Guest Editorial

Reflections on American Geography

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The request to present an overview of American geography in less than an hour presents an awesome challenge. I am delighted to be here and honored to have this opportunity to reflect on geography in the United States. I regret that I am not able to give this talk in Japanese and hope that by the time I come to Japan again I will have remedied this deficiency!

What I offer this afternoon is a personal statement on the status of American geography today. Because this will be a personal viewpoint, it is necessarily selective, partial, and biased, especially so in light of the fact that one of the hallmarks of American geography is its diversity. The thousands of practicing geographers in the U.S. today embody a remarkable variety of philosophical positions, areas of expertise, employment situations, and research and teaching interests. I see this diversity as a strength of the discipline, for it opens the way for a continuous influx of new ideas, ensures lively ongoing debates within the field, and increasingly serves to link geography with other disciplines. This is an exciting time in American geography, with both the status of the field and its content undergoing change.

I. THE STATUS OF GEOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Geography’s status within American colleges and universities is related to its status within the primary and secondary schools. Traditionally, geography has not been one of the major subjects taught at either the primary or secondary level, but recent years have seen dramatic, positive changes. Rarely offered as a separate subject, geography has traditionally been incorporated within social studies in the kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) curriculum. Material identified as being specifically geographic in this curriculum has often involved memorizing the place names of rivers, mountains, bays, states, state capitals, and the like. As a result, most Americans have a view of geography that originates in their 4th-grade primary school experience of naming places on outline maps; in their view, “geography” means “place-name geography”—hardly a stimulating intellectual enterprise!

In 1985 the National Geographic Society (NGS) celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Society’s founding by launching a campaign to improve K-12 instruction in geography and to increase the level of geographic knowledge of the American public. Devoting some 20 million dollars to the project, the NGS began to sponsor a program called the Geographic Alliance that brings together college and university geographers with K-12 school teachers. These NGS alliances, now active in almost every state, have proved an excellent forum for information exchange among geography teachers at all levels.

Through the alliances and summer teacher training institutes, the NGS has been instrumental in improving the status and content of geography in American schools. The focus of geography instruction has consciously been shifting away from place-name geography toward geographic principles, problems, and concepts. As a result, increasing numbers of American students are now leaving high school with some background in contemporary geography. Because curricular innovations in the schools are made on a state-by-state basis within the United States, these changes in the thrust and quality of geographic education necessarily vary a great deal from state to state.
Partially as a result of these changes in the elementary and secondary schools, college and university geography programs are booming.

Of some 2,000 American colleges and universities that award the bachelor's degree, more than 300 offer B.A. programs in geography. Undergraduate enrollments in geography have increased substantially in recent years from 465,000 in 1985 to 565,000 in 1989. About 150 universities have Master's Degree geography programs, many of which train students for careers in environmental, cartographic, or planning agencies. More than 50 Ph.D. programs in geography graduate about 150 new Ph.D.s annually.

American geography suffers from the fact that none of the three "top" universities—Harvard, Yale, or Princeton—has a geography department. Geography's stronghold has long been the large public universities in the American heartland (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana) with the state universities in the western and southern states now boasting strength in geography as well.

Until very recently, students have begun their university educations with virtually no idea of what contemporary geography is all about. Many still do. Typically, students have discovered geography by accident during their undergraduate careers. Many young people today are interested in studying human-environment relationships or the problems of urbanization, but they come to university not knowing that geography is the discipline that will enable them to pursue these interests. Within universities, geography is usually taught in the College of Arts and Sciences as a basic liberal arts subject. Students often find geography by enrolling in a geography course in order to fulfill a university rule that requires them to take courses in each of a number of defined areas of the curriculum. Still, a sizable number of students attend universities without geography programs and learn only after graduation that geography is probably what they have been looking for. Some students enter graduate programs in geography, then, without having acquired a background in the subject as undergraduates.

II. CONTENT: WHAT ARE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS DOING?

Perhaps because of geography's traditionally shaky position within the schools, "What is geography?" is a perennial question asked of and by American geographers. One shorthand answer that I tell my students to use when their families are quizzing them about why they want to study geography in college is: geography is the why of where. Another response that makes sense to nongeographers is that geography focuses on the study of people-environment relationships, where environment is understood to encompass both the natural and the built environments. Just as historians look at the world through the lens of time, geographers do so with a focus on place, space, location, and territory.

These brief responses to "What is geography?" are designed to satisfy the question posers without delivering a full-fledged lecture on the subject. But since you have asked me to talk about what is currently going on in American geography, I can take this opportunity to respond to the "What is geography?" question with a genuine lecture, by outlining what I see as the key aspects of contemporary American geography. I see six of them.

First, geography emphasizes connections, particularly those between the so-called physical and human realms. The relationship between people and the environment has long been at the core of the discipline. Geographers read widely in other disciplines, they cross disciplinary boundaries with ease, and they have a constitutional predisposition to see linkages and connections in place and across places.

Second, scale is an integrating concept in geography. We geographers are acutely tuned to scale issues in the problems we tackle. We are keenly aware of the fact that processes are likely to be scale specific, and we are curious about how processes at one scale affect those at other geographic scales. We are interested in how certain scales become identified as important, how a variety of components are related at a particular scale, and how connections be-
tween and among different scales operate. Scale is perhaps the most inherently geographic concept.

A third aspect of contemporary American geography, coming out of our long tradition of fieldwork, is the strong empirical base of our discipline. A tradition of fieldwork pervades geography, to the point where one might not be considered a "real" geographer unless one has endured the rigors of the field. Increasingly, "the field" on which fieldwork is conducted is likely to be an urban one, but the tradition itself—of primary data collection informing and being informed by theory—lives on. Of course, geographers also make extensive use of secondary data, such as census materials, but the use of data as both generator of theory and testing ground of theory is essential to geography. It is also closely linked, I think, to the fourth aspect of American geography, that of tackling visible problems.

This fourth characteristic is that geography is oriented to solving problems in the real world. It is this aspect of geography that has attracted generations of students to the field and still draws large numbers of them into the ranks of geography. Ironically, the problems themselves have changed little: poverty, hunger, inequality, urbanization, congestion, economic development/underdevelopment, resource use, environmental hazards, land degradation, environmental change. These enduring problems continue to capture the attention of geographers, and we continue to work toward their solution.

Fifth, geographers embrace new technology to analyze problems. Because the map has always been a centerpiece of geographic research and knowledge, geographers have always been instrumental in expanding map technology by devising ever new means of collecting, analyzing, and displaying spatial data. Computer cartography, geographic information systems (GIS), and remote sensing all contribute now to research and teaching efforts throughout the discipline as well as outside the discipline.

Finally, contemporary American geography has much to contribute to current debates in social science and the humanities. Among non-geographers, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of place, space, location, and territory. With our tradition of seeing interconnections in place, of understanding complex human-environment interactions, of employing spatial analytic techniques, we geographers have much to offer those coming from other intellectual traditions. The time is especially fertile now for the cultivation of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary ties.

In identifying these six key aspects of contemporary geography—which, incidentally, I see as six distinct strengths of the discipline—and in thinking about where the discipline is headed, I hear echoes of the past. Before presenting my views of what I see as important current research directions, then, I want to look very briefly at where the discipline has been. A quick (very quick) historical overview will provide a context for my remarks about the present.

American geography emerged out of geology around the turn of the last century, and the discipline's history resembles the trace of a pendulum swinging between, at one end, a concern to make meaningful generalizations and, at the other, a concern to understand the particular. The infant discipline was marked by its focus on human-environment relationships and its strong concern for theory. These two central interests came together and flourished in the environmental determinism of the 1910's and 1920's. A reaction against determinism led to strong interests in the specifics of place, in place-to-place variations, and in the ways in which people living in different places devise particular ways of living. This set of interests flourished in the regional geography of the 1920's to 1950's. Then starting in the late 1950's, geographers became increasingly disenchanted with carrying out myriad studies of the particular and advocated once again the power of theoretical generalizations. The quantitative revolution of the 1960's saw the return of a strong concern for theory within geography; this time the concern was tied to the elegance of neoclassical economics and mathematical modeling.

The behavioral geography of the late 1960's and 1970's, as well as the political economy
perspectives that gained attention in the 1970's and 1980's, were, in large part, reactions against theories based in neoclassical economics. Neither source of criticism was arguing against theory per se this time, but both wanted theories that better represented the world, that were more satisfying, that were more realistic. Behavioral geographers demanded theories that would yield more accurate generalizations by incorporating a more realistic account of household and individual decision making. Political economists, on the other hand, wanted theories that paid attention to the role of larger institutions that structure society and to the pervasive role of politics.

An emphasis on the importance of theory in geography has been sustained, I believe, since the quantitative revolution of the 1960's. What we are seeing now, within this larger view that sees theory as a valuable pursuit, is a renewed interest in context, in place-to-place variations, and in regions. But this renewed interest in place is not the same as the regional geography of the 1930's or 1940's. The “new” regional geography is self-consciously linked to theory and is concerned to use the specific to illuminate the general as well as the idiosyncratic. Moreover, the specifics of place are examined explicitly through the lens of theory. It is a regional geography undertaken in a time when the human constraints on knowing are widely acknowledged, when all theories are seen as being limited and partial, not universal.

Beyond this general concern to hold theory and context in tension and to acknowledge their dialectical relationship, what more can be said about current directions in American geography? What “hot topics” are attracting the attention of students and researchers? I see four of them: global environmental change; economic, social, and political change; multiculturalism and international studies; and GIS. While each of these topics is currently hot, none, I believe, is a fad; each emerges out of a core tradition in geography. At the same time, each reflects the new realities of the contemporary world.

**Global Environmental Change.** Almost anything having to do with the environment is a hot topic these days. This resurgence in things environmental is fed by the growing public awareness of environmental pollution of the magnitude of human impacts on the environment, and of the interconnectedness of the many forms of life on earth—the web of life. It is also fed by the increasing recognition that places are interconnected and interdependent, that what happens in one place affects and is affected by what happens in other places.

Global environmental change, therefore, is a hot topic not only within geography but within the larger scientific community as well. Physical geographers are involved in studies of global climate change, often tracing out the impacts of projected climate shifts on human activities such as agriculture. Human geographers are contributing to studies of the human causes and consequences of global change. Central to geographic studies of global environmental change is the concept of scale: how are the global and the local interconnected? How do they affect each other?

**Economic, Social, and Political Change.** The fact that economic, social, and political activity now has a global—as well as a national, regional, and local dimension—pulls geographers to investigate economic, social, and political change at a variety of interlocking spatial scales. How are human activities at each of these scales interrelated? Furthermore, how are economic, social, and political activities themselves interdependent in place? For example, how are the roles of women and minorities, which vary significantly from place to place, tied to the economic and political changes that are occurring? How do cities at different levels in the global urban system affect each other? How do investment decisions in one place affect those in other places? These questions link with each other and with the questions driving research on global environmental change.

**Multiculturalism and International Studies.** The United States is a distinctly multicultural society and is becoming more so each day. For generations, the symbol of American society was the melting pot: newly arriving immi-
grants would soon (within one generation) be assimilated into mainstream American life; differences among immigrant groups would fade as members of each group learned English and adopted middle-class American values. Now the melting pot metaphor has been replaced with a metaphor of vegetable soup—a mixture in which differences are retained and often cherished. Multiculturalism is about differences stemming primarily from ethnicity, race, and gender. Place plays an important role in the development and nurturing of these differences; through migration, daily movements across space, and through the geographical imagination, place and space can also be crucial to diminishing the effects of difference. In the U.S. as in much of the world, we see local ethnic political consciousness increasing at precisely the time we see economic, social, and political linkages becoming increasingly global. This paradox begs for geographic study.

Geographers have much to say about understanding and valuing difference, about the complementarities and interdependencies arising from difference, and about the role of space, place, and location in creating, sustaining, and demolishing difference. Because human activity takes place at a variety of geographic scales, with the international and global scales becoming increasingly important, understanding difference from neighborhood to global scales is essential. Especially as educators, geographers will, I believe, increasingly be contributing to developing this understanding.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Everyone knows that GIS is a hot topic; some would say it's the hottest topic in geography now! GIS provides the conceptual framework and technical capability for analyzing large arrays of spatial data. It actually enables geographers to ask new kinds of questions and greatly facilitates answering old ones. For example, by incorporating spatially referenced information on error and uncertainty into a GIS, scholars can begin to pose and answer new questions about decision making under risk and uncertainty. A GIS also facilitates environmental simulations, allowing researchers to observe the simulated outcomes to myriad "what if" questions. GIS also allows geographers to pursue questions regarding relationships among geographic scales; such questions may be conceptually old but operationally made possible only by a GIS. Joining together geography's penchant for data and its love of the map, GIS is a powerful analytical tool, one that will increasingly be used to pursue questions on all of the other hot topics I have mentioned here.

III. CONCLUSION

These hot topics are linked, and will increasingly be linked, by more than GIS or other geographic research methods. Understanding any one of these arenas will require an understanding of the others as well. For example, global investment patterns mean new industrialization in some places, fueling urbanization and concomitant changes in land use in the rural origin regions of the urban migrants. Global environmental change is thereby inextricably linked to patterns of social, economic, and political change.

While I have described what I see to be the strengths and directions of American geography, I have the sense that these hot topics are not uniquely the purview of American geography. We live in an era not only of a global economy, but, increasingly, also of a global interchange of ideas. International boundaries create ever smaller barriers to the building of geographic knowledge. Geographers in many corners of the globe—and especially in Japan—are interested in investigating issues related to these hot topics. With geographers worldwide working on these problems—drawing on the strong geographic traditions of seeking to understand people-environment connections, using scale as a central concept, engaging in fieldwork and data collection, tackling real world problems, and embracing new technologies—there is indeed hope for the future.

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Notes

1) This paper is based on the lecture delivered at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo on the 8th of June, 1991.

2) The AAG has more than 6,000 members and about 40 different specialty groups such as urban geography, environmental perception, and transportation geography. Such diversity is not unique to geography but characterizes all of the social sciences in the U.S.

アメリカ地理学界における最近の研究動向

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[解説] アメリカ地理学者協会会長スーザン ハンソン教授は、国際交流基金の招待で、夫君ベリー ハンソン博士とともに、1991年6月7日から16日まで、10日間わたり日本を訪問された。この招待計画は、東京大学教養学部が推薦機関となり、京都大学文学部および筑波大学地球科学系が共同招開機関となって実現されたものである。短い滞在期間にもかかわらず精力的に行動され、日本地理学会、一橋大学経済学部、国際交流基金、東京大学教養学部、筑波大学地球科学系、お茶の水女子大学文教育学部、慶應義塾大学環境情報学部、国際教育情報センター、京都大学文学部および教養部、国立民族学博物館を訪問された。その間一橋大学経済学部経済地理学研究室および京都大学教養部人文地理学研究室主催の歓迎会を通じて、100名を越える日本側地理学研究者の交流が行われた。

本稿は、去る6月8日午後に一橋大学本館特別応接室で開催された講演会における「アメリカ地理学界における最近の研究動向」と題する発表要旨を基に、欧文機関紙編集専門委員会委員長の依頼により、帰国後に加筆修正されて投稿されたもので、7月13日に開かれた欧文機関紙編集専門委員会の承認を得て、ここに掲載の運びとなった。

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