

# Why Ask Where

AN EXPLANATION OF CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

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Cultural geography carries two loaded nouns. “Culture” is itself difficult to conceptualize, and in fact much of what cultural geography has been concerned about has to do with theorizations of where culture comes from, who constructs it and who/how societies are affected by it.

“Geography” is a discipline equally complicated to define, and one which both focus and identity has been contested and reconstructed over time. This essay attempts to untangle both terms, in hopes that the meaning and relevance of cultural geography becomes graspable. First, it looks at the discipline itself, its roots and structural changes. Then, culture is examined to explain *why* it is important to observe it, and *how* to observe it. It concludes by explaining how cultural geography is an invaluable tool in understanding societies, their symbols, politics and the landscapes they inhabit.

### ***Geography’s contentious roots***

First, it is important to look at the discipline itself. Geography is an ancient discipline that has been redefined many times, and seen spikes and declines of popularity in the academic realm.

The Geography of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, led by Humboldt and Ritter was massively ambitious. Humboldt’s *Kosmos* was the Berliner scientist’s attempt to explain connections at the scale of the universe, while Ritter’s *Die Erdkunde im Verhältniss zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen* looked at nature and the history of human kind through the lens of Geography. They are both considered the last masters of the discipline, and helped establish what modern Geography is like today.

But Geography came to be considered too broad, and an academic rearrangement of disciplines was established, one that broke disciplines such as Geography into smaller units. Geography was still considered too broad, and has been further divided into branches.

The first applications of Geography, were also very different than what one might expect. As Don Mitchell (2000) points out in this work explaining cultural geography, the discipline was at first an instrument of the state, used to explain and naturalize imperialism (pp 16-18). Geographers drew borders, named places and naturalized assumptions of racial/national superiority through maps and theories of environmental determinism.

Contemporary geography has been defining itself more as a “way of thought” or specific kind of analytical approach, rather than as a discipline with rigidly define interests, and a great deal of effort has been put into studying inequalities and power relations, by employing a unique “spatial way of thinking.”

### ***Defining cultural geography: schools of thought and structural variations***

Modern cultural geography is a branch of human geography, and has its roots in the work of Berkeley Prof. Carl Sauer. Sauer looked primarily at the importance of materiality, focusing on artifacts and the relationship of people with the environment – particularly in regards to how landscape is formed. Sauer and his disciples believed that by reading the landscape of a place – by looking at architecture, for example – one can explain the people who produced it.

A different line of thought was proposed by some geographers who succeeded Sauer, and criticized him for his readings of landscape, framing it as apolitical, bias and elitist. Leading what is known as the *quantitative revolution*, they decided that for Geography to be considered and respected as a science, geographers had to focus on more nomothetic theory constructions,

rather than being a descriptive discipline. Put in simple terms, geographers during this period attempted to reverse the decline in popularity of the discipline by adopting more mathematical, statistically driven studies and models, with hopes of producing theory, rather than simply describing the world.

The contemporary critical Geography with which this piece is concerned focuses on the processes of meaning making and remaking, as well as power relations. It takes the roots of politics and culture as a product of sustained ideologies, rather than an independent entity that acts upon societies, as superorganicists had suggested in the past. Furthermore, cultural geography aims to explain and theorize the world in relationship to place and space, and read landscape as acted upon, and an actor itself. Contemporary cultural geography is concerned with *both* materiality and social processes, as it perceives them to be inseparable.

### ***Culture wars and the importance of explaining culture itself***

Ideas that a “superorganic culture” that transcends the will and power of humans as a separate entity have more or less been refuted. Even more important, contemporary cultural geographers are careful not to use culture to explain societies and phenomena, but to first *inquire culture itself*.

Culture must itself be explained because it is artificial. Rather than a natural reflection of society, culture is merely a set of sustained values and meanings, which were established and perpetuated through power contestations and relations, in which the “winners” get to set what is normative, and the “losers” are placed in a position of subordination, or framed as “Others”. Though these meanings and values may be contested, the process is virtually always one of

prolonged and sometimes violent struggle. Much like Mitchell writes, “cultural wars are wars like any other (pp. 12).”

### ***Why ask where; cultural geography in action***

What sets cultural geography apart it's not its content, but its approach. Cultural geography is a tool, rather than a self-containing discipline. It borrows concepts from several different fields to explain phenomena with a focus on the *where*.

This spatial approach is unique to geography, and a powerful device for understanding and explaining the world. Cultural geographers are concerned with issues such as – but not nearly limited to - power relations, racism, gender roles and representation, sexuality, political culture, cultural politics, imperialism, colonialism, societal dynamics and media constructions of values and meanings. No matter the subject, the approach is always framed with space and landscape in mind; the relationship between who/what is being observed, and the place where it is found.

A legitimate question that one might ask then would be why bother asking *where* when examining issues that seem more suitable to others sciences and disciplines, such as political science, sociology or anthropology.

Consider then how space may construct *race*. The case of East Jackson (State of the Re-Union, 2012), where a community of white people are regarded as black, and embody the identity of African Americans. Or the case of the destruction of the population in Malaga Island (Philbrick, Rosenthal), whose geographical isolation potentially contributed to a society with no racism, but also to perceptions of an inferior mixed race of degenerates by its outsiders.

Consider how space may influence gender roles and sexuality, as Hopkins (2000) explores when looking at how an institution that provides young boys with older male figures puts men in a social dynamic that contradicts the ideal male role in society, specifically when these male bodies find themselves in places that might ignite the questioning of their masculinity. Or how Bell (2000) examines the binaries city/countryside and femininity/masculinity, as places evoke different interpretations of what being a man is and what kinds of sexual expressions are accepted. Or how Johnston's (1996) analysis of female bodybuilding is so much richer, when we consider the gender-segregated spaces of the gym, and how these feminine bodies operate as sites of political contestation.

Consider yet, how space informs cultural politics, as Davis (1992) observes the militarized, class segregating architecture of Los Angeles, or Duncan and Duncan's (1984) reading of the Tudor and quaint landscapes of North American aristocratic communities, carefully constructed to inform identity and dominance.

### ***Conclusions and exciting prospects***

This piece has attempted to communicate that cultural geography is a powerful tool of analysis and explanation of the world, its societies and culture. It informed that the power of cultural geography is in approaching themes such as politics, culture, normative constructions, relationships of power and symbolism with a focus on place and landscape.

It acknowledged that cultural geography can be a difficult field to comprehend at first, for it is concerned with convoluted terms that are challenging to conceptualize, such as "culture," "landscape," "icons" and "space," and for it has changed and morphed as a discipline itself over the past century. Moreover, because it borrows from other disciplines, instead of being a self-

contained one, which might confuse the inexperienced. It is a way of thought, more than a discipline.

Finally, this piece contemplates other questions that cultural geography would likely inform in a very unique way, such as the geographies of music, and how place may inform and explain the origins of certain musical styles and conventions, and examine the social and political contestations that these cultural artifacts entail, related to their places of origin or even the places they influenced the most. It could shed light on important issues regarding borders and migration, such as the Syrian migrant crisis and the contestation of land in places such as China, India and Israel. It would be a powerful tool in explaining such an odd presidential election like the one of the United States in 2016.

These questions, perhaps already addressed by ethnomusicology, political science and history, can be complemented immensely by cultural geography. For cultural geographers, these are not simply different themes and issues. They're an elsewhere.

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