New Directions in Cultural Geography
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New directions in cultural geography

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Summary The issues reviewed in this paper will be among those discussed at the forthcoming Social Geography Study Group conference at University College London (1–2 September 1987). The paper traces the growing convergence of interests between contemporary social geographers and those with a historical interest in the cultural landscape. Further details of the conference are available from Peter Jackson.

The field of cultural geography has become the focus of renewed interest over the past decade producing a crop of new directions. In 1978 Cosgrove anticipated fruitful cooperation between a humanist cultural geography and Marxist social geography ‘in a joint exploration of the world of man (sic) and the geographies of the mind’. Blaut (1979) turned to socialism and Third World politics to provide his own radical critique of cultural geography while Jackson (1980) sought a similar rapprochement between cultural and social geography, drawing on the ideas and methods of social anthropology.

Antipode devoted a recent issue to developments in ‘radical cultural geography’, including discussions of theoretical problems (Cosgrove 1983) and of literature, the production of culture, and the politics of place (Thrift 1983). A key area of debate concerned the relationships between dominant (‘elite’) and subordinate (‘popular’) cultures with more than a hint on the part of some writers that the study of the latter has been undervalued in geography (Burgess and Gold 1985). The significance of each and the tensions between them are expressed in the ‘political’ and ‘vernacular’ landscapes described by J B Jackson (1984). Most recently, Ley (1985) has commented on the convergence of cultural and humanistic geography around the idea of landscape as text, developing an idea that has become popular throughout the humanities and in a range of interpretative approaches to the social sciences.

Before reviewing some of the questions and problems that these new approaches have raised, it is worth considering some of their common features and the agenda that they set for cultural geography. If we were to define this ‘new’ cultural geography it would be 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. It would, moreover, assert the centrality of culture in human affairs. Culture is not a residual category, the surface variation left unaccounted for by more powerful economic analyses; it is the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted. To develop these points in more detail it is necessary to return to the American roots of contemporary cultural geography.

Interpreting the cultural landscape

The landscape theme remains a fertile one for cultural geographers although its conceptual reference has been considerably broadened from that of Carl Sauer and
his followers in the ‘Berkeley School’. Their concerns were dominantly rural and antiquarian, narrowly focused on physical artifacts (log cabins, fences, and field boundaries). Although rarely explicitly stated, their work rested on the ethnological assumption that distinctive geographical areas (landscapes) could be identified and described by mapping visible elements of material culture produced by unitary cultural groups. Inevitably such landscapes or regions were identified as the product of stable, pre-modern and dominantly agricultural societies whose inscriptions were threatened by the processes of modernisation.

Carl Sauer’s own fears for the consequences of modernity on the balance between human life and the natural world sprang from his ecological interests and led him to organise the international symposium that resulted in the publication of Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth (Thomas 1956). This monument to the influence of ‘Berkeley School’ cultural geography raises themes of human agency with respect to the natural environment and its ecological balances that find current expression in a form of ‘green’ cultural geography (Doughty 1981, Pepper 1984). Equally holistic, but drawing from different sources, is the renewed interest in a form of ‘total’ human geography concerning the everyday life of historical societies which gestures towards the Annales school of French historical writing (Braudel 1973, Baker 1984).

Arguments in 1970s humanistic geography about the authenticity and integrity of place (Relph 1976) echoed the Berkeley School’s critique of modern society and its apparent erasure of many aspects of former cultural and ecological differentiation. In reconstructing the concepts of landscape and culture recent work in cultural geography has emphasised the fact that the landscape concept is itself a sophisticated cultural construction: a particular way of composing, structuring and giving meaning to an external world whose history has to be understood in relation to the material appropriation of land. Thus the symbolic qualities of landscape, those which produce and sustain social meaning, have become a focus of research. This has allowed a broadening of the sources available for study in cultural geography. If landscape is regarded as a cultural image, ‘a pictorial way of representing or symbolising human surroundings, then landscapes may be studied across a variety of media and surfaces: in paint on canvas, writing on paper, images on film as well as in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground’ (Daniels and Cosgrove 1987). Each or any of these allows us to disclose the meanings that human groups attach to areas and places and to relate those meanings to other aspects and conditions of human existence. Thus Cosgrove’s (1984) study of the evolution of the landscape idea in the European tradition between the Renaissance and the end of the nineteenth century draws upon a range of landscape representations from painting and poetry to gardening and urban design, seeking to understand their meanings in terms of the changing uses and perceptions of land during the long and complex development of European capitalism.

Landscape as ‘text’
Conceptualising landscapes as configurations of symbols and signs leads inevitably towards methodologies which are more interpretative than strictly morphological. Among the most commonly favoured are those associated with post-war developments in linguistics and semiotics. This interpretative strand in recent cultural geography develops the metaphor of landscape as a ‘text’ to be read or interpreted as a social document in the same way that Clifford Geertz (1973) describes anthropology as the interpretation of cultural texts. Geertz advances the deceptively simple idea that all social life involves the interpretation and negotiation of meaning among a group of
social actors, but that we as social scientists introduce an extra layer of meaning by **inscribing discourse** (writing it down as a series of texts or ethnographies). Geertz adapts a phrase from Gilbert Ryle to describe the disclosure of multiple layers of meaning in ethnography as a process of 'thick description', linking it methodologically with 'diagnosis': 'stating as explicitly as we can manage what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and about society as such'. Successful execution of such an interpretative description raises critical questions about writing and reading: the capacity of language to 'make' things in its representation of meanings that are already 'read' by the author (Daniels 1985, Olsson 1980).

While geographers have as yet made little contribution to the ethnographic literature (Jackson and Smith 1984; Jackson 1985), others have been exploring the idea of 'ethnography as text' (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Marcus and Fischer 1986), arguing that interpretative anthropology and the writing of culture is but one aspect of a broader crisis of representation in the human sciences. This crisis calls into question the nature and history of the production of social knowledge itself, whose construction produces as many silences and blank, unwritten sheets as highly illuminated texts, an issue which has been effectively opened up by Michel Foucault and those geographers who have followed him (Foucault 1970; Driver 1985; Philo 1986). The crisis is only now beginning to express itself within human geography (Gregory 1987; Dematteis 1985).

The metaphor of text has appealed strongly to humanistic geographers. This is most apparent in various studies of landscape interpretation, ranging from Marwyn Samuels' essay on 'The biography of landscape' (1979) to more intensive, historically-grounded readings of particular landscapes in terms of their contemporary intellectual and social context. Such studies have now become an element of geographical research internationally with contributions by Spanish (Nogue i Font 1984, 1986), Danish (Olwig 1984), Indian (Singh 1985), Israeli (Bar-Gal 1984) and Swiss (Malfroy 1984) as well as Anglo-Saxon geographers. Inevitably this work is uneven both in the sophistication of its approach and the quality of its interpretation. Too often it displays either a theoretical overdetermination, imposing grand sociological models on complex literary materials (Silk and Silk 1985) or a theoretical naivety, approaching symbolic or iconic landscape representations casually, merely classifying sophisticated literary or artistic materials in terms of superficially 'geographical' categories such as landscape taste and beauty, insiders and outsiders, the sense of place, home and exile, mobility and stasis (Pocock 1981, Porteous 1985). Indeed, some of the finest models of landscape and place interpretation are found outside the professional geographical literature, for example Edward Muir's (1981) reading of ceremonial townscape and civic ritual in Venice where the analogy of theatre is closer than that of text, or Robert Darnton's (1984) interpretation of eighteenth-century Montpellier through the eyes of a bourgeois diarist of the time. The exemplary reading of the landscape of *fin-de-siecle* Vienna by Carl Schorske (1981), once again characterising the city as theatre, has already been a stimulus to geographical study (Ley 1987).

**The iconography of landscape**

While textual and theatrical analogies are valuable in that they preserve the sense of human action, creativity and the layering of meaning in ways that other popular geographical analogies like system, organism and structure do not, they can be limiting insofar as landscape is the history of a way of *seeing* or, better, of representing (Cosgrove 1985). The method most successfully developed for the interpretation of visual images
is the art historians' iconography, significantly upheld by Clifford Geertz (1983) as a model for ethnography. Originally developed by Erwin Panofsky (1939) and applied in studies of medieval gothic architecture and Renaissance painting, it has recently been embraced by geographers wishing to give appropriate emphasis to the significance of images in the analysis of landscape representation. Iconography has been applied not only in the obvious case of topographical maps (Harley 1983), but in a broadly based collection of landscape studies entitled The iconography of landscape (Cosgrove and Daniels 1987).

In introducing these essays the editors point to a similar crisis of meaning and method as that facing textual hermeneutics: that images, like language, have become in contemporary understanding, enigmas, problems to be explained, prison houses that lock understanding away from the world. Instead of providing a transparent window on a 'real' world, images and languages are now regarded as a sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification (Mitchell 1986). Those earlier, less commercial societies studied by traditional cultural geographers sustained more stable symbolic codes than contemporary societies, but the liberation of meaning in the post-modern world, the freedom of intertextuality with which we characteristically invert signs and symbols to recycle them in different contexts and thus transform their reference, places the emphasis on surface rather than depth (Daniels and Cosgrove 1987, Youngs 1985). For this reason iconographic or diagnostic methods which emphasise 'depth interpretation' have significant limitations, particularly in the study of contemporary landscapes.

Social geography and contemporary cultural studies

While the landscape theme continues to dominate cultural geography, new directions have also been signposted by developments in other branches of contemporary human geography. In their concern with tracing the local impact of industrial restructuring, for example, economic geographers have been forced to confront the significance of locality in understanding successive spatial divisions of labour (Massey 1984). While this work has given rise to a more general theoretical literature on the complex and reciprocal relationship between spatial structures and social relations (Gregory and Urry 1985), very little attention has so far been paid by geographers to what one sociologist has described as the cumulative texture of local urban culture (Suttles 1984). This suggests that there is considerable scope within social geography, for example, to develop alternative ways of theorising culture without specific reference to the landscape concept.

A major stimulus for such work comes from ideas developed in the field of contemporary cultural studies, deriving ultimately from the studies of Raymond Williams and John Berger and the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Their more immediate stimulus is in the work of Stuart Hall and his associates while they were working at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall et al. 1980). This group has produced studies of 'mugging', feminism, racism, youth subcultures and related topics (Hall et al. 1978; CCCS 1978, 1982; Hall and Jefferson 1976), all theorised in terms of the various strategies of resistance that subordinate groups employ to contest the hegemony of those in power. Their work rejects what they regard as the elitist and antiquarian predilections of traditional cultural studies. Instead, they explore a range of popular subcultural forms, interpreting their contemporary meanings in relation to their specific material context. The symbols of Rastafari, punk rock and skinhead youth
cultures are not seen as an autonomous cultural domain but as involving the *appropriation* of certain artifacts and significations from the dominant (or 'parent') culture and their *transformation* into symbolic forms which take on new meanings and significance for those who adopt these styles (Hebdige 1979). To paraphrase Stuart Hall, culture is the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value.

Not all geographers will be convinced by the way in which these subcultural forms are related back to the 'organic crisis' of British capitalism and to the role of the state in legitimating the strategies it adopts to prevent or contain such crises. But the work of Hall and others does serve to remind us of the political implications of cultural studies and of the need to locate the analysis of culture in terms of a more adequate understanding of the place of 'civil society' within the anatomy of contemporary British capitalism (Urry 1981). Why, for example, have cultural studies focused to such a degree on the supposed 'profanity' of working class and youth subcultures (Willis 1978) and why have they not shown an equivalent interest in middle class culture and in the geography of the so-called 'consumption classes' (Wright 1986)?

Above all, however, contemporary cultural studies have taught us to recognise the fact that cultures are politically contested. A unitary view of Culture gives way to a *plurality of cultures*, each of which is time- and place-specific. Whether we are concerned with the political struggles that are symbolised in the monuments of nineteenth century Paris (Harvey 1985) or with the politics of Carnival in London's Notting Hill (Cohen 1982), culture can always be represented as a politically contested social construction. Moreover, the geography of cultural forms is much more than a passive spatial reflection of the historical forces that moulded them; their spatial structure is an active part of their historical constitution. It should not take a sociologist (Husbands 1982), for example, to remind us that the contours of 'East End racism' are defined in relation to the changing geography of local employment and housing markets, leading to the emergence of a classic 'defended neighbourhood'. Such instances are legion, where particular cultural forms can be related to specific material circumstances in particular localities 'on the ground'. This is a most fertile, if as yet virtually uncultivated, field for a revitalised cultural geography.

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