

Symbolic Discourses: The Influence of Denis Cosgrove in the Field of Geography

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“There is no such thing as an uninteresting landscape!”

—Denis Cosgrove

Introduction

DENIS COSGROVE WAS A TRUE HUMANIST and a leader in the field of humanistic geography. Drawn deeply to “the idea of *genius loci*, the spirit of place” (Daniels 2009: 15), Cosgrove was a stalwart for the academic expressive powers of human geography’s interface with the humanities. Places mattered deeply to Denis Cosgrove, and he found it difficult to understand cultural geographers who did not share his abiding interest in landscape and landscape studies (Duncan 2009: 9). However, it was not landscape alone that held his interest. In his faculty biography for the University of California, Los Angeles (his last faculty appointment), Denis described his work over his career as transforming from a focus on landscape meaning in human/cultural geography to a broader concern with:

... the role of spatial images and representations in the making and communicating of knowledge... [especially] the role played by visual images in shaping geographical imaginations and thus in the connections between Geography as a formal discipline and imaginative expressions of geographical knowledge and experience in the visual arts (including cartography). (Cosgrove 2008)

Quite a hefty statement of purpose, so to speak, but it is entirely representative of Cosgrove’s areas of research interest as well as his scope of influence in the larger field of geography. Appropriately enough for a geographer with humanist tendencies, Cosgrove was a true Renaissance man of the field a (“polymath reminiscent of the Renaissance humanists he admired” [*The Independent* 2008]); in no sense was he limited in terms of the scope of his produced knowledge. Yet, despite the impressive diversity of his attentions, Cosgrove is perhaps best chronicled as the prototypical modern humanistic geographer as well as a forerunner in the field of new cultural geographies.

Personal History of Denis Cosgrove: Geographic Inspiration, Education, Employment

Geographic Inspiration

Denis Edmund Cosgrove was born in Liverpool, England, on May 3, 1948, as the second of six children. For his early schooling in Liverpool, Denis was enrolled by his father (a devout Roman Catholic) in a Jesuit school, St. Francis Xavier School (The Telegraph 2008). Although a country, a channel, and half a continent separated him from the Vatican, his life was still very much attuned to the far-reaching influence of Rome. The global scope of the faith, as well as its tenets, stayed with Cosgrove throughout his life, influencing not only his personal credo, but also his work. His other interests in the global began around this time as well: “Cosgrove traced his geographical passion to a toy globe showing Liverpool as the centre of the world, while the ships in Liverpool’s great docks held the promise of exotic realms to be experienced” (The Independent 2008). These docks also provided a great deal of inspiration to Cosgrove’s developing geographic imagination. The Cosgrove family had no television or car, but took Sunday walks along the Liverpool dockside (The Telegraph 2008). Liverpool had been hit hard by German air raids (second only to London within the United Kingdom) during World War II, though its ports stayed in operation throughout and were a vital supply route for the British. The postwar period saw dramatic reconstruction to the port, including the building of Seaforth Dock, though these changes were also accompanied by a significant loss of employers in the region. But to a young Denis, these walks along the dockside were a glimpse into a truly global world: the discharging of cargo, the exchange of global goods, the ships from exotic locales from around the world. Geography became his passion; however, his school had a low opinion of his pursuit of the subject. As “an A-stream student he was forced to drop it in favour of Latin and Greek (protesting to the headmaster, a priest, his mother was told emphatically ‘geography is a girl’s subject’)” (ibid). Consequently, Denis taught himself much of his early understanding of the discipline, reading books on overseas places that he’d found for himself. Eventually, he was able to take up geography as part of an A-level curriculum and pursue his interest at the collegiate level.

Higher Education

Nowadays more of a rarity in the field, Denis Cosgrove was a classically trained geographer, receiving all three of his academic degrees within the subject. His collegiate career began at St. Catherine’s College Oxford (where he received his BA) and continued at the University of Toronto (where he

earned his MA). His doctoral work was undertaken back in England, where he studied at Oxford University. Cosgrove’s doctoral dissertation, titled *The Palladian Landscape: Geographical Change and Its Cultural Representations in Sixteenth Century Italy.*, is his first publication of note that encapsulates his enthusiasm for landscape studies, symbolic inference, and geographically oriented cultural cues. Cosgrove used his dissertation as a means to interpret the “countryside of northern Italy as a ‘way of seeing’ and of reading the surviving Palladian villas of the Veneto as symbols of 16th-century culture,” a concept that stumped some of his more “dyed-in-the-wool empiricist... boots-on-the-ground” colleagues who struggled to get their heads around some of Denis’s abstractions (Delano Smith 2009: 5). He was, in fact, crafting his vision of landscapes as readable texts; landscapes were to him as much cultural vestiges as physical spaces, and ripe for analysis on how we view, picture, imagine, and interpret them. Interestingly, Cosgrove’s dissertation was not originally submitted as a capstone achievement to a Ph.D, and he instead earned a “BLitt” degree (Bachelor of Letters/Literature). Later on, the paper was resubmitted and awarded a Ph.D, though by this time Cosgrove was already working at his first faculty appointment at Oxford Polytechnic, which he began in 1972.

Employment

Cosgrove’s time at Oxford Polytechnic University was particularly notable for his integral part in a small team that designed and launched that university’s first geography degree program. The other principal faculty member on that team, David Pepper, described the program as one that both reflected disciplinary concerns of the time and was forward-looking. “It gave substantial scope to cultural geography and to environmentalism, neither of which were then prominent in British universities, but both of which increasingly interested Geographers as the late 20th century wore on” (Pepper 2009: 7). To have a program as Pepper describes was truly advanced thinking, as these are now some of the discipline’s most prominent and productive sub-areas. Also during his time at Oxford Polytechnic, Cosgrove’s interest in preserving, not divorcing, the relationship between cultural and physical landscapes emerged. Cosgrove was a champion of “the importance of the social, material, cultural and ideological aspects of environmental problems,” most strongly that “this whole notion of environment and nature is an intellectual construct—a projection of human wants and desires. There isn’t some kind of objective thing out there” (Pepper 2009: 8). This notion of accepted realities being forged as human constructs was an idea that deeply pervaded all of his following work and came to be one of Cosgrove’s most influential contributions to geographic thought.

After eight years at Oxford Polytechnic, Cosgrove took a position as a senior lecturer (and later a reader) at Loughborough University. Cosgrove spent fourteen years at Loughborough, his longest of any appointment, and while he never rose to the position of full professor there, it is where he co-wrote his landmark piece, *The Iconography of Landscape* (discussed later). Cosgrove next moved on to Royal Holloway, University of London, in 1994, “undoubtedly attracted by the prospect of a Chair in a rapidly expanding Department” (Driver 2009: 19). Here, Cosgrove served as the director of the department’s newly created Social and Cultural Geography Group and also launched his own journal, *Ecumene*. *Ecumene* means “*the habitable earth* in ancient Greek, which as [Cosgrove] pointed out, stands as an acronym and mnemonic of the journal’s subtitle: environment, culture, meaning” (Duncan 2009: 9).

His time at Royal Holloway also allowed for Cosgrove’s true inclinations as both a geographer and a humanist to emerge, as he established lasting connections between geographers and other scholars across the arts and humanities at Royal Holloway, “in Renaissance studies, in classics and in Italian [etc.]” (Driver 2009: 20). Additionally, he grew increasingly interested in key thinkers of international, historical, geographical thought, notably those beyond English shores—in France, Germany, and Italy, especially. “Amongst many other things, this enabled an increasing number of international collaborations with geographers overseas, from Padua to Rio de Janeiro” (ibid). This interest in the forms and contents of various global ways of thinking, along with his impressive international scholarly relationships, led to his honorary doctorate from Tallinn University in Estonia (Soderstrom 2009: 23). To put it in simple terms, Cosgrove:

...wrote sometimes about London and Los Angeles, but also about Rome, Venice and Vicenza or about the world as a whole. He was, moreover, inspired not only by the usual pantheon of Anglo-American theorists, or of French theorists recycled by the American academia, but also by untrendy French historians, Italian geographers, or German philosophers. So he looked beyond his backyard, and he therefore also resisted the temptation to inflate his backyard to the size of the world, or, in other words, to consider the city in which he lived or the academic milieu in which he worked as a universal model. (ibid)

These relationships serve as ideal examples of Cosgrove’s polymath tendencies: a globally thinking geographer with a humanist’s sensibilities.

Cosgrove’s final appointment, before his untimely death in 2008, was at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he assumed the inaugural position as the Alexander von Humboldt Chair of Human Geography in 1999.

His choice of Alexander von Humboldt for his named endowment seems an entirely appropriate one. Denis, of course, played a leading role in the creation of the ‘new’ cultural geography, but he was also – like von Humboldt – a true Renaissance man whose knowledge and conversations stretched well beyond disciplinary boundaries. In addition, Denis was someone who had a holistic conception of, and belief in, Geography as an intellectual project. In this, Nature occupied an essential place. What he showed was the many ways in which the natural world can be represented and envisioned. (Roberts 2009: 16)

For Cosgrove, Los Angeles was a superlative landscape to “read”; it was neither a “placeless metropolis” nor a “postmetropolis of shining surfaces and empty simulacra,” as it has been criticized by many others (della Dora 2009: 24). Instead, southern California was, to him, a place “rich with history, crossroads of different cultures, and thus sources of continuous fascination... where, as he said, ‘the geographic nexus of land and life was transmuted culturally into a *landscape* and *lifestyle*’” (ibid).

Contributions to the Field

A discussion of Denis Cosgrove’s influence on modern geographical thought would be incomplete without a substantive look at some of his most influential publications. Here, three of Cosgrove’s most significant writings are considered, not only in terms of the ideas they present, but also because of their larger impact on geographic dialogue and broader scholarship.

The Iconography of Landscape

This book, published in 1989, is a series of essays edited by Cosgrove and his colleague, Stephen Daniels. Landscapes are treated as constructs ripe for study, across a multitude of media and surfaces. Their central thesis is that landscape is “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings” (1) as well as an important mode of social, cultural, and political communication. Interestingly, Cosgrove and Daniels did not intend the book to be a text for new cultural geographers (a tradition not yet invented), but rather a text in historical geography (Daniels 2009: 14). And yet the book has been received as one that “changed everything,” providing an understanding of how a synthesis of geography, history, literature, and art could make a coherent and consequential intellectual argument (Brotton 2009). “The book undoubtedly had a significant impact

on geography, but for those of us working in different areas, it also changed our understanding of why geography mattered, and Denis was right at the forefront of that change” (Brotton 2009: 10). In the eyes of Stephen Daniels, the text is a success both for its effect on dialogues in larger scholarship and for how it encourages geography students without a grounding in the humanities to not only “understand works of art and architecture but make a valuable contribution to their meaning through exercising their geographical imagination” (Daniels 2009: 14). To this end, the book is both a forerunner in new cultural geographies and geohumanities and an important resource for furthering geographic education.

Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape

Published in 1998 to wide release, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* presents further arguments for the social and cultural politics of landscape. Whether he was analyzing sixteenth-century Venice or twentieth-century America, Cosgrove saw the writing and description of the world as “central to our understanding of who we are as a species” (Brotton 2009: 11). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* was yet another means by which to convey his ideas about the importance of this “earth-writing”: geography in perhaps its purest form. The book’s guiding thesis is that landscape constitutes a discourse through which social groups have historically framed themselves and their relations with both other groups, as well as the land. This discourse has close epistemological and technical relationships to ways of seeing places (Cosgrove 1989: xiv). Of note, the discourse is not only about how we see places, but about how we construct depictions of place, our relationships to place, and the ways we’d like others to see us in those places. There is a decided value in the text placed upon the relevance of the material world in the construction of meaning, as well as a “respect for the practical knowledge imbued in acts and processes of visual representation” (Martins 2009: 21). Cosgrove once again utilizes his perhaps most-venerated medium as case studies: works of art, particularly Italian and particularly of a humanist tradition. Poetry and text from the European and American tradition are also used to similar effect; all these humanistic pursuits are a glimpse into a “text” by which landscape studies can be explored and pursued. In Cosgrove’s vision, they offer powerful insights and scholarly material on our collective relationships with, and views of, place.

Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination

Further evidence of Denis Cosgrove’s imagination and scholarliness is on display in his 2003 book, *Apollo’s Eye*. This work represents Cosgrove’s turn

in attention to the deeper cultural meanings of the so-called “paper landscape”: the landscape of the map (Delano Smith 2009: 5). Via maps, visual representation is still in play, though in this imagery the whole of the earth can be grasped, located, communicated, and shared all at once. Scale, then, becomes an important concept in reference to the depiction and reading of places. Scale can distort an image, it can be limited or expanded, and most of all it can provide a varied perspective. In talking about landscapes and scale, Cosgrove deftly notes their ability to be at once “vast in conception and yet jewel-like in detail” (Cosgrove 2003: 128), both sides of the proverbial coin in an ordered global scale. His colleague Catherine Delano Smith posits that by scale, Cosgrove meant not merely mathematical scale, but scale as “the measure of the smallness of humanity and the vastness of the cosmos, Renaissance man’s word for the universe” (2009: 6). Here, she argues, Cosgrove was spiritually and intellectually at home: at the crossroads of humanity and humanity’s depiction, etherealness and groundings on Earth.

Geographic Influence

Broader geographic thought and philosophy

Denis Cosgrove’s approach to geographic thinking, as partially illustrated by the publications above, was unique in its purposeful balance between tradition—the legacy of geographies past—and innovation, the promise of geographies to come (Driver 2009: 20). In no greater sense was Cosgrove’s interest in humanistic ideals at play than in his advocacy for the critical importance of maintaining geographical perspective within a classical tradition. To Cosgrove, orienting to these kinds of classic modes of thinking work to enable geography’s potential for contribution to broader, interdisciplinary debates across scholarly fields (Atkinson 2009: 17). While he was a geographer through and through, his vision was never narrow, but instead focused on the multiplicities possible in geographical thinking across boundaries.

Cosgrove’s philosophical orientation is well described by his article “New Directions in Cultural Geography” (1987), which he co-wrote with Peter Jackson for *Area*. The article advocates for a new cultural geography that is “contemporary as well as historical (but always contextual and theoretically informed); social as well as spatial (but not confined exclusively to narrowly-defined landscape issues); urban as well as rural; and interested in the contingent nature of culture, in dominant ideologies and in forms of resistance to them” (Jackson 2009: 11). Much of Cosgrove’s overarching philosophy is evident in this manifesto; in fact, this description outlines much the work produced in the following decades not only by Cosgrove,

but by the multitude of geographers emerging in the freshly defined subfield of new cultural geographies.

Above all, Cosgrove was a leader in bringing vision, imagination, and representation to the forefront of geographical thinking. His works “sustained a longstanding fascination with places, landscapes and their representations” (Atkinson 2009: 18), notably exploring the ways in which geographies are both shaped by and also shape imagery of place. In Cosgrove’s eyes, landscape reigned supreme, not only as a topic of study, but also as a medium by which to generate geographical meaning and create geographical knowledge. The production of regions and places was driven by an understanding of landscapes, often via an exploration of the importance of visual imagery, art, the graphic (maps included) and the pictorial. This humanistic view of space was in no sense nonrepresentational, but rather an ultimate representational take on spatial understanding.

Development of the Field

Notwithstanding that he was a pioneering human geographer, Cosgrove’s most lasting legacy may be his insistence on not divorcing human geographies from their physical geography counterparts. He was committed fully to a unified discipline—a discipline concerned with society-environment relations (Pepper 2009: 7) and an acknowledgment of the shared common history of geographic exploration. This philosophy speaks strongly to Cosgrove’s “Renaissance-esque” sensibilities, his appreciation of a multitude of subject areas, and his groundedness in the whole of the discipline.

The journal he founded, *Ecumene* (now called *Cultural Geographies*), is also a lasting testament to this principle within the discipline. The goal of the journal was to provide a medium for the new cultural geographies that were developing at the time of its founding. However, the ultimate intention was to provide an academic space that would triangulate “the interface of the humanities, social sciences and environmental sciences. As such, the journal’s goal was not only to reach across academic fields, but to also reach out to rich environmental and place-based traditions” (Duncan 2009: 9). Cosgrove’s selected name for the journal, once again, spoke to his intentions for the larger trajectory of geography. *Ecumene* stands as an acronym and mnemonic of the journal’s subtitle: environment, culture, meaning. It is fitting that even his journal’s name was layered with symbolic significance and an interdisciplinary spirit.

Conclusion

A Renaissance man with a firm grounding in a single field, a pioneer of new geographies and yet a classicist, Denis Cosgrove seems at times a contradiction in terms. Where he most shined, however, was in proving that there was no contradiction in being identified as both a geographer and a humanist. His work will be remembered as a frontrunner in new cultural geographies and for demonstrating the effectiveness of integrating humanism into the discipline. Cosgrove regarded broad geographical vision as a noble perspective and was as committed to the geographical tradition as he was to propelling the field into its potential interdisciplinary future.

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