

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

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Summary

The interest in cultural and social problems developed in human geography from the end of the nineteenth century. For half a century, the emphasis was more on culture, its impact on landscape, the role of techniques, the notion of *genre de vie* than on social structures and hierarchies. With the neo-positivist orientations of the *new geography* of the 1960s, the interest for culture receded and social themes became increasingly important. During the last generation, the role of culture appears central in the reconstruction of geography which was born from the new concerns with the lived experience of space and social justice. The social and cultural aspects of geography appear increasingly intertwined.

1. Introduction

In a way, cultural and social geography is as old as human geography. The term social geography was introduced, as an equivalent to human geography, in the 1880s (Dunbar,

1977). Friedrich Ratzel, the father of modern *Anthropogeographie*, stressed the opposition between *Natur-* and *Kulturvölker*, that meant that culture was a fundamental dimension of the field he was creating (Ratzel, 1882-1891).

The studies dealing with the social and cultural aspects of human distributions played a significant role during the first half of the twentieth century. Cultural geography and social geography were then generally considered as independent sectors of the discipline. The curiosity for the role of cultural factors in geography was stronger than the interest for social distributions. During the last fifty years, the situation deeply changed. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, social geography appeared as a research frontier for the whole discipline. Simultaneously, cultural studies experienced a crisis which was partly linked with the modernization of cultures, and partly linked with the new ambitions of geographers. Since the early 1970s, the development of critical and phenomenological approaches has strengthened the two subfields. They have ceased to appear as independent.

The paper will analyze rapidly the birth and development of cultural and social studies in geography between 1880 and 1950, and the impact of the "new" geography on both fields during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. It will cover with more detail contemporary evolution.

1.1. Birth and Development of Cultural and Social Studies in Geography between 1880 and 1950

Human geography appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. Its birth was linked with the development of evolutionism: human groups had to be analyzed along perspectives similar to those used for other live beings; the influence of environment on the nature of humans, and the social constructions they were responsible for, had to be evaluated. As a result, human geography was more considered a natural science than a social one. Such a view reduced quite evidently its interest for human cultures and social structures but did not prevent its development.

In the prevalent evolutionist perspective, it soon appeared that human groups differed from animal ones because they were not completely governed by their instincts; they had developed sets of techniques, know-how, knowledge, which acted as a buffer between them and the environment. Hence the opposition between *Naturvölker*, which lacked efficient means of protection against the harshness of nature, and *Kulturvölker*, which had developed a full array of tools for harnessing natural forces and using them (Ratzel, 1882-1891).

1.1.1. Cultural Geography as a Study of Landscapes

Because human geography was essentially conceived as a natural science dealing with the relations of human groups with their environments, cultural studies were mainly concerned with man/milieu relationships until mid twentieth century. This perspective was conducive to an emphasis on a few topics.

How did the environment shape human distributions, human behavior and the human organization of space? The old hippocratic hypothesis was still alive at the end of the

nineteenth century (Claval, 1988-a), but it soon appeared that other influences played a more decisive role. People had to live on the resources of the milieus they inhabited. It was mainly through the constraints generated in this way that environment controlled human life. It meant that geographers had to focus on the material cultures of the groups they studied, the way they got rid of the natural vegetation and fauna, substituted cultivated ecological pyramids to the natural ones, were struck by endemics linked with the local living environment, or epidemics born out of human or animal mobility.

In Germany, this interest for the cultural bases of human life was expressed by the development of landscape studies: they showed how human groups had transformed and organized natural environments and built cultural landscapes out of them. The emphasis was on deforestation (Schlüter, 1899), the introduction of cultivated plants and domestic animals (Hahn, 1896; 1909; 1914), the field systems and the ways they were operated (Meitzen, 1895): the culture of civilized groups was equated with farming and cattle-raising, while hunting, fishing and food collecting were considered as the productive bases of primitive ones. Urban and industrial landscapes showed how social life was conducive to other forms of man/milieu relationships, thanks to the mobility of goods and persons and the relaxation of many local ecological constraints. Geographers did not display, however, as much interest for urban realities as rural ones.

The analysis of cultural landscapes was mainly conceived in functional terms: field structures, for instance, were thought as a way to translate into a spatial form the imperative of crop rotation and the combination of agriculture and cattle raising within communities (Claval, 1995-a). Geographers grew increasingly conscious, however, of the existence of inherited features in the landscape: a part of them reflected past functional organizations.

Thanks to Carl Sauer, American geographers imported many ideas from Germany, and more particularly the idea of cultural geography as a study of landscapes (Sauer, 1925; Leighly, 1963). Sauer was the first to conceive cultural geography as a subfield within human geography and to use the term as such. His approach of landscape analysis differed from his German models in one way: he stressed more than them the role of human beings in transforming the biological components of vegetation, the nature of soils, and the forms of erosion. He had a keen interest in landscapes as biological realities shaped by human action. For him, a cultural geographer had first to hold a good knowledge of botany!

The interest in the live components of landscapes had other consequences. From the 1890s in Germany, geographers tried to explain the origin and dispersal of agriculture and cattle-raising. The leading figure in that field was Eduard Hahn (Hahn, 1909; 1914). He was the first to underscore the fundamental duality of agricultural systems: one was based on ploughing, the production of grain and the association of farming and cattle raising; the other relied on hoeing and the use of cuttings for plant reproduction. Hahn showed in this way that the problem of agriculture origin and dispersal was a double one. Geographers had to discover the hearths of the two revolutions which transformed mesolithic hunters/gatherers into neolithic farmers.

Carl Sauer was also fascinated by the problem of agriculture origins and dispersal

(Sauer, 1952). He believed that geographers had to analyze the responsibility of human cultures for the disruption of natural equilibria and the subsequent development of erosion (Sauer, 1938).

1.1.2. Cultural Geography as the Study of *Genres de Vie*

Another approach for the study of man/milieu relationships in a cultural perspective developed in parallel to the landscape school. It flourished mainly in France. Instead of focusing on landscapes, French geographers considered that their main task was to explain the distribution of populations. Human densities differed because natural environments changed from place to place, but also because different social groups did not use the same array of techniques when exploiting the same environment. Hence the emphasis on *genres de vie*. As developed by Vidal de la Blache (1902; 1911), the notion was a complex one. 1- It had an ecological foundation: *genres de vie* grew out of the choice of crops and forms of cattle-raising adapted to specific environments. 2- It had a technical dimension, since farming and cattle-raising were based on specific cultivated plants and domestic animals, involved the use of specific tools and relied on the development of specific know-how concerning crop rotation, field use, and so on. 3- It had a social dimension, since it analyzed the work schedule of the group, and the way it was intertwined with other social activities (Claval, 1988-b).

The *genre de vie* approach gave French geography its capacity to enter deeply into the relations locally woven between human groups and their environments. Because of its emphasis on techniques, it was conducive to the study of historical sequences in land occupation. Since it was a study of all human activities, it provided a new way to conceive social studies (Claval, 1998).

Jean Brunhes was responsible for the crossbreeding of the French *genre de vie* analysis and the German style of landscape studies. He was especially keen on the role of techniques in the structuring of ways of life; they imprinted cultural marks on landscapes (Brunhes, 1904; Brunhes and Deffontaines, 1920-1926; Brunhes and Vallaux, 1921). Pierre Deffontaines followed his path (Deffontaines, 1933). In the 1930s and 1940s, he developed a strong school of cultural geography in France: his main interests were the adaptation of man to harsh environments, and human agency in shaping the landscapes of civilized regions. He developed religious geography (Deffontaines, 1948).

Pierre Gourou represented another development of the idea of way of life (Gourou, 1973). As Vidal de la Blache, he started from human densities. When they differed within the same milieu, he considered that cultural factors played a key role: this was a vidalian theme. For him, however, the techniques upon which *genres de vie* were built were both material and social. In this way, he always associated the study of cultures with a social approach. He was very sensitive to the material and social bases of great cultures- for instance the Chinese and its derivatives such as the Vietnamese (Gourou, 1936; 1940).

1.1.3. The Early Forms of Social Geography

The expression “social geography” appeared at the same time as “human geography”, and for a generation or so it was just an equivalent for it (Dunbar, 1977). It was because of the *genre de vie* approach that an interest for social organization developed.

When exploring the foundations of regional specificities, French geographers discovered, in the early 1900s, that *genres de vie* did not rely only on technical bases. They also reflected social conditions. When working on Western Brittany, Camille Vallaux showed that the local agriculture was linked both with specific ways of combining tillage and the exploitation of rough pastures, and a hierarchic social structure which gave landowners a strict control over their farmers (Vallaux, 1907). In his work on Pays de Caux, Jules Sion went further (Sion, 1908). This plateau was a wealthy cropland, where cottage industry developed from the sixteenth century: it relied on the transformation of the flax locally grown, and agricultural surpluses, which allowed for the existence of a large group of part-time farmers or day’s laborers among whom the weavers were recruited. Since the commercialization of linen was highly profitable, a local bourgeoisie developed. It was responsible for the substitution of cotton to flax at the end of the eighteenth century, for the harnessing of the local streams, the building of small factories and later the use of coal imported from Britain.

Studies such as those of Camille Vallaux or Jules Sion remained exceptional for a long time. André Cholley tried to systematize this type of approach in rural zones in the early 1930s (Cholley, 1930). In fact, social studies developed mainly in urban areas. In this field, most of them were initiated in the United States by the school of social ecology of Chicago, in the 1920s: Park and Burgess had been struck by the diverse social fabric of the great inland capital of the United States (Burgess, 1924; Park, 1960). Out of the Loop and its high-rise buildings, the whole city was made of low houses. Its uniformity was an illusion: each neighborhood harbored a specific community. When mapped, the urban area appeared as a set of concentric rings, with a predominance of low-income recent migrants in the inner area, middle-income blue collars in the second ring, and high-income white collars on the edge.

Further studies showed that the social fabric of Chicago was more complex than this initial model showed. The students of Park and Burgess were the first to stress the fact: the black population was concentrated in ghettos from which it was unable to escape (Wirth, 1928). Close to the Loop, there remained a wealthy "Golden Coast", where high-income groups congregated close to the lake (Zorbaugh, 1929). Other students in the group stressed the originality of the urban way of life (Wirth, 1938) as opposed to rural ones (Redfield, 1940). The specificities of peasant and folk populations became a widely accepted commonplace among sociologists. Concerning the Chicago urban area, an economist, Homer Hoyt, discovered that the concentric pattern of social distribution was not the only one: a radial structure was also present. From one sector to the next, the differences resulted from higher or lower income levels (Hoyt, 1933).

Geographers did not participate in this research orientation until the beginning of the 1940s, when Edward Ullman and Chauncy D. Harris proved that a third pattern of social distribution existed in the Chicago area: this agglomeration was made of a cluster of

communities, each with its own ethnic or religious specificities (Harris and Ullman, 1945).

1.2. The Impact of the "New" Geography on Cultural and Social Studies: from the 1950s to the early 1970s

Geography changed deeply in the 1950s and 1960s. It ceased to be considered mainly as a natural science. It became increasingly a social science. The process was best exemplified by the emergence of a "new geography" during the 1960s, but the transformation started earlier and its consequences were still important in the 1970s, especially at the beginning of the decade.

As long as geographers were natural scientists, they lacked tools for dealing with cultural and social facts. Thanks to the new epistemological turn, they could rely on ideas developed either by sociologists, anthropologists or economists. Since the majority of them accepted the neo-positivist conception of scientific enquiry, they remained, however, more interested into the observable dimension of social and cultural data, or the analysis of rational behavior, than into their lived dimension.

1.2.1. The Time of Social Ecologies

The Chicago school of Urban studies had been mainly centered on sociology and secondarily on anthropology. With the discovery of the complexity of social patterns in urban areas, problems of methodology became increasingly important. What was the most significant, the ring structure of Park and Burgess, the sector organization of Hoyt or the kaleidoscope of Ullman and Harris?

Psychologists had to confront the same type of problem when interpreting the tests they had built in order to measure intelligence. The majority of the data collected were redundant. They reflected the variations of a few factors, among which the factor G (intelligence) was evidently the most significant. In order to evaluate its influence, psychologists and statisticians developed the techniques of factorial analysis. Sociologists chose to rely on factorial analysis to map social areas (Shevky and Bell, 1955; Anderson and Egeland 1961).

It was a time when Chicago geographers became increasingly present in urban studies. Thanks to Brian J. L. Berry, they shifted from the study of central places at the level of urban networks to intra-urban networks of central places (Berry, 1964). By the end of the 1960s, they decided to use computing facilities to speed up the factorial analysis of social groupings within urban areas (Berry and Rees, 1969; Berry and Horton, 1970). It allowed them to show that each of the three models developed in the 1930s and 1940s explained a part of reality (Murdie, 1969): the concentric model was linked with the structure of families and the presence or absence of children; the sector model resulted from a biased knowledge of urban organization, that was conducive to the choice of a location on the same radial axis when people decided to move to a new house; the mosaic model expressed the strength of cultural and social proximity networks within ethnic or religious communities (Berry, 1971; Berry and Smith, 1972).

According to cities and countries, the weight of factors changed. The social geography of cities was conducive to some general findings, but also to the idea that, depending on countries and cultures, some diversity in the patterns of social distribution existed.

This form of social geography was certainly interesting, but it presented evident weaknesses. It relied exclusively on census data. It described the social geography of the city when people were at home, at night, but ignored what happened during the day.

1.2.2. The Social Geography of Rural Areas

During the 1960s, social geography was mainly developed to picture urban and industrial areas. The interest in rural social structures, which was evident among many French geographers at the beginning of the twentieth century, had disappeared. The transformation of rural areas was very rapid. Spheres of relations changed scale: social life ceased to be mainly local.

The analytical tools for this type of situation were provided by anthropologists: Robert Redfield had been fascinated, since the early 1940s, by the folk societies he met in rural Mexico (Redfield, 1940; 1947; 1956). Their members did not behave in the same way than the farmers of the American Middle West. The market was for them a nearby locality where prices varied normally within limits set up by customs. Their main problem was to reduce the social impact of the instability encapsulated into their production system.

The specificities of the folk societies of Mexico were similar to those of peasant societies all over the world. The acceleration of modernization was ruining this form of social organization. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the final stage of Western peasantries became one of the central themes for sociologists (in France: Mendras, 1970), historians (Weber, 1983) and geographers (Franklin, 1969).

Rural areas did not disappear, but their societies took new forms. Many research projects were consequently devoted to the exploration of social life in areas where farming had often ceased to be the dominant activity. There, the generalization of car ownership and telephone equipment offered new possibilities of access to forms of sociability until then reserved to urban areas: hence the proliferation of studies on suburban areas, rural areas, the urbanized countryside, and on the impact of leisure and tourism on these areas (Berry, 1976). In Germany, Hartke used the spread of fallow land as an indicator of the sociological urbanization of rural areas (Hartke, 1956).

1.2.3. Relevance and the Growing Success of Marxist Social Analysis

Geographers grew increasingly uncomfortable with the publications the new geography produced. Their studies were based on a functional approach. They explained how society worked, but did not offer critical perspectives on what was wrong in our world. The existence of social inequalities appeared increasingly as a moral scandal. The spatial distribution of social groups began to be systematically interpreted in terms of unequal power between classes and domination of the strongest over the weakest, that

is, along a Marxist perspective (Harvey, 1973).

Between 1968 and 1972, social studies became one of the most popular frontiers of geographical research. Thanks to William Bunge, new ways of analyzing segregations appeared, as exemplified by his study of Fitzgerald, one of the worst black ghettos in Detroit (Bunge, 1971).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the scope of social geography had become much wider. However, some of its limitations remained: it relied heavily on the data provided by the censuses; it was more interested in social distributions at night than in their daylight equivalents; it was more focused on social hierarchies than on social life and processes.

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Biographical Sketch

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