



THE GEOGRAPHY OF PEAK EXPERIENCE: COLIN WILSON'S MESSAGE FOR AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS

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Colin Wilson is a self-taught British author whose works range widely across the humanities. Perhaps best known for his inaugural book *The Outsider* (1956), his reputation is based on the affirmation of human creativity. Wilson's first seven books, the "Outsider Cycle," illustrate his basic beliefs: "that human beings are free agents, that meaningful values can be found at the core of life itself, and the belief in human will as an evolutionary force with unlimited potential for development."¹ His effort is to create a new philosophy to replace the failure of a negative and pessimistic old existentialism.

Clifford P. Bendau, one of Colin Wilson's biographers, relates that Wilson considered himself:

... a genius, a born writer, and an outsider. Wilson found little value in formal education, and left school at the age of sixteen. During the next few years, he drifted and traveled around England and continental Europe. The period 1950-1956 was marked by economic deprivation, marital difficulties, and general discontent. However, as he has pointed out, during this difficult period he did not for a moment doubt his potential greatness as a writer. With this confidence, but without money, Wilson had taken to spending his days in the British Museum writing; and to spending his nights in a

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sleeping bag and tent on the grounds of the Hampstead Heath. Taking the advice of Angus Wilson, he decided to transform his personal journal entries into a non-fiction work dealing with 'outsiders.' The result of this decision can only be described as a sensation.²

What guidance can this remarkable author provide to geographers who are struggling with the issues of contemporary humanistic geography? Although I do not pretend to be a philosopher, or even a particularly knowledgeable student of geographical thought, I have struggled to understand the field's present philosophical dilemma. Colin Wilson's works have helped me understand some of the problems facing humanistic geographers, and perhaps a brief introduction to his ideas would prove useful to others.

Background

Colin Wilson's life, works, and ideas have not been universally accepted. He appears to be an egocentric and irascible person, opinionated and headstrong. Although *The Outsider* enjoyed great critical acclaim, Wilson's later literary career experienced a precipitous decline from which he has struggled to emerge. His present success is due, in no small measure, to the power and attraction of his ideas.³

These ideas are vividly sketched in Wilson's first book, *The Outsider*, published when he was twenty-seven years old. This book, a tract written in support of his basic propositions regarding human potential, was an immediate best seller in both England and the United States, and was translated into fourteen languages within eighteen months. *The Outsider's* point is that thoughtful people throughout the centuries have instinctively rejected the everyday world in the belief that living is boring and trivial. Early philosophers such as Plato responded by seeking the other, more satisfying world of ideas. Nineteenth-century romantics retreated from the world's trivialities with occasional insights and flashes of brilliance but were unable to control or sustain them. Many were led to

despair and suicide. In the twentieth century, romanticism emerged as existentialism; but the basic problem has not been resolved. Which of the two worlds is real: "the world of supreme, godlike detachment and power, or the world in which we feel victimized, helpless, 'contingent'? Which is true: man's experience of his freedom, or of slavery to his body and the world?"⁴

Wilson discovered through his own experience that freedom from the limitations, pessimism, gloom, and defeat of the world is attainable by an act of will related to a crisis or a challenge. The flash of insight needed for creativity, the inner source of power, meaning, and purpose, can also be developed by discipline and concentration. The concentration of attention followed by a relaxation of the senses causes an experience of delight and life-affirmation. Only a few Western intellectuals have explored this approach. According to Wilson:

The problem is to use the mind in such a way that we become detached from this world of the natural standpoint [the world we take for granted], able to criticize it and analyze it.⁵

The Rise of Humanistic Geography

Geographers are vitally interested in the interrelationships between mind and nature. The history of geographic thought in the twentieth century may be written as a reflection of this dualism. From about 1900 to 1925, for example, geography's principal research theme was environmental determinism, based on the assumption that all living things are under the control of the physical environment, especially climate.⁶ Although many aspects of environmental determinism have been retained in geography, such as in the conservation movement, most geographers have turned to other paradigms for understanding the complexities of mind and nature.

From about 1925 to 1950, most geographers adopted regionalization as their major research approach.⁷ This view assumed that people and nature operate as a complex whole to shape landscapes into recognizable units. Regionalization is a strong survivor and is well repre-

sented in regional planning as well as in the curricula of most contemporary departments of geography.

A radical new approach in geographical research controlled the 1950 to 1975 period. This new theme, spatial analysis, was characterized by the effort to make geography more scientific and to develop a procedure and body of theory for evaluating facts related to places. The new approach relied heavily on mathematics and the employment of theoretical models to test and verify hypotheses on the distribution of spatial patterns and processes.⁸ Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of this theme was its inability to find humanistic values in its logical positivism.

From 1975 to the present, geography has undergone another transformation. Many of the basic assumptions and methods of the spatial analysis paradigm remain, but the rôle of human behavior in decision-making has been accentuated. By replacing some of the assumptions in the strictly economic approach favored in the spatial analysis theme with more realistic concepts based on human nature, the resulting geographical explanations of spatial processes and patterns may reflect the real world more closely. This is the goal of the perception and behavior theme in geography.⁹

The perception and behavior theme, sometimes referred to as humanistic geography, encompasses several facets. Phenomenology, for example, is based on the assumption that geographical knowledge must be gained from an understanding of the attitudes and intentions of the people under study, not the scientists who are the students.¹⁰ Idealism, another alternative, assumes that landscape development can be understood by uncovering the rational thought that lies behind it.¹¹ Marxism concentrates on mode of production as the basis of the study of society.¹² Existential geography is a form of historical geography, as it attempts to reconstruct landscapes based on their past uses.¹³

With all these different perspectives, humanistic geography has, in the view of some scholars, reached a re-

search impasse as serious as that which faced spatial analysis some fifteen years ago. Not only has geography separated itself from the scientific method, but also it has lost touch with itself.¹⁴

The Relevance of Wilson's Ideas

This is the point where Colin Wilson's ideas assume significance. He, as an individual, has struggled with the problems of existence and meaning in *The Outsider* cycle and subsequent works. His investigations have drawn upon the works of many philosophers that humanistic geographers know and use.

For example, Colin Wilson draws heavily on the works of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred North Whitehead. From Whitehead, Wilson extracts the idea of a consciousness that pervades all nature, culminating in the human brain, which is the most alive of all. The brain is responsible for perceiving meaning in the world. The creation of meaning is an intentional activity. According to Husserl, the tool for analyzing this consciousness is phenomenology, which promotes a concentration of focus on the reality of events, ridding the mind of distortion. Wilson believes it is necessary for people to widen the horizon of their consciousness intentionally in order to transcend the narrowness of the lifeworld.

Passive acceptance of the world as it appears destroys peoples' sense of purpose in life, and must be overcome by act of will:

. . . it is, Wilson goes on, as if a 'mind parasite' were present within man's consciousness. This parasite, normally blocking man's awareness of the wider vistas of existence, loses its grip during intensity or peak experiences. In these moments, as well as in moments of artistic illumination, consciousness is flooded with meaning, contingency disappears, and man experiences contact with a new reality of consciousness. Wilson contends that by focusing the will, through concentration and effort, man can overcome the parasite and move freely into the transcendent realm of consciousness. The tool to be used is the new existentialism. The new existentialism, as an evolutionary humanism, goes beyond the philosophy that stresses

man's contingent nature, and allows man to live more freely in the sphere of the mind.¹⁵

Wilson's new existentialism, based on the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, rejects scientific logical positivism, traditional philosophy, and literature because it has produced a dull and boring reality. Wilson proposes a new existentialism "filled with perceptions and personal power to intensify those perceptions."¹⁶ Wilson urges people to spurn the 99 percent of the consciousness that is mechanical or automated (the part the 'mind parasite' wants us to see, or the part 'the robot' controls) and to exercise the 1 percent that can actualize the real person, allowing people to regain control of their consciousness and lead them toward freedom.

How can people develop this freedom? Wilson believes it is commonly expressed in "peak experiences" that transcend the ordinary. This can be a profound religious experience, the moment of intensity following a brush with death, a flash of insight accompanying one of life's turning points, a mystical union, or anything that concentrates the attention. Rather than waiting for such experiences to happen, Wilson believes that they can be induced by an act of will. Man thereby assumes responsibility for his own evolutionary development and entrance into the world of pure consciousness. This is the ultimate purpose of self-knowledge.

If along with Yi-Fu Tuan we accept the proposition that humanistic geography assumes value as it clarifies certain kinds of human experience and promotes self-knowledge, then should it not be our goal to collect, analyze, and interpret the peak experiences that illuminate human spatial behavior?¹⁷ Colin Wilson, it appears, would have us study the insights that bind us to place and provide that place with its personality. He would urge us to ignore the elements of spatial behavior that are mechanistic or automatic, those performed by the "robot," and to concentrate on those aspects of space and place where human insight and brilliance are accentuated. Where—and why there—do people rise to the challenge

of actualization? What is the subsequent relationship between peak experience and location?

David Seamon introduces this new geography in his book, *A Geography of the Lifeworld*, whose objective is to explore peoples' immersion in location:

The focus [of this book] is people's day-to-day experiences and behaviors associated with places, spaces and environments in which they live and move. The search is for certain basic patterns which epitomize human behavioural and experiential relationships with the everyday geographical world.¹⁸

Why concentrate on everyday experiences, though? Everyday experience for most people is under the control of "the robot." As Colin Wilson says: "Everyday consciousness is a liar."¹⁹

Wilson encapsulates the distinction between everyday consciousness and peak experience as a dialogue:

The old existentialism emphasizes man's contingency. It says that since there is no God, there are no 'transcendental values' either. Man is alone in an empty universe; no act of his has any meaning outside itself — and its social context. Existentialism had removed the universal backcloth against which medieval man acted out his dreams, with a sense that everything he did would be brought up on judgement day. In its place, says Sartre, there is only the infinitude of space, which means that man's actions are of no importance to anyone but himself.

Phenomenology replies: We grant you, for the sake of argument, that all religious values are nonsense. But we cannot agree that man's everyday sense of his 'self-evident contingency' represents the truth either. Everyday consciousness is a liar, and most people have insights to this effect at least once a week. If they concentrated upon the matter, they would get such insights more frequently still. The question is simply how to give such insights a philosophical status, and to investigate them.²⁰

How can geographers practice the "geography of peak experiences?" There are many different research paths available, but some are supported by such humanistic psychologists as Abraham Maslow.²¹ One of his "attributes of reality when perceived in peak-experiences," for example, is environment-transcendence. The implication for geog-

raphers is that we, as experts on the environment, can and should study how people overcome its influences and effects. In analyzing how people transcend the environment we complete the geo-philosophical cycle that began with environmental determinism.

Influential geographers such as Ellsworth Huntington (a major spokesman for environmental determinism), or Preston James (a prime regionist), Brian Berry (a leading spatial analyst), or Yi-Fu Tuan (widely known as a humanistic geographer) all exhibit in their works the flash of insight or creativity that Wilson advocates. Isolating and nurturing that creative spark among new generations of geography students would help overcome the tyranny of the everyday experience. As we learn to recognize our intentionality, geography and geographers would help to heighten the awareness of our surroundings and promote the rôle that transcendent experience has on the creation of landscape. By using Wilson's ideas, geographers can pass beyond the mere landscape reconstruction of the "old existentialism" to a new era of geographical research that emphasizes the human potential to create landscapes that deny control of the "mind parasite" or "robot." These are the landscapes of peak experience.

Conclusions

We have seen that both Colin Wilson and American humanistic geographers have faced a crisis of understanding concerning the rôle of contemporary philosophy in understanding human creativity. Colin Wilson's investigation suggests that the future of human development is linked to peak experiences that transcend the ordinary. Many humanistic geographers are still identifying and analyzing everyday experiences. Perhaps if geographers adopt a new approach that emphasizes peak experiences, our discipline can both resolve its current philosophical dilemma and contribute significantly to the next step in human development.

NOTES

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15. Bendau, op. cit., note 1, p. 11.

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17. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," in Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (eds.), *Philosophy in Geography* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979), p. 422.
18. David Seamon, *A Geography of the Lifeworld: Movement, Rest and Encounter* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 15.
19. Colin Wilson, *The New Existentialism* (London: Wildwood House, 1980), p. 151.
20. Wilson, *op. cit.*, note 19, p. 152.
21. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 94.