

A CASE FOR HISTORICAL AND LANDSCAPE APPROACHES TO GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Historical and Landscape approaches to the study of geography are issues that have loomed large in methodological discussions in geography. This paper evaluates and discusses the arguments about historical and landscape geography. It examines the methodological problems in historical and landscape geography, and attempted to distinguish between historical and landscape geography on one hand and their relationship with the regional approach. The paper concludes by making a case for Historical and Landscape approaches to geographical synthesis, in order to place the geographical endeavour at the heart of environmental studies.

Introduction

Problems of methodology and sometimes of relevance or significance have tended to trouble geography and geographers more than any other discipline and its practitioners, than one can readily think of. Historical and Landscape approaches to the study of geography are issues that have loomed large in methodological discussions in geography. In this paper we examine the methodological problems in historical and landscape/cultural geography, and attempt to distinguish between historical geography and landscape/cultural geography, and their relationship with the regional approach. The paper evaluates and discusses the arguments about these approaches and makes a case for historical and landscape geography as paradigms to geography as a science of the environment.

Geography and Historical Geography

It has been questioned whether all geography is necessarily “historical geography” (Harts, 1982; Ogbonna, 1976). Geographical tradition in some places, and for some time has shown lack of interest in historical processes and sequence, leading to the outright rejection of historical geography as a systematic specialism. But, geography, in any of its branches, ought to be a generic science so as to account for origins and processes of present phenomena. “Historical geography” is not the history of geography; the word ‘historical’ should simply mean the past. Since all geographies have ceased to be merely descriptive, for any geographical explanation to be meaningful, it ought to be based on historical, sequential development. Such a blending of history [the past] and geography would represent a complete integration of the areal and temporal variations of the world, which would be reality.

In the past preoccupation with nature and the form of its relationship to man had led to the adoption of non-generic description of the human content of areas. The current over-emphasis on the development of the so-called topical knowledge and over insistence on what is “relevant” or “significant” and ‘hat is not have all narrowed down the scope of geographical inquiry. Those who oppose the historical approach in all branches of geography (Bunge 1966; Haggett, Cliff and Frey, 1971), only hope to limit the field so as to be more competent. It is easy to point out how this approach leaves much to be desired.

The geography of the present day will soon pass and become history. Man today is engaged in modifying the landscape, both physical and cultural, in various forms. In time to come, any meaningful explanation of such landscapes must emphasise the impact of man's activities over the landscape in the past, which in this case looks at process over time, and that is historical geography. Therefore, all geography is "historical geography" whether actual or potential since events in both physical and human geography pass through some processes of change and development over time- past, present and future. It is no use studying static patterns rather than a process that is continuing and seemingly never ending. Man is the main instrument of change; what he does over space and time affects all branches of geography- physical or human.

Historical geography seeks to emphasise the process/time dimension in the spatial arrangement, differentiation and organization of both natural and man made phenomena. Thus, all geographers by implication are historical geographers to varying degrees in so far as they see the present resulting from processes in the past, even in their various specialized fields. Time in this context does not necessarily mean from the beginning of time, which would be an impossible thing. The geographer can divide his world into periods. For example he can study the geography of the 18th century or the 19th century or ancient, classical and the modern period, or of any period at all in the past so long as the period impinges on the present expression of geographical forms. It is difficult to see how any branch of geography in a spectrum as inclusive as this, can be left out. Yet, the term 'historical geography' is neither redundant nor undesirable as a systematic geographical specialism such as physical or economic geography. More recently Geographers are becoming so topical, theoretical and quantitative in their works, as demonstrated in the works of Cliff and Ord (1981), Haggett, Cliff and Frey (1971), Bunge (1966) so much so that the historical overtone has often been played down in favour of the method of scientific logic, i.e. hypothesis testing and theory formulation. In most of their works outside direct historical specialism, past influences, if at all, are only casually brought in by way of introduction, while the bulk of the work is devoted to current issues of the researchers' interests. For example Mario Bunge (1966) arguing about the role of theory formulation in science maintained that, "where there is no theory formulation no science", as some contemporary geographers try to achieve, as if this ought to be the main concern of contemporary geography method.

In a situation like this, historical [past] geography faces the threat of eventual extinction as quantification, hypothesis testing, theorizing and specialization in topical issues further intensify. Thus historical geography some times seen as harbouring little that is amenable to quantification, could be squeezed out of existence in a geographical era that is already becoming quantification biased. By recognizing and treating it as a systematic specialism in geography there can be the assurance that current geographical phenomena would continue to be explained in the light of the past. This is true even with the application of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technologies. For example to understand the current levels of desertification and deforestation in the Nigerian Savannah region it is necessary to examine past trends over time using remotely sensed images of the past and compare with current trends. This is itself a method in historical geography. The stock of historical geography is so varied and ample to be simply allowed to diffuse into the other systematic specialism. If that happens then past geography will become only incoherent titbits of geographical facts that lack synthesis and comprehension.

The Problem of Methodology in Historical Geography

One of the problems in historical geography is in the method of study. Proponents of historical geography have faced the problem of the right approach to the field. The choice is between a horizontal “cross-sectional” and a vertical “development” approaches, reflecting differences in methodological traditions even among the practitioners of historical geography. Darby (1979) noted that before the first International Conference of Historical Geography that was held in Brussels in August 1930, there was already some kind of geographical writings that we now refer to as Historical Geography. Such writings include Bancroft’s (1888) work on the “Californian Pastoral 1769-1848”, which gave pen pictures of Californian landscapes and the economies before the gold rush. Darby also made reference to the descriptions of past geographies written by Macaulay and Trevelgan in Britain, and Henry Adams in the United States of America. Other contributors who talked about past geographies include Hetner, and especially Carl O. Sauer who wrote on the construction of cultural landscapes (Darby, 1979 p.9).

The rise of historical geography as a self-conscious discipline came with the development of academic geography in the English-speaking world in the twenties and early thirties. This was as a result of the realization by proponents of historical geography that every past had once been a present, and their believe that the term historical geography could be used logically to describe only one approach i.e. the construction of past geographies (Darby, 1979).

To a certain extent, almost all geography is historical in that the data were gathered in the past and do not perfectly reflect present conditions. But the word ‘historical’ in historical geography concerns the reconstruction of past landscapes or the study of geographical changes through time. This approach is the so-called cross-sectional approach. It is either vertical or horizontal cross-sectional approach. The vertical cross-sectional approach emphasises the time dimension in geographical synthesis. It emphasises the narratives describing geographical processes with much less emphasis on patterns. This is also exemplified in the works of some historical geographers on changes in settlements (James W. V. 1976) and about changes in agriculture, forest cover and clearing of woodlands (Russell, 1967; Blouet, 1976). On the other hand some cross-sectional approaches may appear to lack significant time dimension and is characterised as horizontal or instantaneous cross-sectional approach, usually in the form of maps. The horizontal approach though serves some useful purpose it does not help much in explaining the processes of change that result in a landscape and its geography.

Thus the Vertical and Horizontal Cross-sectional Approaches are all important but different approaches to historical geography. Perhaps a most suitable approach must be a careful combination of the two since each has something to contribute. First, it should be emphasized that historical geography should be generic in approach rather than be just an empirical account without depth. The vertical (development over time) approach has the advantage of looking at phenomena in the light of sequence of changes. For instance, it analyses landscape into its changing elements; it therefore covers some depth or takes us far into time such that we can better appreciate the impact of time on present phenomena. Nevertheless, it is equally worthy of note that in analysing phenomena in such successive narratives one runs into conflict with other specialities like economic geography or geomorphology or even other disciplines. However, in so far as both economic and geomorphic changes are part of historical study, then such a treatment is historical. If understanding of landscape is part of geographical study, then the treatment is geographical.

Conversely, a horizontal succession of cross-sections will not provide deep insight into the past event. As the elements that make up the landscape do not change at the same time and at the same rate, this approach creates another difficulty. Even when change takes place, repetition is unavoidable so that cross-sections in series fail to adequately reflect reality. However, while vertically a historical geographer can cover more depth, horizontally he covers more ground, and greater diversity. This is why a reasonable mixture of both approaches can be beneficial.

The scope of landscape study

Geographers traditionally tend to organize their ideas around five major themes. These as Harvey (1973) suggested include:

- i. The areal differentiation theme,
- ii. The landscape theme,
- iii. The man-environment theme,
- iv. The spatial distribution theme, which is manifested in terms of locational analysis, and,
- v. The geometric theme, which is an extremely old tradition in geography

These major themes are neither mutually exclusive nor completely inclusive of all geographic works. However, each of these themes can in its own way provide an operational definition of the nature of geography, around which geographers develop concepts and methods. The concept of the 'Landscape' as one of the central focus of geographic study came largely from the works of German geographers and is related to concept of the 'Region'. In the German sense, the words 'land' translated as a definite unit of a country (or region), is virtually synonymous with the term '*landschaft*', which is literally analogous to the English word 'landscape' meaning a 'scientifically defined geographical region' (Holt-Jensen, 1988). It also means either a specific unit area or type of area. Perhaps the close relationship between regional study and landscape study may be seen in the German's concept of *Landschaftkunde*, which concerns both the study of such small unique areas and the delimitation and classification of different types of regions.

Landscape studies have been classified into at least three approaches. These include:

1. Landscape chronology, or regionalisation, which uses development over time as way of presenting regional synthesis. More specifically, landscape chronology concerns the science of reconstructing past landscapes, for example on the basis of relict elements in the contemporary landscape such as in the study of the drying of Lake Chad (Mega Chad) in Borno state, North eastern Nigeria, using aerial photographs and satellite images. This approach may also be applicable to the study of shifting sand dunes in desert landscapes. This approach includes what Darwent Whittlesy (1929 cited in Holt-Jensen 1988 p.37) described as Sequential Occupancy Studies.
2. Landscape ecology, was initiated by Carl Troll in Germany and defined landscape ecology as the complex of causal and reciprocal connections between biological communities and their environment. Troll regarded landscape ecology as an approach to an integrating study of landscapes, and introduced and developed the art of aerial photography interpretation to study it (according to Jensen, 1988 p38).

3. Landscape morphology, was initially developed in Germany as a form of regional geography. Holt-Jensen credited this development to Otto Schulutter who asserted that geographers should consider the form and spatial structure created by visible phenomena on the surface of the earth as their unifying them. In this case mountains, rivers, roads, canals, gardens, fields, villages, towns and cities should, within a restricted sense, form a unity in the eyes of the geographers. These visible pictures i.e. physical and cultural elements of the landscape should represent the object of geographers study. This view therefore constitutes the landscape morphology approach. This concept was aptly captured by Jean Brunhes who said that we should study the earth as if we were sitting on a balloon and looking down upon it, and that we should analyse the landscape and the characteristic interplay of observable phenomena there (cited in Holt-Jensen, 1988, P.38).

Of particular significance to us are the landscape chronology and landscape morphology approaches, which by implication together encompass the vertical and horizontal dimensions of historical geography

The concept of landscape should denote an assemblage of geographical facts whether they are concrete things or not or only conceptualized. The human geographer's equivalent of landscape is "area" or "region" and the processes that shape areas or regions are both physical and cultural. Thus, the geographic landscape has an organic character of physical, spatial and temporal elements, since these can be expressed in terms of place and time. Viewed this way the landscape has a generic meaning, for not only does it include things physically seen, it is also a generalization derived from the observation of individual scenes. We speak of physical as well as cultural landscape. In addition, we speak of the character of a landscape, which conveys meaning beyond the scope of the physically observable elements that relate the landscape to a system. Thus the study of landscape covers more than the things that can be seen.

What is implied when we refer to such things as a typical "African", "Indian", Asian, or "English" landscape? Obviously in this expression, we mean much more than the physical elements that first meet the eye. For example, the Netherlands according to Smith (1978) is a creation of man, because it owes its existence to the long continued struggle to drain and reclaim new land and to protect existing lands from the invasion of the sea. Perhaps this is the "Dutch landscape". Similarly, some landscapes in the world are dominated by dams, canals and reservoirs (all human creations). A good example is the "tank" landscape of south-eastern India where myriads of little streams and areas of overland flow have been heavily littered by small earth dam structures. Another example is an "Indian landscape", which Spate and Learnmonth, (1967) describe as "a surface of vast overlapping fish-scales". By these expressions, we are at the same time conceptualizing the way of life, habits and culture of a typically Indian, Dutch or an African scene. These landscapes can relate to other known landscapes either because they are contrasting or are similar. Ogbonna (1978) remarked that an American lecturer with some Nigerian university students on a field visit to the federal government's experimental wheat farms near the Lake Chad in North-eastern Nigeria in the late 1970s was amazed when he saw a very extensive farm on a slightly undulating topography that was completely colonized by growing wheat stands planted in rows and highly mechanized. He easily described it as "a typically American Landscape". By this sadden expression of his experience the American was not only contrasting the farm with other Nigerian farms dominated by small peasant holdings, but he was also associating it to an

agricultural landscape he new back in his home (America). Implicit in these examples is a contrast between Nigerian and other cultures through the mirror of the Cultural Landscape.

Cultural, Historical and Regional Geography

It is sometimes difficult to establish a divide between cultural and historical geography when considered together with regional geography. Together with regional geography, they make up a facet of the broader theme of human geography and are all concerned with the areal differentiation of human activities, that is, a comparative study of areally localized cultures both in the present and in the past. However, in any circumstance we need knowledge of the functioning of the culture, the process of living together of the group, in order to comprehend the localization of human activities, which we can achieve through historical reconstruction.

To define and understand human association as areal growth we need to know how settlements and their activities came to be what they are. Such study of culture areas is both historical and cultural geography. By emphasising the influence, not only of the people but also of physical elements in successive evolutionary sequence, cultural geography would tend to describe patterns, structures and beliefs that result thereof. Thus, there is strong element of cultural geography in historical geography just as there is some historical geography in cultural geography and this makes them difficult to separate neatly.

Regional geography on the other hand is a synthesis of both historical and landscape geography and more. The cultural landscape which the "region" represents either in the past or now, involves knowledge of the functioning of the given culture as a whole and familiarity with the terrain which the given culture occupied. In this case, both historical and cultural geographers must be regional specialists for they are concerned with the appearance, limits and functioning of the region. In addition, the regional geographer needs knowledge of the historical and cultural geography of the area he deals with because the present can most easily be understood if the past is known. An example will illustrate this point. In Nigeria some time ago, one of the country's (1975-80) regional economic development plan emphasized among other things, the need for the wandering cattle Fulani's of the north to be forcefully settled. This portion of the plan appear not have regarded the historical and cultural facts about the cattle Fulani' s who by their culture do not recognize any territorial or political boundary and sovereignty in their almost limitless semi-arid environment. Consequently this provision of the plan did appear to have been successful, since even by today (in 2007), about 27 years after the end of the plan period a good number of them (the Fulani nomads) are yet to be settled and indeed many still shift locations within the country try and many more come in from, or move out to neighbouring countries like Niger Republic and the Republic of Cameron, where their kith and kin live in similar environment that are only separated by colonially imposed boundaries, Culturally to the nomadic Fulani, the colonially imposed political boundaries are of no significance to him and to his livestock as long as his survival and that of the livestock is concerned.

The Berkeley School of Cultural Geography

Since the time of the Greeks or even before, geography has experienced more than a fair share of internal conflicts in respect to ideology and methodology. For a good length of time environmental determinism was the sole basis of geographical practice, but now apparently obsolete. Although distant echoes of discord may yet be heard, geography has become increasingly man-centred. Naturally, the lack of

universal accord in the methods, purpose and spirit of geography produced a number of national, international, and even institutional ideological school of thought of which the Berkeley School of cultural geography is a classic example.

The significance of the emergence of the Berkeley School was the liberation of the minds of some geographers towards a more objective inquiry into man-nature relationship (Ogbonna, 1978). Through culture and history, explanations were sought for a host of geographical problems ranging from environmental issues through the interplay of culture and nature to physical biotic and even economic questions. Briefly put, the Berkeley school founded the human cultural approach to geography, which has been a strong force in killing environmental determinism. The father of the school, Carl O. Sauer, himself left for America and geography generally a rich and varied legacy. That his name is yet not clearly among Americans conservationists is surprising, and yet, conservation of the natural environment can claim a good part of his contribution. To geography, he demonstrated successfully that through interdisciplinary approach more success could be attained. He was a great human geographer in the first instance, and then an anthropologist, even an archaeologist. Perhaps the best way to assess his legacy both to America and to geography would be to match him against W.M. Davis, another great American geographer of the recent past. Davis who was a determinist, both in his approach to geography and in his influence on fellow American geographers, went into intellectual drowsiness as his views prevailed - his period was some sort of a drag on American geography. Contrarily, Sauer advocated a human approach to geography, which he maintained is essentially historical. He bred and nurtured a host of human geographers of reputation who have propagated him well. His period marked a renaissance and a landmark in the history of American geography. Perhaps to appreciate the role of the Berkeley School, especially the role of Carl O. Sauer, the following examples of Doctoral Dissertations supervised by Sauer since 1927 to 1967 and Andrew Clark (1959-1975) may be useful guide.

Table 1: Selected Doctoral Dissertations supervised by Cart o. Sauer at Berkeley since 1927, and Andrew H. Clark since 1959.

S/No	Author	Dissertation Title	Year	Supervisor
1	John Leighly	A study of Urban Morphology: The towns of Malardalem	1927	Carl. O. Sauer
2	Joseph E. Spencer	The Middle Virgin River, Uta: A study in cultural Growth and change	1936	“
3	Felix Webster McBryde	The Native Economy of South Western Guatemala and its Natural background.	1941	“
4	Robert G. Browman	Soil Erosion in Puerto Rico	1941	“
5	George F. Carter	Plant Geography and Cultural History in the American Southwest.	1942	“
6	Dan Stanislawski	Historical Geography of Michigan.	1944	“
7	Brigham A. Arnold	Land Forms and Early Human Occupation of the Laguna Seca Chapala Area, Baja California, Mexico.	1954	“
8	Donald Innis	Human Ecology in Jamaica	1958	“
9	Alfred Philip Muntz	The Changing geography of the New Jersey Woodlands, 1600-1900	1959	Andrew H. Clark
10	Arthur Joseph Ray	Indian Exploitation of the Forest-Grassland Transition zone in Western Canada, 1650-1860	1971	“

Source: *Historical Geography News Letter*, Vol. 6, Number 1, Spring 1976, Pp. 77 – 79.

While the concern of Historical approach to geographical synthesis covers every aspect of man and his living environment, the approach of the Berkeley is summarised by Leighley (1976) while making reference to Sauer’s methods. Leightley remark that:

“By steady attention to the perennial object of geography, the observable face of the earth, Sauer avoided the faddism that has afflicted academic geography in the United States. He was a consummate observer; and what he saw with his eyes perpetually raised in his mind questions concerning “how things came to be.” He spent his life seeking answers to such questions. His test of a student’s quality was the latter’s ability to carry that process through, from observation to interpretation. The methods to be used were quite simply those appropriate to a specific question), whether measurement, mapping, data collecting in the field, verbal enquiry, laboratory examination of specimens, or search in archives.”

The main concern at Berkeley was summarised by Spencer, that “everyone thinks critically about his own individual interest” (Spencer, 1976).

The Scope of Historical Geography in Nigeria

Although most African institutions of higher learning have long established departments of geography, historical geography have received little attention. This is particularly true of Nigerian Universities, even as the scope of historical geography in the country can be extensive and rich. One of the great themes of historical geography in Nigeria could be the study of the stable elements of the geographical scene, which include distribution of peoples (there are well over 200 distinct groups in the country alone, both big and small), the pattern of settlements, the soils and vegetation that develop where fields and pastures replaced forests. The study of these themes may lead most areas back to a much earlier age than we presently know, so that a good understanding of the present is guaranteed from a knowledge of the past.

Nigerian geographers, by “accident” of place of training and nature of orientation tend to be applied in their research. This may have accounted for their lack of interest and neglect of historical and cultural emphasis. The great ancient cultures of Benin, Ife, Kano and Sukur Kingdom in Adamawa state, Nigeria, which are presently

only superficially talked about, can be fertile grounds for a Nigerian historical geographer. Other themes can be those rapid changes in the regions which man's increasing ability to modify his environment have brought about. The changing patterns of agriculture, of industry, of communications and trade, of population densities and the resultant changes in the evaluation of natural resources and of space relations. Furthermore, the Nigerian historical geographer should be concerned with the development of political and administrative units in so far as their changing areas and policies have geographical effects. One of the problematic questions in the Nigerian politics today is the wave of agitations for readjustment of peoples in the various administrative units and even the readjustment of boundaries. Governmental dilemma on these issues stems from lack of past geographical evidence against which to weigh claims. If we had historical geographers who would have done their jobs well, the problem would have been solved.

It can be claimed seriously that historians, anthropologists and archaeologists have done much to uncover the past of Nigeria and to understand the nature of its differential cultural developments. There is a gap to be filled by geographers in this general effort for there is still much that is not known about spatial variations in modes of living and purposes that accounted for them.

Conclusion

Bashir (1998) observed that geography by its nature is a systematizing and integrating spatial science that deals with both the physical and human environments. While this is true, however, the understanding of human and physical phenomena requires an assessment of the fundamental cultural processes and the resulting forms or structures they produce in geographic space. If geography and its practitioners have to account for origins and processes of present phenomena as a generic science, it must be based on historical sequence (process, time and form) of development. It is when this is done that the proper integration of the areal and temporal variations of the world, with the cultural and physical facts of human existence, which we interpret as reality can be realized. And this is historical geography.

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