ¹
1995 Chicago, IL	88.7%	5.5%	5.7%
1996 Charlotte, NC	87.3%	6.2%	6.6%
1997 Fort Worth, TX	90%	4.3%	5.7%

¹ The term 'foreign' is taken from the statistical records provided by the AAG. The authors would like to thank Kevin Klug of the AAG for providing the data for this table. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%. In 1997, countries counted as 'foreign' included, in descending order of participant numbers, the UK, France, Israel, Australia, Germany, Hong Kong/New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Finland/Slovenia/Sweden, Brazil/Kuwait/Russia/Switzerland, Croatia/Cuba/Cyprus/Honduras/Hungary/Ireland/Jordan/Taiwan/Thailand.

We can go beyond the origins of the participants to also address the intellectual content of recent AAG meetings. The conferences, which have few gatekeepers in terms of the selection of sessions or papers, do not address issues of globalization to any significant extent. Not only are there no specialty groups which focus upon the issues of globalization, but a survey of the sessions listed in the index for the 1996 meeting in Charlotte turned up no evidence of interest in that topic *per se*. In 1997, five sessions were organized under the rubric of globalization and in 1998 this had risen to ten. Although this does indicate nascent interest, it is a tiny proportion of the several hundred sessions that were organized.

By way of contrast, we might speak of a tentative binational 'West Coast' geography, comprised of scholars situated in both Canada and the US, including those who operate primarily within an intellectual economy of critical social theory (Pratt, 1993; Pred and Watts, 1992; Gregory 1994; Sparke 1994), and those who engage in explicitly transnational research agendas (Mitchell, 1997; Hirsch, 1997; Vasile, 1997; Sparke, 1996). As one might expect, the overlap between these groups is considerable. Theories of transnationalism analyze – among other things – the movement of capital and its owners across space, tracing the cultural and political implications of transnational migration as well as the impact of increasingly global financial transfers (Wilson and Dissanayake, 1996). Perhaps the most transnational human geography event hosted in North America was the Inaugural International Critical Conference in Geography (IICCG). Held in Vancouver, Canada in August 1997, the gathering undoubtedly attracted many like-minded North American geographers whose interests were not met by other fora. It also brought together, however, a significant proportion of scholars from abroad under the ill-defined but inclusive rubric of 'critical geography' (see Table 2).

The conference was at once a broadly transnational collection of scholars and a venue for intellectual ex-

change organized in 'real time' which addressed issues associated with globalization and transnationalism, among a range of other theoretical interests.

Free trade in geography?

The example of a conference attracting large numbers of American and Canadian scholars should remind us of the political debates that have continued throughout this decade in the U.S. over the terms of free trade. Numerous commentators have indicated that Americans are deeply troubled by the prospect of open borders, both in terms of foreign goods and foreign workers. Once again, we can usefully situate the academy into this broader political-economic debate.

The debut of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994 marks a symbolic shift for geographers in Canada, the US, and Mexico. NAFTA creates conditions for the increased and unfettered circulation of goods and services, though not the circulation of people/labour. The trade liberalization associated with NAFTA – a marker of globalization within an increasingly neo-liberal economic context – sits in stark contrast to the staunchly national boundaries for those of us who fall outside the category of goods and services (Sassen, 1996). Various categories of academics, however, are an excep-

Table 2. Participation rates (%) at the IICCG Conference, 1997¹

Country base	US	Canada	'Foreign'
1997	40%	23%	37%

¹ The proportions calculated here are taken from a partial, publicized conference list to which those included gave permission. The conference hosted approximately 250 in total. Some twenty countries participated in the conference, with the highest representation among international visitors coming from the UK, Korea, and Sweden.

tion to this rule. NAFTA creates temporary categories for certain 'treaty nationals' (TNs) who fall into nine specific categories: urban planners (defined as those holding a geography degree) and university/college teachers (inclusive of academic geographers) comprise two of these groups. The cross-border circulation of geographers who fall into these categories will provide some evidence of a global labour market, although two caveats are in order. The first is that, as noted, there has been a flow of Anglo geographers into the United States for several decades. The second is that the opportunities for Mexican colleagues to enter the US remain much more closely monitored, as is the case with most occupations. The operation of the North American labour market has not yet transcended the many differences between the northern and southern borders of the United States.

Saskia Sassen's (1996) thesis that the denationalization and globalization of certain economic sectors stands in contrast to (but articulates with) the renationalization of territorial boundaries vis-à-vis immigration regulation in the US is borne out by recent legislation. Since the implementation of NAFTA, the US has become much more concerned about the porosity of its borders, both that which it shares with Mexico and the 49th parallel which divides Canada and the US. The 1996 Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act, for example, outlines measures to ensure that by September 1998 every visitor, including Canadians who are now exempt, must obtain a visa before entering the US (Selle, 1997). The idea that a wall should be built along the land border between the US and Mexico – put forth by the New Right during the last presidential election – has since been realized. A wall has been erected, at the cost of US\$ 750,000, between Nogales, Arizona on the US side and Nogales, Sonora on the Mexican side (Howe Verhovek, 1997). 'US officials say they are pleased with the barrier, which they insist on calling a fence, even though it's already been climbed over and defaced in places by graffiti' (Lopez, 1997). It is then ironic that every effort was made to ensure that the 'fence' was as aesthetically appealing on the Mexican side as the US side: windows were inserted so that people could look through the pink wall from one side of the border to the other. While this wall does not directly shape geography as a discipline, it embodies a divide that creates geographies of exclusion (Sibley, 1995).

A hi-tech twist in this scenario is the deployment of GIS (Geographic Information Systems/Science) to patrol the US-Mexican border (*GIS World Inc.* 1997: 12). The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the US Border Patrol have integrated Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to survey a network of 40 buried sensors installed over the past two

years at the border near San Diego. The sensors detect seismic disturbance which can then be mapped using GIS. The new technology is employed by an expanded group of border guards, who use it to identify and detain 'illegals'. The doubling of US border patrol staff stands in stark contrast to the talk of free trade in a global economy. The contradiction is perhaps a metaphor for the state of the US academy, which retains borders despite globalizing tendencies across the disciplines, geography included.

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With American popular culture, media, and business disseminated across borders so thoroughly, a process that Sassen has discussed as an example of further Americanization, we are left to ask – why not disciplines such as geography? This is a question that has been extensively rehearsed by virtually every commentator in the past and it becomes more compelling if we assume that a discipline dealing with space and place could have much to say to those in government and in business. A former director of the Office of the Geographer in the U.S. Department of State has argued for exactly this instrumentalist role (Demko 1992). However, his cheery observation in a discussion of 'military planners' that 'General Augusto Pinochet of Chile happens to be a geographer' also says volumes about why the discipline may lack some credibility in policy circles (1992: 218).

In reality, there are two interpretations that can be made of the state of contemporary geography. One deals with the postmodern condition, the other with the growth of research in Geographical Information Systems. In many ways, these are unrelated, perhaps even antithetical concerns; nonetheless, they both speak to a fundamental issue within the discipline.

The power of place denied

In recent years, geographers have worked hard to insinuate themselves into the reappraisal of time and space that has occurred within many social sciences and the humanities, and some American geographers such as Ed Soja and Allan Pred have been influential in this regard. Nonetheless, this has had some unlooked-for results. One is captured in the simple proposition that space has become 'de-materialized' insofar as it has been transformed into a metaphorical relationship. In their readings of cities (such as Los Angeles) as texts, rather than as concrete realities, some geographers have thus begun a dismantling of what had been a fairly consistent naïve realist perspective on the social and natural construction of the world.

From a different perspective, we see an analogous process at work in the writings of David Harvey, who has critically confronted concepts such as the 'power of place' (Harvey 1996). While this replaces a sentimental attachment to cultural regions, the fear of creating a 'spatial fetish' diminishes the distinctiveness of geography as a discipline that serves to interpret the world to its inhabitants.

Geographic information science: a global growth industry?

Geographic information science, or GIS, is an area of immense growth within geography because of its potential application in a variety of commercial and institutional settings. It is a nationally endorsed and funded research pursuit with an arguably global presence. In the US, GIS received a strong impetus for development in the early 1990s when the National Science Foundation funded the National Center for Geographic Information Analysis at \$ 1 million per year for five years. At the same time, GIS represents a sub-discipline of geography that at once creates new bases for the globalization of information and exchanges ideas and intellectuals across borders in very practical ways. A number of objects of geographical inquiry are global in scale, including epidemiology, climate change, and environmental modeling, and GIS is well-poised to analyze these spatial phenomena. GIS has strong appeal because its method can be traced and its results reproduced. It has, despite the claims of its many critics, had a significant impact on the profile of geography and its contribution to globalizing processes.

In a manner that is analogous to our brief discussion of postmodern scholarship, we can see that GIS is also clearly not the exclusive domain of US geography, nor even of geography as a discipline. Research in GIS is disseminated and shared between the US and Europe (including the UK), at conferences such as the Symposium on Spatial Data Handling (SDH) which has been held every two years since 1984 in Zurich, Seattle, Sydney, Zurich, Charleston, Edinburgh, Delft, and this year in Vancouver. GIS may well create grounds for 'reintroducing geography' into the American mind; it remains to be seen whether it does so in a way that necessitates the interventions of academic geographers. In that context, it is significant that the Microsoft Corporation reports that it will be selling satellite imagery, using GIS technologies, over the Internet by the spring of 1998.

Conclusions

It is perhaps symptomatic of geography as a discipline that it continually interrogates itself and, to some, appears to spend more time analyzing itself than engaging in substantive research. Such are the perils of any discipline that operates on the margins of the academy, as occurs with geography in the United States. With respect to the issue of globalization, we can be sure that this will in turn become a subject of concern and exhortation. And, once more, a perspective will be added to the curriculum, regardless of its compatibility with other components.

In this brief overview, we have argued that American geography has, at this juncture, displayed relatively little interest in global phenomena. In part, this reflects the complex antecedents of the discipline in this country. In large measure, though, it also indicates the manner in which globalization and Americanization are often conflated. As those in the US observe the transformations beyond their shores, they do so with a detachment and even an insularity that are denied to observers in other locations. Consequently, we see a recursive process at work; a lack of concern for and uninterest in the world writ large marginalizes American geography; and a geography with little interest in globalization has little to say on that subject. We do not suggest for a moment that geography's practitioners are not active; nor do we suggest that the research is of anything but a high standard. But as we have noted with a couple of brief examples, some of the most interesting work in the poststructural context and that in GIS are both serving to dilute the singularity of academic geography and neither is offering a clear global vision. Consequently, we see yet another context in which the process of Americanization serves to shape, and ultimately to distort, the development of academic geography in this country.

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