

# 1. GEOGRAPHY AS AN ACTIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

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## Geography as a Social Science

*Any academic discipline is a means, not an end. It is a means for such intellectual ends as learning, knowing, and understanding. It is a means for such social ends as progress and problem solving. It is a means for such individual ends as opportunity and fulfilment.*  
(Wilbanks, 1997: ix)

Geography, as one such discipline, has sustained its existence for two hundred years because it can claim to satisfy the three means that are espoused by Wilbanks in the above quotation. It is a means for intellectual ends in the knowledge, skills and values that is promoted as geography. These have been enumerated in a wide range of policy statements such as the *International Charter on Geographical Education* (IGU.CGE, 1992). It has been demonstrated to be a means for social ends such as progress and problem solving through numerous specific studies that have analysed the growth of urban areas, the spread of earthquakes and the distribution of different diseases in areas around the world. Problem solving tasks, such as the best place to locate a new regional centre, where to locate a second airport for a large city, and what is the impact of whaling on the marine environment, all require a central input from geography. Geography is a means for individual ends, such as opportunity and fulfilment, in the way that it allows individuals to explore their local community and environment and develop a strong appreciation of the qualities in this environment and how people interact within it.

In broad terms, the discipline of geography has been interpreted variously over the past two hundred years depending on the orientation that theorists have placed on the discipline. We have selected two illustrations to convey what we mean and the first of these is a statement by Peet (1998:1) synthesising the many orientations toward the discipline of geography:

*Geography looks at how society shapes, alters, and increasingly transforms the natural environment, creating humanized forms from stretches of pristine nature, and then sedimenting layers of socialization one within the other, one on top of the other, until a complex natural-social landscape results. Geography also looks at how nature conditions society, in some original sense of creating the people and raw materials which social forces "work up" into*

*culture, and in an ongoing sense of placing limits and offering material potentials for social processes like economic development.*

The second statement from the US Geography Education Standards Project report *Geography for Life* (Bednarz *et al.* (1994 frontispiece) reads:

*Geography is the science of space and place on Earth's surface. Its subject matter is the physical and the human phenomena that make up the world's environments and places. Geographers describe the changing patterns and places in words, maps, and geo-graphics, explain how these patterns come to be, and unravel their meaning. Geography's continuing quest is to understand the physical and cultural features of places and their natural settings on the surface of Earth.*

While they are quite different statements, both highlight key aspects that characterise the discipline of geography as we know it. These are: the relationship between physical and human aspects of our world; the importance of place and location; the use of distinctive tools or techniques for collecting and representing geographical information; the integration of phenomena and processes in particular areas in the world; and a set of social and environmental values that are practised by people who act as geographers. The first statement adopts a stronger social orientation towards geography whereas the second one takes a more scientific approach to geography. Both are legitimate statements about geography. These general statements have then been focused and hewn according to the philosophy of the geographical theorist to form a wide range of different approaches to geography including humanistic geography, radical geography, Marxist geography, postmodern geography and the geography of gender. Encyclopaedic publications such as that by Peet (1997) present a detailed survey of these approaches. When these approaches are presented in chronological order, it becomes apparent that the different orientations in the second half of the twentieth century have a strong human orientation as the balance in the relationship between humans and environment swung in favour of the humans. Therefore, geography has come to hold a much stronger human orientation around the world than it has a physical environmental focus. This is not to say that physical environmental studies are not important and are not pursued. International projects on biodiversity and climate change are still being conducted, as are studies on the Greenhouse effect. However, we would claim that curricula in schools and in universities have taken on a strong human orientation as geography demonstrates that it is an important social science.

### **Social Approaches to Geography**

This book is entitled *Geography, Culture and Education* to highlight its strong social orientation to geographical studies. In doing so, it draws the reader's attention to the various kinds of people-focused approaches that have been popularised in geographical investigations over time. Geographical researchers and theorists may differ in some of the finer details about these different approaches. However, they generally agree on the distinctiveness of a number of social approaches to geography. We shall attempt to differentiate them through some brief definitive statements.

## CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

As a reaction against environmental determinism, cultural geography emerged as the study of culture areas and cultural landscapes from an historical perspective. It was characterised by the work of Carl Sauer of the Berkeley School and bore some resemblance to the approach of the French human geographers, such as Vidal la Blanche, which emphasised the study of how natural environmental features influenced groups, societies, and human associations through the study of life styles that have evolved over time. More recently, cultural geography has been redefined to embrace spatial representations drawn from the creative arts, e.g. literature and painting, and the study of such cultural forms as sexuality, food consumption and youth cultures.

## HUMANIST GEOGRAPHY

Humanistic geography developed as a strong reaction to the positivistic quantitative revolution in geography in the 1950s and the 1960s. Investigations using this approach examine environments from the perspective of place – the different settings in which people live, have experiences, understand, interpret and express meaning. Place became the focus for social and environmental experience. It used phenomenology, the study of phenomena as people experience them, as a basis for explaining its orientation to geographical investigation. Seminal studies using this approach include: Tuan's study of perception and imagining of place (1976), Relph's study of people's experience of place (1976), Buttner's study of life-worlds (1976) and Ley's study of the meaning of place (1977). These studies typify a concern for humanitarian values and original human experience rather than second- and third-order experiences that have already been interpreted by someone else.

## RADICAL-MARXIST GEOGRAPHY

The interrelated Radical and Marxist approaches to geography emanated in the 1960s. While accepting the view that geography is the science of space and environment, Radical geographers chose topics for study that were different from those of the humanistic geographers. Topics such as urban and regional poverty, variations in access to social services and discrimination against minority groups reflected the focus on demanding social issues. The social relevance of geographical studies was very important to these Radical geographers. It was transformed in the 1970s into Marxist geography. This was achieved by moving beyond topics that were radical in content, but did not involve a radical theory or method of analysis. Such a move involved the search for an alternative way of understanding that traced social issues to their sources in different societal structures. Here, the spatial and environmental were linked closely to the social and the economic. Using Marxist concepts of social production of the environment and space, human geography was "finally linked into social science" (Peet, 1997:110). In doing so, geographers chose to explain environmental disasters, the Greenhouse effect on the globe, and economic globalisation.



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