Walter Christaller

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Walter Christaller[1]

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Abstract. Walter Christaller needs no introduction in the United States. He was well known for his central place theory long before his work was acknowledged in Germany. Though even in his childhood he was interested in atlases, it was not until the age of 36 that he studied geography. Before 1914 he began studies in philosophy and political economics and subsequently served in the army; later, during the twenties, he pursued a variety of occupations. In 1929 he resumed graduate studies that led to his famous dissertation. At the end of the thirties he held a short-lived academic appointment, but then moved into government service during World War II. After the War he joined the communist party and became politically active. In addition, he devoted himself to the geography of tourism. His principal geographic contributions had been made before World War II. However, he was honored for them, first in the United States, after age 70, and then finally in West Germany.

Key Words: Christaller, central place theory.

"CENTRALITY is the quality of a place of possessing a higher order of significance when compared with other places in its surrounding area (Umland). It is achieved by supplying such goods and services as are not available or are insufficient in settlements within that area" (Anonymous 1970, 1066).

This is the underlying theme of central place theory, which has become widely known and applied. It has been discussed and disputed, but it has also been refined and used as a base for further theoretical development.

The originator of this theory, Walter Christaller, was ignored in his native country for a long time, but his ideas had an early impact upon the thinking of geographers in the United States and Sweden. It was only in his old age that Germany recognized his achievements with honors and awards.

Walter Christaller was born on April 21, 1893 in Berneck in the Black Forest, a town he later classified as a decayed central place of inferior importance. His mother, in her mature years a successful novelist, belonged to a cultured middle-class family of Darmstadt, which was a typical large administrative center in Germany. As for Christaller's paternal side, he himself used to say that they all were nonconformists. The grandfather, Johann Gottlieb Christaller, worked as a missionary in West Africa, where he studied the local languages and translated the Bible into those idioms. As founder of West African philology, he obtained the Volnay-Prize of the French Academy of Science in 1875. One of his books was translated and published in the United States in 1964. The older Christaller's son, Erdmann, father of Walter, the geographer, became a clergyman and theologian, but he became involved in doctrinal conflicts within his profession. His hostility to the church culminated in his novel, *Prostitution of Spirit.* As a result of this publication and of his partial deafness, he eventually lost his office.

Walter and his sisters were educated and taught at home by their mother for many years. At thirteen Walter first entered a grammar school, where he was an excellent student but not sufficiently challenged. He recalled his fascination for atlases when he was very young. However, his first studies after completing school before World War I were in philosophy and political economics rather than in geography. World War I gave him the opportunity to become a soldier, and a good one. After having been wounded several

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Figure 1. Walter Christaller.

times, he returned home from the battlefield a disillusioned man like many of his comrades. It was then that socialist ideas germinated within him. These ideals stayed with him throughout his life, although now and again he denied them and later on he modified them.

Youth and war experience were followed by a decade of experimentation and gradual maturing. Christaller, no longer quite so young, went back to the university for one term, worked as a miner and as a construction worker, wrote for newspapers, and at times considered emigration to Russia. Twice there were opportunities to pursue a well-paid middle-class career. In 1921/22 and 1924 he was Secretary of The Cooperative Building Society of German Office Holders in Berlin. While serving in this office, Christaller co-authored a brochure entitled *Practices in Cooperative Building* (Lubahn and Christaller 1922), in which the philosophy of land reform appeared to be crystallizing. In 1925 Christaller took a position in a Berlin construction firm by the name of "Occident" and very soon became head clerk. In this connection it should be noted that already in these early years he was quite open to new ideas. For example, he and two or three other builders

were the first in Germany to introduce prefabricated structural parts in the course of building a development for disabled people. This settlement still exists and can be seen in East Berlin.

The fact that neither of these jobs lasted long created personal problems for him because he had married in 1921 and was faced with raising three children. Christaller and his wife were divorced in 1928 with an amicable settlement. He was able to maintain the connection with his son and two daughters; in fact, the older daughter even recalled later that in her childhood she drew hexagons for him. During those years in the twenties Christaller did not pursue geography except for designing a list of code numbers of German towns. He called that activity a hobby but it was indicative of his mathematical-theoretical bent.

The next decade, beginning in 1929, became the academic one in Christaller's life. He continued his studies at the University of Erlangen, earned a degree in political economics, wrote a thesis, which was to be a landmark in his career, passed the examination for the doctorate, and qualified as an academic lecturer. His thesis was the famous work on central places in southern Germany (Christaller 1933), which he completed in 1932 at Erlangen and which was published in Jena in 1933. Thus, at 36, in 1929, he moved into closer contact with the field of geography. His formal studies had taken only five years, including the pre-World War I years. He had gradually turned away from political science and toward economics. He had also turned for support to the great German geographer, Robert Gradmann.

Gradmann, himself a proponent of inductive thinking, nevertheless recognized the importance of Christaller's original deductive reasoning and of his creative spirit. Gradmann called Christaller's ideas fundamental and of lasting importance.

In his dissertation (Habilitation) Christaller revised his methods and used an inductive approach. Unfortunately, the resulting book, *Rural Settlements in Germany in their Relation to Community Administration* (Christaller 1937), remained nearly totally unknown although it was published in 1937 by a well-known German firm. Until this day it is the only extensive treatment of the subject in Germany.

Nevertheless, Christaller began as a lecturer at Freiburg/Br. in 1938. In two years he had built up the Institute for Local Government Science under the guidance of Th. Maunz, who after World War II became a political leader (Minister) in Bavaria. However, after 1940 Christaller did not pursue an academic career because he no longer had an academic appointment, nor was he offered one at any German university.

We can only attempt to find the reasons as to why he did not succeed. Three obstacles can be recognized:

1. Christaller was too narrowly specialized in his geographical work for a post at a German university, at least in the forties. He was not ready to extend his deeper interests into other fields of geography. Furthermore, members of the academic community considered him an outsider and his ideas as numerical mysticism.
2. He was 45 years old when he completed his dissertation (Habilitation). Thus, his age could have been a handicap.
3. He was inclined toward socialism, which was not looked upon with favor in Hitler's Germany. In the early thirties he had been afraid of being pursued and had fled to France for several months. Nevertheless, Christaller did join the National Socialist Party in 1940 and used Nazi terminology at various times.

Between 1940–1945 he lived and worked mainly in Berlin. Eager to apply his central place ideas, he was blind to the political misuse being made of them. That was particularly evident in his papers "Spatial Theory and Spatial Order" (Christaller 1941a) and "Central Places in the East and their Cultural and Market Domains (Christaller 1941b). If we ignore the political implications in the latter paper, it is interesting to note how he planned and classified East German (now occupied) and Polish townships of that time and how he argued, for example, that Posen (Poznan) was an ideal central place which could grow to a population of 450,000. It did indeed reach that size by 1966.

It is ironic that in those years, while Christaller was working in a field that was exploited politically to such a degree, he became known to the outside world of geography. First Robert Dickinson and Chauncey Harris cited him briefly, and later, in 1941, Edward Ullman introduced Christaller's ideas in the

United States under the title, "A Theory of Location for Cities" (Ullman 1941). Certainly, today many American authors are "beyond the ideas of Christaller. However, part of the conceptual richness and power of central place theory stems from the fact that it can be extended in this manner" (Alao, et al. 1977).

In the course of time Christaller's theory has made its impact throughout the world. In Sweden, Edgar Kant, a transplanted Estonian, presented it in about 1945, and later local government areas in Sweden were reorganized on the basis of the theory.

Christaller's most famous work, "The Central Places in Southern Germany," was translated into English in 1966 (Baskin 1966) and into Italian in 1980 (Christaller 1980).

Looking back to the forties, we find Christaller after the war in Jugenheim near Darmstadt, where he had spent the main part of his childhood. The so-called "Blue House," his mother's old home, gave him a certain economic stability, which he lacked so often. Now, growing older, he maintained a meager income doing statistical jobs and other tasks.

If there had been a real chance to obtain a regular job at this advanced age, he himself spoiled any opportunity by going back to the political ideals of his youth. He joined the Communist Party and in 1951–52 became its deputy in the local council. Because of cooperation in a communist study group on agricultural problems in both East and West Germany, he was charged with espionage. Legal proceedings lasted several years, but in the end all charges were dismissed. In spite of aquittal, however, he was not permitted to accept any invitations to the United States. He did visit Sweden and Greece several times.

After that, Christaller wrote more popular books on geographical subjects, interesting but lacking his former touch of genius. Moreover, he was concerned with problems of tourism, using the term *periphery* as a contrast to centrality, a concept to which mathematical precision could not be applied.

Not until he was 70 and older did Christaller begin to receive honors, again first from abroad. He was given the Outstanding Achievement Award of the Association of American Geographers in 1964, and in 1968 he received honorary doctorates from the University of Lund (Sweden) and the University of Bochum (Federal Republic of Germany). In the last year of his life financial aid came in the form of a small stipend from the Hessian Government, as well as a one-time award from the President of the Federal Republic. Simultaneously, German geographers contributed to a fund for Christaller. "For the first time in my life," he said, "I need not worry about money".

People who knew him personally remember his modest, friendly character. Unfortunately, he did not sell himself well. When he read that he had contributed a new concept to the world, he could smile. But by the same token he was able to point out quite self-confidently that it was he who brought mathematics into geography. He died on March 9, 1969.

Note

1. Abbreviated and translated from: Hottes, Ruth. 1981/1982. Walter Christaller—a view of his life and work. In *Geographisches Taschenbuch,* pp. 59–69. Weisbaden. Translated by Guido G. Weigend, Dean, College of Liberal Arts, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287.

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