

WHAT MAKES PLACES AND LANDSCAPES DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER AND WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT IN A SHRINKING AND GLOBALISED WORLD?

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Several months after this paper was submitted, I had a conversation that was so germane to the theme of the paper that I have decided to use it by way of introduction. I was talking to a young man who works in a credit card call centre near our university. The centre specialises in advising Canadian merchants on the filling of orders that are received on-line from overseas for billing to credit card accounts. A number of those orders, emanating from Nigeria, had attracted particular scrutiny. Suddenly, the young man said: "I don't know where Nigeria is." It was soon apparent that he did not know whether it was in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. He clearly did not know that it was Africa's most populous country; and he had no idea that its great north-south differences in environment, religious affiliation, tribal background, land use, and resource distribution made Nigeria a complex state – and at times a volatile one. Yet he was engaged in crucial decisions, involving large sums of money, that would have an impact on a country which he could neither locate nor describe.

By our standards, the young man was geographically illiterate; yet I knew him to be a valued employee at the organisation which is the very epitome of the global economy: an international credit card clearing centre. Although he worked in a global organisation, his thinking was not global but topological; it was all a matter of connectivity. He had no idea of place.

Much has been written about what geography is and how it can contribute to global understanding. The title of this paper implies a continuing importance for the concept of place in a world that is perceived as shrinking and increasingly globalised. The present time, preoccupied as it is with globalisation, might, be expected to offer a golden age for geographical education. Evidence suggests, however, that geographical education faces difficulty in a number of places in the world, where it is often adversely affected by administrative decisions made for other reasons and in other area of the curriculum.

This paper therefore focuses on a paradox. The term "global" has long since passed into the realm of metaphor and we should expect to encounter it in situations ranging from office budgeting to events of pandemic proportions. In education it is widely employed as a rationale for curriculum development, the promotion of textbooks, and even course selection by students. Yet, our subject, the only one *explicitly* named for its study of things on the global surface, seems increasingly marginalised in "global" curricula that appear driven mainly by mathematics, science. And one language – usually English. That is the paradox confronting geography.

While many people use the terms *world*, *earth*, and *globe* interchangeably, subtle differences among them bear significant implications for the status of geography and the content studied in its name. The term *earth* clearly conveys a physical meaning, whereas that of *world* is conceptual. People create many worlds in their lifetime on the earth's

surface, something that is accurately captured in the theme of this year's IGU Congress: "One Earth with many worlds." The term *globe*, however, pertains to a spherical body with geometrical properties. It is in that context, and not *earth* or *world*, that we understand *topology* as "the study of those properties of a geometrical model, such as connectivity, which are not dependent on position" (Mayhew 1997).

The idea of topology thus comes to the fore in addressing the question posed in this paper. In short, will students acquire a mainly topological understanding of the world? Or will they develop, in the words of Walford (2001, p.3) "the natural curiosity that all of us have about places and ways of living other than own." The question touches issues of citizenship and concerns the end of education. It also has implications for the role of geotechnology in relation to geography.

These considerations are relevant to a series of questions posed by American geographers Cutter, Golledge, and Graf:

. . . Has globalisation changed our view of the social construction of space? Does physical space still support spatial relations and spatial interactions, or are they becoming somewhat independent, as may be the case in social space, intellectual space, and cyberspace? How will the interactions between people, places, and regions change as our view of space (and time, for that matter) changes (Cutter, Golledge, and Graf 2002, pp.308-309)?

These questions were partly addressed in a series of articles published by *The Economist* on the geographical implications of the Internet. The first asserted that cyberspace was a pretence for circumventing true space, rather than a genuine replacement for it. The article concluded that the weight of geography exceeded the power of technology to overcome it; and the final article in the series spoke of the "revenge of geography" (*The Economist* 13 July 1994, p.13; 2 Sept. 2000, p.16; 11 Aug. 2001, pp.9 and 17; 15 Mar.2003, p.13).

Writing of the deeper implications of 9/11, however, Thomas L. Friedman observes that while people are technologically closer in a global sense, they are often as far apart as ever in their understanding of each other. For Friedman a mismatch exists between our tools to communicate and our skills to understand different cultures, countries, and civilisations (Friedman 2003, pp.389-390). His views suggest why it is important in a shrinking and globalised world that geography continue its traditional study of differences among places and landscapes on the global surface. Topological maps may assist greatly in the analysis of those differences. But all topological maps have a major shortcoming: they cannot, of themselves, describe conditions on the global surface – they cannot portray place. The implications of this for a topological view of globalisation will be apparent at a time when international understanding and global citizenship are to the fore.

Geography is concerned with place. Understanding the nature and causes of areal differentiation on the global surface has traditionally been the geographer's task. The concept of site is integral to understanding areal differences on the global surface. But like other social scientists, geographers focus on the patterns and interactions found on

that surface, and not *primarily* on the natural processes that act on it from above or below (International Baccalaureate Organisation 2001, p.3).

A sense of place is an innate human faculty possessed by all to some degree; yet we can never be entirely objective about place. A sense of it is the thread that ties us to our surroundings and we share with others the knowledge drawn from experiences in a place. Places may serve to create positive self-identities; but history shows they may also serve to generate negative attitudes toward others. So, as a learned skill, a sense of place requires geographers to exercise careful and critical observation of places, if we are to contribute common sense and understanding to countless local changes in the world (Johnston 1996, pp.65 and 72; and Relph in Hanson, 2001, pp.208-209).

Another cogent reason for the study of place in a globalised world is now to be found in the recent emergence of citizenship education. This provides an important focus and an opportunity for collaboration between geography and environmental education (Stoltman and Lidstone 2001, p.215). In the wake of 9/11, however, it has also acquired an important political focus. A sense of place and a role in that place, community and loyalty to it: these are seen as integral to security, and are reflected in the introduction of citizenship oaths and new visa requirements. Geographers' earlier reluctance to address citizenship education can no longer be sustained, for the topic is clearly linked to perception of place (Stoltman and de Chano 2002, p.140). As the Australian geographer J. M. Powell has observed, "perceptions, preoccupations, fears and aspirations, all fundamental to the human condition, invest the world with meaning and in the process define places"(Powell 1985, p.312). In societies that are increasingly pluralistic, young people need the help of geographical skills in building personal geographies of place and space that will allow them to live in harmony and with respect for one another (Johnston 1996, p.73; and Robertson 2003, pp.56-57).

Related also to citizenship are questions concerning the use of geotechnology and its potential for invading personal privacy through a technological union of GPS, GIS, and wireless (Monmonier 2004, p.175); this to enforce laws, target advertising, or ensure service in an appropriate language. Increasingly we are dependent upon these technologies for the provision of services ranging from fast-food deliveries to sewerage systems. We are also increasingly subject to their surveillance of us. Will this ultimately affect one's sense of place? Bednarz explored a new role for geography in citizenship education in the United States in the wake of September 11, 2001. She cautions that the implementation of technologies "may not lead to better citizenship or decision making but can be used to support and improve the *process* of decision making" (Schee 2003, p.52).

A similar observation may be made with reference to the study of place. Humans have always abstracted their experience in order to share it more easily. Today this is being done increasingly by digital means for which geography provides a framework. But this still begs the question: to what end will this be put? Will it be used to help the geographer do what geographers have always sought to do; namely, the process of developing synthesis from analysis in order to depict the character of a place? Or will technology promote a topological view?

In the current pluralism that has followed the positivist period, is it not time to ask whether a new form of regional geography is not emerging; and if so, what impact it is likely to have on the public image of geography? Far from returning to the old descriptive regional geography, much less capes and bays, a new regional geography needs to develop appreciation of the great variety of cultures on earth and how they have, and are, evolving. It treats a region as a unique product formed by individual responses to general processes. Though not judgmental in terms of right and wrong, it is also objective in seeing that the positive and negative components of a sense of place are not obscured (Johnston 1985, pp.334-335; and Relph 2001, pp.221-222).

This paper is therefore going to end as it began, focused on a paradox and stressing the continuing importance of place in a shrinking and globalised world. At a time of momentous events in various parts of the world today, we might note the words of the British geographer R. J. Johnston. His rationale for new regional geography remains prescient today as it was when stated twenty years ago.

In the context of present threats to world peace ignorance is dangerous. It leads to bad decisions, based on false stereotypes. Too often, situations are polarised, because the protagonists oversimplify the positions of others. This is a sign of immaturity, of an unwillingness to face the complexity of the world and accommodate to it. The alternative to accommodation is frequently conflict . . . To promote accommodation we must promote understanding. We must appreciate what other people think and do. We need a regional geography which is contextually based, which locates decision-makers in their historically produced cultural environments (which include attitudes to the physical environment) and in the imperatives of their mode of production. And this must be the basis of our teaching (Johnston 1985, p.337).

In conclusion, let me stress: this is no time for students not to know where Nigeria is, much less what it is like as a place. Social scientists offer a variety of perspectives that help us make crucial decisions in context and on the basis of a well-informed understanding. The geographer's understanding of place is our unique contribution in this regard. It is no less important in a shrinking and globalised world than it has been since people first noticed differences between places.

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POSTSCRIPT

A week after this paper was presented, the main Congress of the IGU in Glasgow heard that insensitive computer programmers with little knowledge of geography have cost the giant company Microsoft hundreds of millions of dollars in lost business and led hapless company employees to be arrested by offended governments. Tom Edwards, the company's senior geopolitical strategist and himself a geographer, noted that some of their employees, "however bright they may be, have only a hazy idea about the rest of the world." The repercussions, he said, could be very serious. The company had now launched geography classes for its staff in order to address the problem.

Should we be surprised? Connectivity is crucial to Microsoft as it is to the credit card call centre near our university. Yet, the implication of Edwards' paper is that topological thinking is not sufficient, even in the globalised world of today. There is an important message in this for any educational organisation that seeks to promote global or international understanding. After phases of positivism and post-modernism, the idea of place – and its reflection at the regional level – continues to be an important medium for understanding the world around us.