



## **IGU Study Group the cultural approach in geography**

Cultural geography represents one of the major trends in the evolution of our discipline today, as is testified by the development of studies dealing with spatial segregations, diasporas, identities and multi-cultural policies. For the last 15 years, a sustained interest for this domain has been evident everywhere in the World, with the appearance, in English speaking countries, of a New Cultural Geography, which is matched, in France and in other countries, by movements as dynamic, but with slightly different orientations. The Executive Committee of the IGU has just given an official recognition to this trend through the creation of a Study Group on The Cultural Approach in Geography. The will to explore the cultural dimension of distributions and processes is obvious in political and social geography, and is gaining momentum in economic geography.

In the first letter I sent in July to the future full members of our Study Group, I stressed the relevance of 4 themes for which cultural geographers developed a keen interest:

1. The construction of place, territory, environment and society by culture.
2. The fundamental reasons of the cultural differentiation of the Earth.
3. The expressions of the diversity of cultures in space.
4. The applications of cultural geography to political and economic geography, tourism or regional planning.

In order to build a research program, I think that it is useful to take a broad view of the problems and to reflect about what should be an agenda for cultural geography in the next years.

Today's cultural geography drew many lessons of the researches developed in that field until the seventies, even if it disregards this borrowing. However it differs much from them, whatever its forms, for a series of reasons which are linked less

with its methods of research or sources than with the changing conception of geography itself. A thorough investigation of that original situation is needed if we wish to present a coherent agenda likely to orient reflections and to answer the expectations of geographers in the coming years.

### **1. The transformations of geography and cultural approaches**

1. The insistence with which people today are speaking of culture comes from a critique of the role of Reason in knowledge. The epistemologies dominant in the social sciences long remained inspired by the physical ones: an epistemological gap radically severed learned Reason from ordinary discourses. It is that opposition that has been gradually challenged: the conceptions developed by the different societies are, it is true, far away from Reason – but are we sure that the 'rational and scientific' knowledge of distributions that geographers tried to promote during the last hundred years did not reflect the prejudices and presuppositions of Western society? The success of cultural geography grew first from this relativization of modern forms of knowledge – it is one of the aspects of postmodernity.

2. Hence geography ceases to be exclusively cultivated by a learned elite: it is a part of the popular forms of knowledge which exist in every culture, and are not to be scorned. These practices and know-hows certainly lay on doubtful notions, foolish hypotheses and the playing of untestable mechanisms, but they speak of the wishes and plans of people, as well as of the practices which allow, more or less efficiently, to exploit the environment.

The studies which explore these forms of knowledge are built on a simple and fundamental idea: a

geographer must primarily understand how men live in the World, exploit it, but also shape it according to their dreams and load it with sense. Our discipline is a science of man, in the true meaning of the word, and not only a science of the inscription of social mechanisms in space. It shows us how each group, here or there, constructs in the minds of its members the Cosmos, the Earth, the place where they live and those they are told of, and how they conceive nature, society, Good and Evil, male and female.

3. The interest in civilizational realities is also linked with the rapid transformations of the contemporary World. Cultural research as developed at the beginning of our century mainly stressed the technical dimensions of cultural facts: groups were defined through their tools and the way they used them for exploiting their environment. Human groups had created ways of life, "genres de vie", which allowed them to take advantage of very diverse environments in order to satisfy rather than uniform fundamental needs.

The crisis that cultural geography experienced during the 60s and 70s was an outcome of the rapidity with which techniques, now easy to transfer because of their new scientific basis, tended to diffuse all over the World and to become uniform. Many populations lost the technical elements on which they had grafted their identities as a consequence of the shock caused by the globalization of trade in the World today, there are many disorientated groups which are looking for roots: they reject the philosophical universalism which was reigning until recently, and stress passionately all that makes them different from the others. Elements of the environment, which had in the past only functional value, are now loaded with symbolic meaning. Elsewhere, it is in the past, regionalisms or fundamentalisms, that people look for the bases of their collective identity, which has to be protected from the inroads of universalism.

The role of modern high-tech (transportation, communication, computers, screen images, virtual spaces etc.) in contemporary culture is the subject of much study today – not merely critically, but to understand the ways in which such technology is exploited to create and transform space and meaning.

4. Globalization goes hand in hand with an increased mobility of goods, ideas and techniques: it is against those trends that almost all the groups do react spontaneously. The mobility revolution concerns also human moves: migrations of populations have always occurred, but they have new characteristics. The easiness with which it is possible to move back to one's native land when the need is felt, and the continuous flow of news which is received from it, given diasporas new capacities to survive without being integrated into the surrounding society. As new

comers suffer from being unwelcomed and discriminated against, many refuse to be dissolved into the society which receives them. The postmodern world is thus characterized by multiculturalism. Some people present it as a generous ideology made for displacing chauvinisms and exclusivisms of a bygone era. It is not in this way that evolution occurred: it is because the melting pots or assimilation processes, as imperfect as they were, have ceased to function, that the idea to have a diversity of cultures living together in the same place has been theorized.

When dealing with these problems, anglophone geography is mainly interested in how cultural groups both negotiate and manipulate globalization, creating hybrid, creole, flexible, provisional and liminal cultures, quite different from fixed cultures. This aspect has to be covered by the Study Group.

Cultural approaches in today's geography thus expresses: 1) a more modest way to conceive science and 2) the wish to understand what *ecumene* really is. They reflect: 3) the reactions of groups whose identity is threatened by the technical uniformization of the World and the overflow of informations; and 4) the concern for evaluating, in a World where groups are increasingly intermingled, up to what point living together may be peaceful.

A little more than thirty years ago, Ian Burton wrote that the quantitative revolution was over. I think that it is possible to say, in a similar way, that the revolution which explains the new interests for cultural facts, has now been carried out. The psychological and ideological blockages which led to neglect or minimize cultural forces have disappeared with the demise of positivism or narrowly economist marxist views. After a phase of perplexity and hesitations, ideas have become clearer, some themes have progressively been structured and significant results reached. The effort of fundamental reflection of the last 15 years has to be carried on, but it ought not to be diverted from looking into the contribution of cultural approaches to the understanding and solving of problems which confront contemporary societies.

Starting from these considerations, I think that it is possible to propose an agenda for the new Study Group on Cultural Approaches in Geography.

## **2. A suggested agenda for cultural approaches in geography**

### *1. To improve the understanding of the diverse paths followed by cultural research*

What is called cultural geography does not offer the same content everywhere. As geographers with an interest in the fundamental heterogeneity of the Earth, we have to rejoice in a situation in which cultural approaches grew during the last 15 years along diverse paths according to countries: here,

transition was a smooth one, there, there was a break.

A part of the program of the Study Group has to be devoted to the diversity of the researches dealing with the themes of culture, landscape, territory, identity, in order to promote mutual understanding between scholars and favour the diffusion of their results.

2. *To participate to the great epistemological debates concerning the nature of culture*

The change from which modern forms of cultural geography originated is linked with the contemporary movement of epistemological reflection. This latter is more open than in the past to the role played by discourses in the construction of reality – should it be nature, places, space, or social categories, classes, communities, sex or race, etc.

The close link between epistemological reflection and cultural approaches makes these debates highly significant. Some persons think that cultural approaches have to focus on representations, others stress more the role of practices and artefacts present in the World. The Study Group has to stimulate the debates on these fundamental questions, which are in fact more complementary than rival.

3. *To devote a keen attention to the study of ethnogeographies*

Cultural geography also has to develop an interest in the popular and modest components of geographical know-hows, which were long neglected since they were just practices and remained ignored by the elites which monopolized cultural life: the ethno-geographical component of cultural geography is an essential one, even in societies relying on advanced technologies. As soon as it is recognized, the question of the true nature of the geographies which are presented as 'scientific' arises.

4. *To participate to the elaboration of an anthropology of space*

Cultural geography has to ponder on the fundamental features of the organization and experience of space: in that field, it is necessary to start from an inventory of what has been written by ethnographers and historians, and to complete it by enquiries dealing both with societies which keep alive many inherited traits, and those in which modernity is everywhere present.

This inventory mustn't remain purely descriptive. It has to stress, behind the diversity of behaviours and attitudes, the existence of a few elements able to shape the more diverse practices, know-hows and ideologies: role of territoriality, utopia and other forms of Beyonds.

Thus cultural geography has to ponder over the idea of an anthropology of space. This will allow a clearer vision on 1) religious beliefs, mythologies or ideologies in the experience of the lived World, 2) the genesis of situations of heterotopia, or 3) the organisation of space.

5. *To develop cultural approaches in the fields of social, political and economic geographies, and forms of settlements and spatial organizations – towns and regions*

Cultural geography has to ponder over the role played by cultural realities in the fields explored by economic geography, political geography, social geography, urban geography, rural geography and even physical geography. Cultural geography is not a field with clear-cut borders; it explores the components of complex human realities. It is all the more fruitful that it enriches other approaches.

Hence the interest in developing joint ventures with other Study Groups or Commissions.

6. *To focus on the cultural problems born from globalization, the evolution of big cities and tensions on the global environment*

Cultural geography has to focus particularly on the problems born from the evolution of the contemporary World: identity reflexes; refusal of universalism and uniformity; diasporas and multicultural situations; new forms of exclusion and marginality.

7. *To develop research on the theme nature/culture*

This theme, a classical one at the beginning of our Century, resumed its centrality since a few years. This evolution, which is linked with the ecological concerns of contemporary societies, involves a deepening of reflexion. Augustin Berque proposed the concepts of trajectory and mediance in order to explore these relations in a rejuvenated perspective. Bruno Latour reminds us that it is more convenient to speak of the relations natures/cultures than of the nature/culture one. The cultural geography of plants (their use in gardens or indoors) and animals (pets, menageries, zoos) has also to be analyzed.

It will be necessary to dialog with geomorphologists, hydrologists, climatologists, biogeographers, etc.

8. *To ponder on the landscape, which bears testimony of most of the cultural processes and investments*

Some themes, landscape or physical and urban planning for instance, offer transversal cuttings through the fields covered by the cultural approaches. Hence their significance for cultural geography.

**3. The program of the study group for the next years**

1988: *Symposium on Culture and Environment, and more specifically, on Culture and Atlantic Environments*, Lisbon, between 30 August and 2 September 1998. The precise time will be given later

1999: *Symposium on Culture and Development*, Machaad, Iran

2000: During the IGU International Congress in Seoul, a double symposium:

- 1) *Cultural Diversity*, in Seoul
- 2) *Urban Growth and Urban Conservation*

A symposium on the cultural approaches in geography will be held in Paris on 8–11 December 1997. This symposium will deal with two themes:

## **Symposium on cultural approaches in geography**

*Paris, 8–11 December 1997*

*First circular*

### **1. The recent evolution and the state of cultural approaches in geography. 8 December 1997**

This part of the meeting will take place on Monday 8 December 1997. It will be organized by *the I.G.U. Study Group on 'The Cultural Approach in Geography'*.

Cultural approaches differ according to countries. We should be happy to have well informed reviews on the cultural approaches developed in specific countries or linguistic areas, in order to make them more transparent to each other.

### **2. The cultural problems of big cities, 9–11 December 1997**

This part of the symposium will take place on 9–11 December 1997. It is a joint venture of *the IGU Study Group on 'The Cultural Approach in Geography'* and *the Commission on 'Urban Development and Urban Life'*.

We should be glad to see the following themes covered by the communications:

#### **1. *City and multiculturalism***

The construction of identity and alterity in large metropolises in a time of globalization. Territorialities, integration, forms of segregation and exclusion. Alternative cultures in the cities. Poverty, insecurity and ideologies of security. Emergence and impact of solidarity movements. Application of multiculturalism in urban policies.

#### **2. The production of the urban scene**

Towards an hermeneutics of Cities. The symbolic dimension of urban forms.

#### **3. *The cultural activities of cities and in cities***

The City and the growth of cultural consumption. Culture as a new urban function. The festive city between mass and elite culture. Geography of artistic creativity. Attitudes of city-dwellers regarding culture.

#### **4. Culture and urban policies**

Cultural services in the City. City and collective memory. The policies of urban conservation. Urban marketing through culture. Political changes and changing cultures of the urban governance.

### **Communications**

The propositions of papers have to be submitted to the organizing Committee before 1st June 1997. Summaries have to reach us by 1st October.

### **Registration and correspondence**

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A second circular will be sent in June and the third one in October.