

THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY IN GENERAL EDUCATION*

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There exists today an amazing educational paradox in our society, a society dedicated to the proposition that the best interests of individuals and of society alike are served most effectively through the general education of all its members. There is, on the one hand, ever-increasing need for more widespread and competent understanding about our world and all its troubled parts of our own communities and regions. On the other hand, there is a serious underemphasis, if not complete neglect, in our schools of the one discipline which has been given the specific responsibility for defining the concepts, formulating the principles, perfecting the techniques, and propagating the knowledge on which such understandings rest, the discipline of geography.

There is, and can be, no more difficult problem in education than that of deciding just what out of our vast store of knowledge is so basic and essential that every member of society should be given command of the material through our formal processes of education. Complete agreement is impossible, but we are obligated, if we believe in general education, to endeavor to distinguish what is essential by its very nature from that which is desirable but not essential. Every subject selected needs to be chosen, not alone on the assumption that it is useful, but on rational evidence that it fulfills a greater need than any subject potentially, or actually, displaced.

This ideal is hard to achieve, and, in one respect, it has failed. Geography has been partially or totally displaced in the effective education of most of our students, and, it must be contended, by less essential courses; for there can be no successful general education in which the fundamentals of geography are neglected or inadequately grasped.

To such a statement there must necessarily be general disagreement, otherwise geography would have reasonable emphasis in our schools and the paradox would not exist. But if this proposition is true, those charged with the heavy responsibility of determining our general education curriculums should demand, and consider, all rational evidence and pertinent arguments; those trained in the discipline should prepare the arguments and accept the burden of proof.

There needs to be a meeting of minds, but, unfortunately, any promotional work done in behalf of geography runs headlong into a massive wall built of interlaced misconceptions and confusions about the nature of the field. There are at least three prevalent misconceptions which, unless dispelled, almost guarantee that geography will—and must—be held in low esteem.

As one misconception, many people conceive geography to be the memorizing of place names and locations. Contributing to this fallacy are those sincere but mistaken teachers who require students to learn names

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and locations and, in so doing, credit themselves with teaching geography and convince their students they are learning geography thereby. Name-location exercises have a very real value and are essential, not alone to geography, but to every discipline that pretends to deal with world realities. But memorizing names and locations as an end in itself is no more geography than memorizing dates and period labels constitutes history.

A second misconception all too prevalent is that geography entails nothing more than the amassing of geographic facts such as the inexcusable facts asked of contestants on our popular quiz programs who have chosen the category of geography. The error in such a misconception lies in the fact that there are no such things as geographic facts. Facts are facts. Events are events. Neither is anything more and neither belongs to any discipline. Facts and events constitute the realities of the world and are infinitely diverse in space and time and capable of analysis and interpretation from many points of view. Selected facts constitute the subject matter of geography, but any or all of these facts may be studied and interpreted to other ends by other disciplines. Geography, as every other science, is defined by its hypotheses and propositions and not by the facts investigated.

A third misconception about geography is that it is solely descriptive and not analytical and interpretive. Although landscape and regional description is an essential part of the process of geographic investigation and reporting, it is not the final purpose. Description for its own sake is art, not science. In the early grades, where youngsters lack factual information or the intellectual maturity to interpret complex relationships, geographic study entails much description, to be sure. But it would be illogical to construe from this that geography is description. Description, fact accumulation, and place-location exercises contribute information, not understanding, and are, therefore, means, not ends.

Eradicating such misconceptions, however, would not alone assure a disposition favorable to geography for there are reasons why even those who seek to understand the field should be confused. The word *geography* itself is a source of confusion. This word has become one of those common terms used loosely, vaguely, and often incorrectly to such an extent that it has, at least in public, lost much of its scientific connotation and academic utility. Regularly in newspapers, popular periodicals, and even educational journals, references are made to the "geography" of some place or other. This every-day usage convinces the reading public that geography is something that exists on the face of the earth—the terrain, observable features of the landscape, or, perhaps, vaguely, all the things seen and unseen that should supposedly be associated with place names. This popular use of *geography* as an ambiguous collective term tacitly acknowledges a need to know the realities of the world, but it also permits us merely to stipulate such knowledge. The consideration of local, regional, or world conditions by word alone becomes a perverse habit of mind that, unfortunately, satisfies. The word *geography*, therefore, becomes a symbolic substitute for real knowledge and understanding. As a result, the study of geography is disregarded easily and the discipline dismissed by nothing more nor less than intellectual default.

A second reason for confusion stems from a basic problem in teaching. Geography deals with the realities of the world and, in its elementary aspects, studies such seemingly obvious things as forests, soils, weather, rocks, rivers, farms, cities, highways, and on through the list of familiar things. This emphasis leads many laymen to conclude that geography is simple and geographers naive. But how many of our adults can define a forest accurately enough for the ends of true understanding? How many can use the word soil without being vague, ambiguous, or incorrect? How many so understand their own communities that they can classify them according to function or location? How many can explain the relation of the bedrock in their area to local terrain, water supply, soil fertility, engineering problems, or industrial opportunity? It is precisely the attention paid by geographers to the things we normally take for granted, or study only out of context, that should commend geography to those interested in general education. However, confusion arises from this aspect of geography because it leads many to believe that geography is concerned primarily with material that belongs rightly to other disciplines. It is, of course, the responsibility of the analytical natural and social sciences to define and interpret individual phenomena or categories of phenomena from the viewpoint of their nature and origin. Geology provides us knowledge of rocks, geomorphology of landforms, botany of plants, anthropology of races, and so on. But geography deals with all such things, too, mapping their distribution, interpreting their spatial interrelationships, and generalizing on their location, and, must, therefore, teach students not yet familiar with such things, enough about them to serve the needs of geographic study. This is an incidental and time-consuming duty, but a necessary one that actually enhances the value of geographic study for the purposes of general education. Nevertheless, it leads some people to believe that geography is nothing more than a little bit of thinned-down geology, meteorology, botany, economics, sociology and political science.

A third cause of confusion about the nature of the discipline comes about through mistaken identity. Those who do not habitually define a field in terms of its intellectual responsibilities continually confuse geography with parallel activities. Yet it is quite one thing to be an explorer, journalist, literary traveler, or novelist, all of whom may describe and interpret to some end conditions over the world, and quite another to be a person doing geographic work. Non-geographers may very well do a far more entertaining, rousing, and readable job of describing peoples and places and a more thorough job of collecting detailed facts than geographers, but without even approximating the requirements and needs of geographic analysis and interpretation. It should be realized further, to help dispel confusion, that since reality cannot be subdivided the way its study is subdivided into academic compartments, scholars in every field, by necessity, often do some work which is geographic although their work as a whole cannot be so labelled. Conversely, not everything done by geographers is geography.

Once misconceptions and confusions have been eliminated, it is not difficult to see that geography is a field of study and not a thing, a landscape, a collection of facts, not even an area and all its content. It is, instead,

a science with certain specific responsibilities delegated to it by our academic formula and educational system.

To meet its obligations as a science, geographic work, unlike parallel but unscientific activities, must be objective and not subjective, emotive or prejudiced. It must describe and interpret what is normal in every part of the earth and discuss the abnormal, the spectacular, or temporary only to the degree that they are important in understanding normal ranges of deviation. And, finally, geographic analysis and presentation must be comprehensive, considering all significant elements and all pertinent factors of explanation inherent in the area or feature of study. In this troubled world, wherein we are constantly exposed to news of the unusual, informed primarily only of important people, facts and events, and bombarded by subjective reports and single answer explanations, all of which serve to distort or caricature the truth, geographic knowledge and study serve as an intellectual antidote. Mass communications tend to create in us warped views of the world and its people unless the flood of information is evaluated properly by minds which already comprehend world realities in their normal relations. To help prepare minds for such world understanding is one end of geography.

Toward this and other ends, all courses in geography have certain aims essential to a general education. One is to help students develop a mental map of the world that fosters and facilitates global orientation, perspective, and thinking. Another is to help students to a conscious awareness and comprehension of the content of natural and cultural environments of the earth. A third is to give students sufficient command over the spatial factors of explanation to enable them to begin to understand the earth mosaic.

These instructional aims, however, do not define the basic and manifold responsibilities of geography in man's general pursuit of knowledge. Geography takes its place among the sciences as the Science of Spatial Relations. As such, it involves, as one of its approaches, the study of the distribution of things important to our understanding—things large and small and things distributed broadly over the face of the earth or as details within the smallest of areas—from playgrounds in our town and resources in our region to strategic areas in our struggles for economic efficiency or global power. This aspect of the field is often essential in, and complementary to, the work of the analytical disciplines and to planning. Geographic study also involves the definition and delineation of physical and cultural regions of every type and complexity essential to the purposes of area analysis. Regions are to geographic study what epochs, eras, and periods are in our study of history, and are as useful and as vital. A third function of geography is to examine, in all their complexities, the reactions of people to, and within, their natural environments: that is the *man-land* relationships. This, in particular, is the bridging function of geography which provides the connecting link between the physical realities studied by the natural sciences and the cultural realities studied by the social sciences. In short, the functions of geography are to define the significant physical and cultural features of the earth, to analyze and interpret their distribution and regional patterns, to make them understandable

by explaining the basic forces, or factors, underlying their existence, and to show how they are complexly and causally interrelated according to location and areal association.

To those who think the business of education is to provide students with all the facts and ideas they need to know, the responsibilities listed above must seem not only staggering but quite impossible to accomplish. It would be ridiculous, of course, to attempt to give anyone factual knowledge or complete understanding about all the world's peoples and places in all their complex interrelationships. Geographic education, however, does not purport in the least to do this. Any formal science, certainly at pre-professional levels, seeks only to provide students with an adequate command of fundamentals and a useable framework of reference for use throughout life, and such is the aim of geographic education. The aim cannot be that of giving students selected facts they will need to know in life, for no one has foreknowledge of such facts. But since it is presumed that any student will, after his formal schooling, think about the world and localities important to him, geographic training can provide him with useable and useful concepts, principles, generalizations and viewpoints, and with certain skills and a referential body of factual knowledge. It is inevitable, after all, that people do considerable geographic thinking, for we cannot divorce our lives and problems from the reality of spatial existence. If we do not take advantage of known geographic knowledge and techniques, our untrained and normally inept geographic thinking is no better than, if as good as, that of primitive man.

The most telling argument for geographic education, however, has yet to be introduced. This argument rests on the assumption that, if education is not to be chaotic but is to be made effective through the command and organization of fundamentals, then each person needs to gain, through formal education, an integrated framework, or structure, of knowledge that enables him to deal effectively with the *whats*, *whens*, *wheres*, and *whys* of life. No one of intelligence in our society doubts the need to study individual phenomena and types of phenomena, consequently the analytical sciences have multiplied and flourished. Every phenomenon, however, is an expression of time and place as well as of being. If we wish to understand the real world, we need to know not only what things are, but we also need to understand them in their context of time and place. For this reason each person needs a well-developed time sense and an equally well-developed space sense as parts of their framework of knowledge. Responsibility for developing the time dimension is given largely to history, although it is shared with geology, archaeology, and certain other disciplines. The responsibility for developing the spatial dimension belongs to geography, which has essentially the full responsibility for developing the students' awareness of the patterned arrangement of all things—physical, biological and cultural—over the surface of earth. It is this responsibility, that of building one of the major dimensions of any adequate structure of knowledge, that makes geography essential to general education.

Although the respective responsibilities of history and geography to develop our intellectual orientation in time and space are complementary and equally vital, the study of history has universal approval, but the

study of geography does not. It cannot be concluded from this fact that geography is less important to general education, but only that we, as a people, have not been awakened to its importance. This is the basis of our educational paradox. Although a scientific and intellectually advanced people, we are, in general, ignorant of the fact that nothing whatsoever on the surface of the earth can be fully or rationally understood if we do not take account of, and interpret, its location and spatial relationships. We cannot deal intelligently with despoiled forests, depleted soils, strategic bases, urban slums, underdeveloped lands, or any other problems we have as inhabitants of this planet unless we localize each problem and analyze the complex spatial factors underlying their existence: but we seem scarcely aware of this truth. As a people who know many facts about our world, we are, nevertheless, geographically untutored, and, what is worse, we are unaware of it. We believe in integrated knowledge, yet we neglect the synthesizing service discipline of geography which, by its very nature, provides us our best system for integrating our understandings of world realities. Of what use, except to practicing specialists, is the knowledge gained from the analytical sciences if that knowledge cannot be applied to the understanding of real conditions in the current world simply because we are ignorant of the world? Of what value are courses in history if students do not know the product of historic change, the world of today or of any moment in the past? We are a people who limit our own knowledge and intellectual competence by our general failure to develop the spatial dimension of the framework of knowledge. It must be said again, there can be no successful general education in which the fundamentals of geography are neglected or inadequately grasped.

The question should not be, then, whether or not geography will be included in general education curriculums, but only what weight it should be given. The final answer to this admittedly difficult question needs to be found through the cooperation and continuous collaboration of all people sincerely interested in American education. But there certainly should be enough geographic study over the years of formal education that American students create for their own future use a completed framework of knowledge, one not lacking the spatial dimension. The aim should be that our students gain those understandings of the world that permit rational judgment and the making of wise decisions, for we are a democratic people with power not to be used unwisely and with a heavy burden of responsibility in this interdependent and troubled world. There should be no suffering on this globe because of basic ignorance on our part, for that deficiency can be remedied if we but will it.