

2. GEOGRAPHY AS A CULTURAL FIELD

WAYNE DAVIES AND MARY GILMARTIN

Geography's relationship with cultural issues has been restricted in the past to the systematic field called cultural geography, a field to set alongside the other systematic divisions, such as political, urban, or economic geography. But in the last two decades new interpretations of the importance of culture in the differentiation of societies and space, as well as appreciation of the limitations of the realist assumptions that underlay traditional human geographical approaches, have transformed our understanding of the relevance of cultural issues to geography. The result can be seen in the very different content, methods and philosophy of textbooks that exemplify the old (Jordan and Rowntree, 1979, 1997) and new (Mitchell, 2000) approaches. An important part of these new ideas is the critique of the realist assumption behind most geographical work that there is some objective reality waiting to be written down. It is increasingly recognised that our knowledge has been 'constructed' through the culture of the peoples seeking to understand and communicate about the world. Certainly this does not mean that generations of empirical work are wasted. This has provided us with a great deal of understanding about the world. Rather, these new interpretations and understandings based on culture focus attention upon fundamental epistemological issues about the nature of our geographical knowledge, and how it has been created. Hence, it can be argued that the study of cultural issues have moved from being a restricted and even marginal part of research in human geography, to one that underpins the whole nature of the contemporary field. The rest of this chapter seeks to justify this position by showing the relationships between culture and geography in five contexts to justify the title that geography is a cultural field. It will begin by briefly summarising the **alternative uses of the term 'culture' and its relationship with 'society'**. This is followed by a review of **the traditional approaches to the field known as cultural geography**, which provides the springboard for a brief summary of the profound changes represented by **contemporary cultural geography**. The next two sections discuss the position that the field of geography is not only **culturally dependent** but can be viewed as a **cultural product**, in the sense that the 'type' of knowledge produced is influenced by the particular values and needs of the society in which it is created.

Alternative Meanings of Culture

The term culture now has three distinctive interpretations, which can be briefly summarised as 'sophisticated artistic endeavour', as 'way of life' and as 'representation and purpose'. In common parlance the term 'culture' is still associated with the way it became defined in the eighteenth century Romantic Period, describing the most sophisticated artistic forms in literature, music and art, activities (Williams, 1958, 1976, 1977), what Matthew Arnold described in the poem 'Sweetness and Light' as: 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'. But at the same time as culture was being applied to sophisticated artistic expressions the influential German philosopher Herder used the term to identify the distinctive life styles and character of different peoples in Europe. It was in this sense of the word that the term began to be used by mid and late nineteenth century students of human evolution and non-western societies, and in geography, as a collective term for describing the distinctive 'ways of life' of identifiably different peoples (Tylor, 1871) and brought into geography as 'genres de vie' by the French possibilists.

By the mid twentieth century the dualism between the use of the word in terms of the high artistic achievements in the Western world, and its application to the way of life of traditional peoples in other parts of the world, became further complicated. The word 'culture', usually preceded by an adjective, began to be applied to particular subgroups in Western society, such as in 'working class cultures', or various 'ethnic cultures' or 'gay cultures', or 'teenage cultures' which indicated greater awareness of the presence and distinctive contributions of groups of people with their own characteristics and life styles, within the wider context of society as a whole. At the same time the elitism shown by the restriction of culture to the most sophisticated or intellectually refined artistic expressions came under fire (Greenblat and Gunn, 1992). The utility of more popular forms of artistic expression and entertainment became recognised through the term 'pop culture'. As these groups and areas were subject to analysis it was increasingly recognised that special emphasis needed to be placed upon communication in sustaining separate cultures, for it is only through this process that these various groups create and exchange meanings, developing the shared understandings or ways of seeing and interpreting the world (Williams, 1958). This interest was stimulated by the expanded roles played by the new forms of visual and sound communication made possible by the new electronic technologies, enabling us to store, manipulate, and send messages and images almost instantaneously across the world. Individuals such as Raymond Williams, Simon Hoggart and Stuart Hall (Smith, 1999) were particularly important in developing the study of sub-cultures and the media within the contemporary world, recognising that the critical approaches used in textual studies of novels, could be applied to these new developments. Their work stimulated the development of the field called 'cultural studies'. This is not the study of different traditional cultures throughout the world, and the subgroups within western society, but of studies that seek to go beyond the study of surface traits. Culture took on a new meaning in the term 'cultural studies'. The approach exposes the taken-for-granted assumptions of material objects and patterns, providing new interpretations and meanings in everyday activities and actions. The focus is upon the search for meanings and

identities, and relationships with social formations that lie behind the empirical representations studied by the older divisions of knowledge, whether in literature, politics, economics, sociology, etc. In Smith's (1999,131) words this involves the establishment of 'connections between the ways questions are addressed across the social sciences so that the objects of analysis are no longer seen as simple, certain and well defined but are now understood as complex, uncertain and contested spaces'; cultural studies is considered a post disciplinary, rather than an interdisciplinary field.

There is little doubt that the term culture, in its context of 'way of life' overlaps with the word 'society', which is often used as a descriptor for the practices and relationships between people who function as a distinctive group. But, although it can be argued that the terms are synonyms, the term culture is usually used in a far wider context and has more of a comparative resonance. Not only does it deal with the artefacts, artistic practices and intellectual achievements and beliefs within the whole way of life, as well as the social practices and relationships, but also it implies a more comparative context than the singular connotation implicit in society. But the new interests in culture as a way of life within contemporary society did not restrict itself to the superficial forms of different life-styles, as expressed in the various traits and practices; investigators began to delve into the meanings and the purposes that lie behind the 'ways of life' of different cultures. In the context of history, Belsey (1996,1) summarised the core differences between 'society and culture' in the temporal dimension with her comment that one can create: 'a rough and ready distinction between cultural history, or the history of meanings, and social history, which deals with practices'. This idea can be equally well applied to the spatial context of geographical study, even though it will be shown that traditional cultural geography routinely dealt with 'practices' of different groups, viewing them as defining elements of their cultural, rather than societal, differences because they were dealing with non-Western societies.

Geography and the Study of Cultural Traits and Patterns

Only one of the three interpretations of culture described above was adopted in the traditional approach to cultural geography, which focused on the material and non-material traits that identified the distinctive peoples found in the world and their environmental practices, a product of geography's empirical tradition and nineteenth century links with exploration and anthropology. When these different human groups were studied, it was not surprising that the earliest emphasis was upon describing or classifying the differences, as seen in the series of distinctive traits, such as language, ethnicity, dress, house types, field patterns, technology, work practices and livelihood, diet, art, modes of communication and entertainment - in short, characteristics that apply to their whole 'way of life', rather than those only in the 'high culture' context in the artistic sphere. These different 'ways of life' and characteristics were reflected in their collective behaviour - behaviours that were learned, rather than the instinctive, innate actions. But, it was soon realised that these features are only sustained because of communication between people sharing these traits,



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