Del Casino - "What We Study"

Introduction

Everywhere I look these days I am confronted with the realities of a world shaped by massive inequality and increasing intolerance. Since I began this writing project almost three years ago, HIV cases have risen dramatically in some of the poorest parts of the world. Human trafficking of women and children is being expanded across international borders. Global climate change is intensifying hurricanes and cyclones, directly impacting people who live on land that has been deforested. The current government in Burma refuses to help its citizens, who are starving in the aftermath of the most recent cyclone to sweep through that country. Asthma rates among children living in cities as different as Los Angeles and Nairobi continue to climb, differentially affecting people of color and ethnic minorities. Class differences are being exacerbated by a global economic system that is focused on the generation of wealth instead of the provision of needed resources. Wars are being fought (and planned) by so-called global superpowers, such as the US, based on a narrow and naive reading of ethnic, religious, and political systems and practices. While globalization theorists may think we are living in a world that is becoming more spatially interconnected, the data show just the opposite. The world is becoming more divided, increasingly segregated and differentiated across the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability. More people may be "plugged in" to a global telecommunications network than ever before but others remain completely outside this "revolution."

I am inspired, at the same time, by people who struggle against structural and social violences. Anti-globalization movements challenge the presumptions of a global economic system that is trying to dismantle local economic differences in favor of a singular and monolithic capitalist system. Activists fight to advance the rights of ethnic minorities, working class folk, people with disabilities, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Students in high schools are creating clubs that celebrate sexual difference and holding rallies calling for a cessation of violence against women. Indigenous leaders from poor, farming backgrounds, such as Evo Morales

in Bolivia, are being elected national leaders and taking the world stage. New social networks are spreading across the globe, informing local activist movements to fight for the rights of the world's most disenfranchised. That 500 people living with HIV and AIDS in Thailand led a 2006 protest against a US–Thailand Free Trade Agreement is testament to the powerful coalitions that can be built. People in community organizations and nongovernmental agencies are working tirelessly to create alternative development paths for some of the world's poorest people, while groups fight for the rights of minorities to gain formal citizenship within countries in which they have lived their whole lives. The latest US presidential primary featured, for the first time, an African-American candidate and a female candidate, both of whom were serious contenders for the Democratic Party nomination. That the US electorate is even considering electing a president of mixed-raced background is a staggering achievement. Couple these accomplishments with the mundane and everyday actions of people who work tirelessly against inequality and for more open and tolerant communities, and there is a lot about which we can be hopeful.

Social geographers are interested in these issues because all of them are about the organization, regulation, control, and contestation of space. Put simply, social practices happen somewhere, and the spatial organization of the world impacts how those social practices unfold. As an example, imagine South Africa under the system of apartheid. Under that particular social system, racist ideologies were reinforced through strict spatial segregation. If you were black or colored in South Africa, signs told you where you were and were not to go. Even when no signs appeared, an underlying spatial logic became part of everyone's personal geography in South Africa. Black Africans didn't need to be told not to enter white suburbs without permission. Perhaps less obviously, but no less powerfully, is the spatial practice of a five star hotel in Bangkok, Thailand. In the lobby are two people. One is a western tourist wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and flip-flops. Another is a Thai person, also wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and flip-flops. The western tourist is asked if she would like a seat in the lobby, while the Thai person is asked to leave. It doesn't take a staunch political system to enforce and encode racism in this hotel. Not surprisingly, though, you would rarely find a Thai person who comes from a certain working class background in the lobby of such a hotel. The geography of belonging is part of their everyday worlds. In different ways, then, both spaces, the apartheid state of South Africa and the hotel of Bangkok, impose a distinct geography of inequality and difference.

On the flip side, a struggle for adequate resources must be accompanied by a struggle for equitable access to agricultural spaces, health care spaces, or educational spaces. The Americans with Disabilities Act is an act based in geography. It is about creating equitable access to all public spaces and the resources those spaces control. In a different way, gay pride parades and civil rights marches are struggles to control public space and make what is often geographically hidden – heterosexism and racism – visible. In making such an outward geographic gesture, the goal is both to make people aware of the social issues surrounding heterosexism and racism and to change how people use public (and private) space. No less powerful, but

equally important, might be the flying of a gay pride flag in front of one's house, signaling that not all households are centered in a normative heterosexuality. For social geographers, then, studying how people use space to construct more tolerant and plural societies is centrally important to their work.

In this book, I want to argue that social geography is centrally placed to examine all these issues. I make this slightly bold assertion for several reasons. First, social geography has a long history of studying inequality and difference. Social geography's traditions include the study of environmental justice, racial segregation, gender and sexual diversity, and mental and physical disabilities, for example. Second, social geography is a field of study that has a strong relationship to sociology and social theory. This provides social geography with one of the most theoretically and methodologically diverse "toolkits" for investigating social inequalities and differences from a wide range of perspectives and approaches. Third, social geographers are interested in affecting change with their scholarship and activism. This includes their activism within the discipline of geography as well as in the communities – both "near" and "far" – in which their work and lives are situated. This is not to argue that social geography exists in a "black box" distinct from the other areas of geography. In fact, I will be at pains to argue that social geography is a richer field of inquiry today because of its relationships with (and occasional antagonisms toward) environmental geography, political and economic geography, and cultural geography. With this in mind, let me briefly trace out the "remainder" of this text.

This Book's Modest Goals

Although my assertions about social geography's value as a field of study are somewhat bold, my goals for this book are rather modest. This book's main aim is as an "introduction" to the very complex and diverse sets of perspectives, approaches, and topics that are of interest to social geographers. As an "introduction," I cannot and will not claim that this book is comprehensive. Nor will I insist that this book's organizational framework is the only way to conceptualize social geography. To do so would be patently absurd. There are dozens of ways that one could interpret and organize the field of social geography. The one I provide here, then, is based on my reading of the field as its stands today. In providing a framework for understanding social geography, my reading of the history of the discipline is also strategic, setting out an argument about how social geographers may benefit from understanding a certain set of "past" social geographies. Over the course of researching, writing, and editing this book, I have become even more convinced of the importance of social geography. I hope that over the course of this book, students will also become as engaged and enlivened by the diversity of social geographic research and inquiry as I have become. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the social geographers outlined in this book. That I couldn't do more to showcase their diversity is the downside of such a volume. That students might