

Why Geography Matters . . . But Is So Little Learned

by Walter A. McDougall

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It is nice to be popular, or at least to teach popular courses. But the downside of large classes is that the only students I get to know are those who come to visit during my office hours. Thus, I was taken aback one day years ago when an anonymous face from the lecture hall appeared at my office accompanied by a large dog. The student was blind.

He was there to ask for my help because, while he could understand the domestic factors in the foreign policies of nineteenth-century Britain, France, and Russia, he had trouble visualizing their strategic relationships, since he could not read a map. I pulled out a map of Europe and guided the young man's finger in tracing the coastlines of the continent and the location and boundaries of nations. I described mountains and rivers, along with where and how large the countries were, and tried to convey how slowly sailing ships and horses traveled so he might imagine how steam transportation revolutionized warfare. His memory was extraordinary, and soon he displayed a better feel for geopolitics than many, perhaps most, of my students.

We all must learn geography in order to learn history. That is why it is so disheartening that many youth emerge from American schools virtually illiterate in geography. The 2002 "national report card" on geography found that 16 percent of eighth graders could not locate the Mississippi River on a map, and only one-quarter of high school seniors were able to interpret maps, describe regional features and socioeconomic and political factors. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, commenting on the results, noted that "One-third of fourth graders could not identify the state where they lived. The state where they *live*." [1] Why? Is geography snubbed because it involves rote learning rather than critical thinking? Because multiculturalists are suspicious of a subject that invites unflattering comparisons among nations? Because geography seems passé in an era when technology is making the earth a "global village"? Because geographers fail to promote their subject? Or because educators have forgotten how important it is?

Whatever the answer, geography's importance ought to be so obvious that no one would challenge it. [2] We are all geographers from the moment we navigate a playpen or explore our neighborhood on bicycles to our adult careers as teachers, business or sales people, farmers, engineers, truck drivers, or just smart consumers. Geography is the context in which "we live and move and have our being," and as Ambassador Strausz-Hupé liked to say, "You cannot argue with it." [3] Geography is the way things are, not the way we imagine or wish them to be, and studying it is just as basic to a child's maturation as arithmetic, which teaches $2 + 2 = 4$, not 3 or 22.

Another reason geography is basic to education is its role as springboard to every other subject in the sciences and humanities. A British study observed that children are like Rudyard Kipling's mongoose. "The motto of the mongoose family is 'run and find out' and Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was a true mongoose." Likewise, children "will enjoy merely discovering what is just round the corner . . . and need no encouragement to explore the banks of a river or visit a farm. . . . So, too, when faced with glimpses of Everest, the Victoria Falls, the lonely deserts of Arabia, Tibet, and Antarctica, they find food for their sense of wonder and feeling for beauty." What happens next is that a student originally enthralled by the sheer variety of the world begins to ask, not only what? And where? But why? And how? [4] Why are deserts or rain forests here and not there? Why do Asians eat rice and Mexicans tortillas, instead of bread? Why did Europeans discover routes to China instead of the Chinese discovering Europe? How did the colonial powers manage to conquer the world, how did today's countries emerge, and why are some big, rich, or mighty, while others are small, poor, or weak? Asking such questions opens a universe of inquiry, because to answer them students must turn to geology, oceanography, meteorology, anthropology, ecology, economics, sociology, and history.

And yet, the British study concluded, "The strange fact . . . is the role of geography in the curriculum is at once anomalous and ubiquitous. Geography lacks a clear identity . . . so the problem for geographers, curriculum planners, and teachers is to find ways to acknowledge and act on this reality." [5]

The ways have always existed. They need only to be rediscovered.

Geography's Origins

The origins of geography lie deep in prehistoric times as proven by the recovery of ancient shipwrecks suggesting people engaged in long-range commerce millennia before Sumerian, Egyptian, and Chinese sages founded agricultural civilizations thanks to their own applied astronomy and geography. What is more, these first students of the earth, sea, and sky were mystics believing the world revealed the gods themselves, hence the Aztec and Mayan temple observatories, Stonehenge, the pyramids, and the mysteriously ecumenical Zodiac.

But scientific geography began, of course, with the Greeks. Eratosthenes calculated the earth's circumference with astonishing accuracy and may have coined the word geography (earth-writing). Ptolemy mapped the known world on a latitude-longitude grid. Herodotus and Aristotle speculated about links between topography and political institutions two thousand years before Montesquieu did the same. After the fall of Rome not least among the causes of the Dark Ages was the catastrophic loss of geographical information suffered in Western Europe. And insofar as renaissances occurred in the Medieval era—under Charlemagne, during the Crusades, and finally in the great quattrocento—they resulted in large part from renewed contact with the Eastern Mediterranean and recovery of ancient geographical texts. But once Europeans equipped themselves with that knowledge, not to mention math and astronomy from Araby, the compass and gunpowder from China, and cannons via Ottoman Turkey, they launched the Age of Discovery that created the modern world.

Nothing illustrates geography's power better than Renaissance exploration. Once the tales of Europe's intrepid mariners were styled as lofty adventures illustrating the unique dynamism of Western civilization. Today students mostly read that greedy and violent men just set out to murder and plunder other (presumably idyllic) peoples. But however given texts or teachers present the Age of Discovery, they lose everything if they fail to present it as a scientific

revolution. The need to navigate beyond sight of land and survive lengthy voyages, chart strange waters so others might follow, map and describe new lands so intelligent planning could be done for future expeditions: all that sparked a cartographic explosion. The commerce pursued by Europeans made the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries the first era of “globalization” and hastened the rise of capitalism. The strange flora and fauna brought home to Europe were named and categorized, providing the empirical base for botany, zoology, and in time Darwinian biology. The travelogues published about foreign cultures allowed *philosophes* from Montaigne to Voltaire to transcend a Eurocentric approach to religion, society, and politics. And needless to say, the Age of Exploration did prove anew Strabo’s saying: “Geography subserves the needs of states.” Taken as a whole, “the effect of geographical literature on the Renaissance mind was as the raising of a curtain, a revelation made almost entirely by the printed book.” [6] European courts sponsored exploration, competed for colonies and trade, chartered companies, and began to subsidize science, while geography broke monopoly over university curricula enjoyed by classical and theological studies. [7]

In sum, the Age of Discovery is the most exciting school subject imaginable. For however sullied by violence and exploitation, it was an intellectual triumph unique in history. Philosophers referred to geography as “the mother of sciences,” and John Locke insisted, “Without geography and chronology, history will be very ill-retained and very little useful.” [8] But curiously it was in the latter half of seventeenth century that the first signs of a counter-current emerged: geography’s very success in spawning so many other paths of inquiry gave some people a false impression of it. As geographer Bernard Varenius lamented, geography was criticized as either too narrowly descriptive or “too widely extended,” since readers were “generally bored with a bare enumeration and description of regions without an explanation of the customs of the people.” [9]

Indeed, geography did retreat in the eighteenth century as physics, astronomy, and natural history captured the imagination of scholars. Geography was snubbed as pedantic, old-fashioned, and “popular.” But after 1763 geography revived as a tool of statecraft when Britain and France resumed their imperial rivalry. It was Lord Sandwich of the Admiralty who sent Captains Cook and Vancouver to explore the Pacific, and Napoleon who founded the first chair of geography and history at the Sorbonne. Academic geography revived as well in the least likely locale, Germany. By the 1790s Immanuel Kant described geography as the “foundation of history,” and considered the two of them basic to all inquiry because they “fill up the whole span of knowledge; geography that of space, history that of time.” [10] Two of Kant’s successors made geography a formal academic discipline. The first was Alexander von Humboldt, the naturalist famous for his expeditions to South America, and the other was Karl Ritter, whose *Erdkunde* grew to some 21 volumes. They disagreed on cause and effect. Humboldt held human beings were part of nature and shaped by it (thus anticipating Darwin), whereas Ritter held nature to be God’s creation designed *a priori* to provide the needs of mankind. But both emphasized the *Zusammenhang* or “hanging together” of human and physical nature, an idea that later inspired Ernst Haeckel to coin the term ecology. [11]

Humboldt and Ritter founded the Berlin Geographical Society in 1828, a British one followed in 1830, and chairs in geography existed at universities across Europe by the 1870s. The young United States, meanwhile, was geographically minded from its inception. Benjamin Franklin mapped the Gulf Stream and promoted geography in schools. Washington persuaded the

Continental Congress to fund a Geographers' Department, and his surveyor Robert Erskine made 130 maps of the states. Jefferson, of course, wrote his *Notes on Virginia* and dispatched the Lewis and Clark expedition. As early as 1784, King's College, New York, began teaching geography, and educators Noah Webster, Jedidiah Morse, and Horace Mann imagined every American child a geographer, befitting a nation destined to grow. In 1818 the U.S. Military Academy created a Department of Geography, History, and Ethics. Army explorers such as Zebulon Pike and John Fremont and Navy geographers such as Matthew Maury and Charles Wilkes charted the American West and the Pacific. [12] After the Civil War geography was so ubiquitous that a survey of Ohio schools showed eight pupils learning geography for every one studying history. [13]

Therein, once again, lay the seeds of crisis, for geography aroused the envy of other disciplines and was vulnerable to attack for two reasons. First, it encompassed so much that it again seemed to lack methodology. Second, stunning new theories in geology, paleontology, and biology seemed to debunk the Bible's account of Creation while the old Humboldt/Ritter debate turned ugly under the influence of Darwin and Marx.

Evolution implied, of course, that human beings were just products of "natural" selection in which species struggled to survive in changing environments. Marxism taught that history unfolded according to immutable social laws as natural as the physical laws discovered by Newton. These radical notions not only challenged revealed religion, but also denied the assumptions of secular liberalism, which extolled the sovereignty of rational man over his environment. Geographers found themselves caught in a great debate that ensued between various determinists and their critics. [14] In particular, Friedrich Ratzel set out in his *Anthropo-Geographie* of 1882–91 to describe all the regions of the earth and establish how geography shapes human nature. His influence spread through Ellen Churchill Semple, one of America's first female geographers, who bluntly postulated: "Man is a product of the earth's surface." [15] Others rejected what appeared to them a grotesque form of determinism. They granted the importance of geography to human development, but refused to believe the *choices* people made in response to environment were somehow predetermined. So they countered with a theory called possibilism that left room for human inventiveness and sovereignty over technology.

This debate did considerable harm, but not before geography reached the pinnacle of prestige. What propelled it ironically was a "standards debate" in every way similar to our current one. In 1893 the National Education Association's Committee of Ten, led by Harvard President Charles Eliot, criticized the lack of rigor in high schools and found most geography a barren exercise in memorization. The Committee recommended a stress on physiography—the evolution and processes of the earth—and man's place within it. [16] Publishers responded with a flood of new textbooks proving that geography's magic had not been forgotten. "It should be impressed upon every child," wrote Spencer Trotter of Swarthmore, "that geography is a part of his everyday life, not a mere learning of names, but a living reality. The imagination—that quality of the brain which enters so largely into a child's life, peopling its wonderland with fairies and creations of fancy—is the one element needful in gaining the ideas of real things." [17] Trotter urged teachers "to learn to look for the significance of facts. Never lose sight of cause and effect. Facts are the raw material of thought, to be transformed within the man and reappear glowing within his personality." [18]

The efforts of the Committee of Ten received a huge fillip in 1898, when the Spanish American War broke out and the United States emerged as a global military and commercial power. The Wharton School of Business of The University of Pennsylvania had already begun teaching economic geography in 1893, but in 1898 the University of California founded the nation's first geography department, and in 1903, the first doctoral program arose at the University of Chicago. With support from government and business alike, geography flourished. But in years when the U.S. was digging the Panama Canal and the Wright Brothers were conquering flight, it seemed incontestable that geography should stress natural resources, government works, and commerce: social studies writ large. [19] Again, publishers met the demand with books such as *Commercial Geography*, whose author conflated humanitarianism and commerce in the manner of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson: "Oppression in Armenia, or cruelty in the Kongo, arouses the feeling and elicits the protest of the world. . . . Isolation has been called the mother of barbarism, while communication and trade bring nations and men together, often put evil to shame, and, by the light of publicity, establish better things and promote the higher life of man." [20] In the United States, no less than Hakluyt's England, geography was the education of a people destined to rule, only now for Progressive uplift rather than exploitation.

The New Imperialism and the Geopolitical Movement

In the same years as Americans were poring over maps of their new oceanic possessions, reading their *National Geographic* magazines (founded in 1888), and beginning to think in terms of a global economy, a new and powerful school of geography captured the imaginations of statesmen and armchair strategists from Europe to America and Japan: geopolitics. It is customary to name Rudolf Kjellen (1864–1922), the Swedish professor of political science, its founder, because he coined the term in 1899 and systematized its theory of the evolution of states according to their geographic environment, economic resources, and racial composition. Kjellen thus adopted the century-old notion of political units as organic and added to it the Social Darwinian mechanism of human competition and adaptation. In terms of influencing international relations, however, the real pioneer of geopolitics was the American Naval captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, author of *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890). Upon reviewing military, political, and economic history from the ancient to modern eras, Mahan concluded that the determining factor in the rise and fall of empires was sea power. He considered the United States uniquely blessed with all the prerequisites for a great navy and merchant marine. He advocated an imperial policy based on a two-ocean high-seas fleet, a Panama Canal, annexation of Hawaii, and bases in the Caribbean and Pacific. Mahan became the leading propagandist for American navalism and overseas expansion, influenced Theodore Roosevelt and the other Progressive Imperialists, and was so respected as a scholar that the American Historical Association elected him its president in 1902. More ominously, Mahan's writings made a deep impression on the impetuous Kaiser Wilhelm II, who launched Germany's bid to become a great naval power in 1897 and provoked an arms race with Britain that helped to spark World War I.

The study of the geography's influence on politics was, of course, as old as Herodotus and Strabo, or at least Montesquieu and Kant. But where they had been interested in speculating about the way topography, climate, and other factors helped to inspire certain forms of government, the geopoliticians explicitly or implicitly speculated about the way strategy might influence the geography of world affairs. That is, they were the opposite of determinists and endeavored to put geography in the service of the state. Halford Mackinder "assumed that the crucial moment in historical change was the human response to the environment—in others words, how individuals and societies chose to apply knowledge to the conditions before them. Through this dynamic, the historical became intertwined with the geographical, transforming political geography from a

recitation of boundaries and capital cities into an interpretive survey of modern nation-states based on their position, resources, and diplomatic relations.” [21] To many Europeans and Americans alike, it seemed that the era of territorial growth that began with Columbus was over, and that henceforth commercial and colonial competition among states was bound to intensify, and possibly grow more violent. At the same time, European and American imperialists took for granted the racial hierarchy in the world and believed gave them the White Man’s Burden, or *mission civilisatrice*: the duty and right to uplift their colonial peoples and share the blessings of civilization. Thus, whether for reasons of national security and prosperity, or for reasons of morality and duty, young leaders in America, Britain, France, and the other powers must be educated in world geography. The result was a boom for geography not unlike the boom experienced in science education in the wake of Sputnik.

Mackinder was the greatest of the first generation geostrategists, and at the inaugural meeting of the Geographical Association of Great Britain in 1894 he spoke of “geography as the training of the mind.” [22] Geography and history were part of a larger whole, and neither could be understood without the other for the reason that geography was *not* the basis for some determinism in the manner of Marx’s class conflict or Ratzel’s anthropogeography. Rather, human perceptions of geographical realities and possibilities were as important as objective realities. According to Mackinder, “the influence of geographical conditions upon human activities has depended not merely on the realities as we know them to be and to have been, but in even greater degree on what men *imagined* in regard to them. . . . Each century has its own geographic perspective.” In the case of the twentieth century, as noted above, the perspective was that of a closed system, a world already divided, and thus a politics of violent redistribution of lands and markets in which “every shock, every disaster is now felt even to the antipodes, and may indeed return from the antipodes.” [23]

Mackinder made a brilliant contribution to geography when he asserted that it was not only knowledge or ignorance of the world beyond one’s ken that rewarded or punished a given state or civilization, but how that knowledge was perceived and interpreted. The examples abound. The reason why Columbus was able to persuade the Spanish court to finance his voyage was precisely because he believed in Ptolemy’s erroneous estimate of the circumference of the earth, and then compounded the error with one of his own, leading him to believe Asia only a few thousand miles across the western sea. In the eighteenth century, the British came into a possession of two Russian maps of the North Pacific that seemed to suggest the likelihood of a Northwest Passage thorough Canada. The maps were false, perhaps deliberately so, but they inspired London to send Captain Cook on his third and fatal voyage, the one that discovered Hawaii and opened up the North Pacific. Even as Mackinder was writing, the U.S. Congress was reversing a decision in favor of a Nicaraguan canal on the basis of a postage stamp (circulated by Panama advocates) that suggested Nicaragua was a land plagued by volcanoes and earthquakes. On a more profound level, as Mahan had chronicled, governments’ perceptions of their nations’ geographical place in the world and natural “destinies” made a deep impression on their history. Thus had the French repeatedly lost out to the British in the naval and colonial realm because they insisted on pursuing competing ambitions on the European continent.

Finally, Mackinder offered a grand theory of global politics that was the very opposite of Mahan’s. Where Mahan viewed the earth as a great watery planet speckled with continents, and therefore stressed sea power, Mackinder considered Eurasia, the “world island,” the most prominent feature on the globe. He warned that whoever succeeded in controlling Eurasia’s “heartland” would be able to control all of Eurasia, and whoever controlled all of Eurasia must inevitably control the whole world. That had not been possible in the past, but thanks to the

railroads and telegraph it was becoming a genuine threat. Mackinder was initially fearful of Russia, but by 1914 Germany would arise as the most likely candidate to control the “heartland.”

So who was right: Mahan or Mackinder? It would take two world wars and a cold war to find out, because “war,” Kjellen wrote, “is like wine: it always tells the truth.” [24]

Twentieth-Century Storms

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the old gazetteer geography was enriched by applied geographies stressing natural history, technology, and colonialism (with its themes of racial hierarchy and social uplift), and the commercial and strategic geographies promoted by business and the military. Practitioners in all these fields found themselves in great demand when the United States entered the Great War and in 1919, when Wilson sailed over to Paris to construct a new world order.

“Tell me what is right,” Wilson asked his geographers, economists, and historians, “and I will fight for it.” In the event, not even the victorious allies, much less the Germans, agreed on how to translate justice into the language of geography. Wilson insisted on self-determination for all, but could viable, let alone homogeneous, nation states be fashioned from the ethnically mixed regions of East Central Europe? Wilson’s geographers proposed all sorts of frontiers based on considerations of ethnicity, topography, economics, linguistics, culture, history, religion, law, and security. [25] But the result was a hodge-podge that no one considered just, and when the U.S. Senate itself rejected their treaty, geographers’ self-confidence was cruelly shaken. Not that America had gone “isolationist”: Wilson’s chief geographer Isaiah Bowman helped found the Council on Foreign Relations in 1921 and the Republican administrations of the 1920s remained closely engaged in world affairs. But the value of geography as a tool of statecraft succumbed to disillusionment with the War to End Wars.

What took its place was a movement that had quietly grown since the 1890s: social studies. Again, geography’s success had undone it, for if geography was now deemed valuable only if it stressed human interaction with the physical world, then why teach it separately at all? The NEA recommended in 1916 that geography be offered in the seventh grade only and treated thereafter as a supplement to history and civics. [26] By the 1930s geography disappeared entirely from high schools or else was retained as a remedial course for students not literate enough to do history.

A contemporary critic put the blame on the teachers and texts that “dish up a great number of facts of every sort which it was thought children ought to know, but for which there did not seem any other place. School geography is now undergoing a merciless examination and criticism on the part of the curriculum reformers and it must give a justification for its retention or it stands in danger of . . . disappearing.” [27] That must have been stinging indeed! Geography teachers had been asked to teach “a great number of facts of every sort” and now were chastised for it. At the same time, methodological cleavages widened as the geographic determinists clashed with the possibilists, and their annual conventions more often than not exposed their identity crisis. “What is geography?” shrugged A. E. Parkins in 1934: “Geography is what geographers do.” That was hardly likely to impress provosts and school boards. [28]

And as always, geography teachers were vulnerable to complaints about their instruction. High-powered professors and academic reformers armed with half-understood theories from John Dewey thought most of what went on in grade schools boring. As one study charged, geography

teachers were usually young single women with a two-year degree from a normal school. They had little knowledge of the subject and little interest in learning more since they were hoping for marriage. The critic thus called for visual aids and anything else to supplement an inadequate text indifferently taught. [\[29\]](#)

It seemed geography teachers could do nothing right. And yet, reformers demanded even more of them in the interwar years. They explicitly asked America's geography teachers to end hatred and violence and spread peace and prosperity to the four corners of the globe. In 1933 the National Society for the Study of Education devoted its whole yearbook to geographic instruction, insisting it promote what today we call globalization, multiculturalism, political correctness, and the peace movement! Under the heading "The Machine Age and the New World of Closer Relations," it asked geography classes to stress how world trade, investment, travel, communications, and international cooperation knitted the world together. But since "the big problems are not as yet settled," geography must also "Prepare students for the New Citizenship," which meant teaching right "attitudes," including "increased respect, sympathy, and understanding for others. . . . World peace depends upon sympathy between peoples. Antagonism and prejudice lead to friction and war. . . . If we know enough geography, history, and human nature, we shall find the foreigner is neither queer nor foolish, but has done very much as we would have done under the same circumstances." [\[30\]](#)

Sad to say, social reform, especially when it borders on utopianism, is the enemy of geography, and the isolationism of the 1930s certainly did not help. Sad to say also, geography's best friend is war. During World War II millions of Americans turned to their atlases to follow battles and locate their kin overseas and learned new ways of viewing the world as polar projections inspired by aviation replaced the rectangular Mercator projection. The war taught the "lessons of Munich and Pearl Harbor" and inspired hopes for the new United Nations. By 1946, courses in world geography were eight times more popular than commercial geography courses dating from the turn of the century, and many American states mandated one or two full years of geography. [\[31\]](#) A new "family of man" perspective taught American youth that peace, democracy, and the fates of all peoples were indivisible. The Cold War then made the U.S. leader of the free world in a struggle made ever more complicated as decolonization spawned dozens of new Third World states that might go communist if Americans failed to meet their pressing needs.

One might conclude that geography was poised to reach even greater heights than before World War I. And yet, it was in those very years, from 1945 to 1970, that all the challengers of geography joined forces and triumphed. Geography was held to be boring and meaningless unless subsumed into history, politics, economics, and sociology—subjects which themselves were being subsumed, at least in the K-8 grades, into social studies. To be sure, foundations, government agencies, and the "best and brightest" professors they funded, were fiercely internationalist. But the very issues they obsessed about—nuclear weapons and Third World development—seemed to make history and geography irrelevant. Modernization theory drove educational reform, and so when administrators, bean-counters, and "real" social and natural scientists asked geographers to justify their discipline, the geographers flunked the test.

The death knell first sounded in 1948 when Harvard abruptly abolished its Department of Geography. Other leading institutions followed suit, and the message filtered down to local school boards in the decades that followed. A friendly study from the mid-1960s tried to remind educators that geography is the foundation on which other disciplines build, that it is directly relevant to contemporary problems (including the "conflicts in Asia"); and that the instruction given students was "appallingly insufficient." But, "When leading institutions like Harvard and

Stanford abandoned their geography departments, the tumbling dominoes effect was pronounced. In the elementary schools, geography was almost forgotten in many state and local systems.” [32]

A 1951 book, *The Spirit and Purpose of Geography*, puckishly quoted Mrs. Malaprop: “I would have instructed her in geometry that she may know something of the contagious countries.” But the authors signaled a trend when they gave up trying to restore geography and instead tried to smuggle it back into classrooms on the shoulders of history.

[33] In 1961, a British Department of Education report echoed Immanuel Kant to the effect that history and geography fill the entire circumference of our perceptions and were the furthest thing from boring. Any subject in which millstone grit and London clay, podsol and isobars, Roman roads and invisible exports, the Brontës and the Celtic church can all find a place may have more to offer to our divided culture than is sometimes realized. [34]

Troubled American advocates likewise asked how to restore geography and found an answer in a “fused history/geography.” [35] But eloquent allusions to Roman roads and Celtic churches, dimly lit worlds and children led into the light, were impotent before the Ford Foundation and NEA Council for the Social Studies, which pronounced:

If curriculum planning is to be concept-oriented in the social studies, it must itself have a conceptual framework exhibiting coherency and consistency. Are those frameworks now emerging? There are many houses to place in order before a clear picture can be seen as to the role geography will have in the social studies curriculum of the 1970s.

The “many houses to place in order” included location theory, cultural ecology, spatial interaction systems and model building, the cognitive and affective learning of children, behavioral objectives in geography (sic), and inquiry models. [36] Such was the “ed” jargon advanced by people who dared call *geography* tedious.

Still the bottom had not been reached, because no sooner did the new standards movement sound the alarm about geographic illiteracy than a formidable opponent emerged: postmodern deconstructionism. Its promoters insist no document, text, or map has any intrinsic meaning, and all categories and concepts used to interpret what they name so-called facts are just discourses imposed by a dominant race, class, or gender. Entire literature and history departments have made this linguistic turn, and geography is not immune as the attempt to create a feminist geography attests. [37]

I do not deny deconstruction has merit. Postmodern geographer David Harvey is right to point out that as early as 1915 émile Durkheim said our notions of space and time are not absolute, but social constructs. Primitive peoples, after all, have no notion of “clock time” or measured distances. Still, “the social definitions of space and time operate with the force of objective facts, to which all individuals and institutions necessarily respond.” Citing Edward Said, Harvey notes that Muslims were oppressed by the mere fact of being called “oriental” in a European discourse privileging imperialism. Citing medieval historians Jacques Le Goff, Harvey shows that feudalism and capitalism had different definitions of space and time, that hours, minutes, and seconds were not standard until the seventeenth century, that Renaissance trade and commerce were what imposed Ptolemaic longitude and latitude, and that the French Revolution simply decreed the metric system. Harvey concludes, “the study of historical geography . . . lies exactly

at the point of intersection between space and time and therefore has a major . . . role to play in understanding how human societies work.” [38]

Postmodernists have also described how geopolitics serves a hegemonic state or the elite. Hence the geography of the British imperial order (1815–75) promoted a discourse of civilization and backwardness; Europe’s “new imperialism”(1875–1945) a discourse of strategic competition; the Cold War (1945–90) a discourse of ideological conflict; and the U.S. enlargement doctrine (1990–9/11/01), a discourse of democratic capitalism vs. “rogue states.” [39]

The burden of postmodernism is that even if all agree on the importance of geography, disagreement is bound to arise over which of many “geographies to teach.” If geography as understood in the nineteenth century, twentieth century, or even today is seen as tendentious and designed to inculcate students with notions of racial hierarchy, militant anti-communism, or globalization, with what are we to replace it—a feminist or multicultural geography? Or can something on the order of traditional, empirical geography be resurrected?

That is a serious question, but it cannot even be raised so long as educators deny even the relevance of geographical knowledge. Much of the public today reduces geography to a game show category. “This river rises 150 miles from the Pacific Ocean, but its mouth is on the Atlantic . . . What is the Amazon!” And this *Jeopardy* or *Trivial Pursuit* attitude is reinforced by four-year colleges that offer no geography and require no history. No wonder students conclude geography is something for grade school and of no importance to the “real world” of their careers. No wonder administrators shun geography unless it can serve some social agenda like environmentalism or diversity. No wonder publishers expunge from their texts any facts that do *not* serve the perceived agendas of their school board customers.

The Way Forward

There is a way forward, but it requires the public and administrators alike to discard six myths that stripped geography of its honored place in the schools. Those myths hold that geography is boring; that rote learning is a waste of time; that teachers who stress facts must be incompetent; that geography must serve commercial or social goals in order to be worthwhile; that the failure of professional geographers to share one focus or methodology de-legitimizes their discipline; but that geography properly subsumed in social studies is nonetheless capable of *saving the world* from war, prejudice, and injustice.

I hasten to add, that last myth is not only prevalent on the political left, but among neoconservatives and old-fashioned liberals now on the political right. We do not commonly think of Liberalism as an ideology like Communism or Fascism. But Classical Liberalism born in the nineteenth century in fact meets the teleological tests of an ideology. The difference is that where Marxists and fascists hold class or race struggle to be the motor of history, and either revolution or war the agents of change, Liberals believe the struggle against ignorance is the engine of history, and that individual liberty and above all education are the primary agents of change. Liberalism has changed tactics many times, with Christian missions and anti-clericalism, overseas commerce and domestic reform, untrammelled capitalism and regulated capitalism, small government and big government, isolationism, imperialism, and global crusades all being the tools of choice in one era or another. But Liberals place their abiding faith in education.

America is the quintessential liberal nation, and its students have always been invited to have faith in progress, in the United States as the vanguard of progress, and, since the 1890s, in the

American mission to redeem the world. We know the dangers of such spiritual pride: it can spawn a self-defeating pacifism as in the 1930s, a self-defeating militancy as in the 1960s, or a self-defeating complacency as in the 1990s. But its educational dangers lurk in the possibility students are made to view the world through distorting lenses or else not view it all lest they spy unpleasant facts that don't confirm the prevalent American self-image. Indeed, looking back on the decline of geography over the past hundred years, it is tempting to conclude that Liberalism itself has perversely blunted the very tool—education—it expects to use to improve the world.

Only if and when these myths are expunged will three important reforms become feasible.

First, teachers, textbooks, and curriculum designers must restore an “old-fashioned” emphasis on topography, place names, and map reading. For whatever our politics, the grammar of geography is grounded in reality. The Earth does revolve around the sun: that was not just Galileo's “point of view.” Of course we can debate whether the term “Middle East” is a Eurocentric conceit. But conceits and myopia are themselves illuminating subjects of study. Above all, facts matter, for without a shared body of factual knowledge teachers and pupils have nothing about which to talk to each other! How much knowledge is “enough?” One exercise planners of texts and curricula might try is to recall the various courses they took in college and ask themselves what geographical knowledge they needed to master that material? Conversely, they might ask themselves what knowledge they would want students to have if they were teaching those courses.

Second, geography should be kept close to history because much history is introduced best through geography, and much geography is taught best through history. The former point is obvious: the world is the stage and scenery on which the human comedy unfolds. The latter point may be less obvious. But imagine courses in physics that begin with the ancients and march forward in time through nuclear physics. Geography can be taught the same way, and while that may seem to “privilege” Western civilization, only by inviting students to catch the trade winds with Magellan, trudge to the South Pole with Amundsen, and photograph the earth from the Space Shuttle can one convey what an adventure geography is.

Third, teachers should try to convey how notions of space and time have changed as a function of technology. From the first irrigation systems to the Internet the human race has reinvented its world. But just as students cannot handle calculus until they have mastered algebra, so they cannot deconstruct human conventions of space and time until they know what got constructed in the first place.

Six myths, three programs, and finally one dream. I often have the privilege of lunching with Harvey Sicherman and catching up on world affairs. Among his other famous and infamous talents, he is a master of the geographical factors in war and diplomacy, and several years ago amazed me by predicting the exact boundaries that would define the ultimate Bosnian settlement. I have done the map, he announced, and traced it out on a napkin.

My dream is that every American student, at the end of every block of instruction in every conceivable subject, can say proudly and knowledgeably, I have done the map. Because that means they know who they are, where they are, and how to get where they want to go.

- [1] National Assessment of Educational Progress “*Geography 2001*”: *The Nation’s Report Card*, June 2002, nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/geography. See also comments given at the NAEP’s 6/21/02 Press Conference on Geography by NAEP Governing Board member Daniel Domenech (nagb.org/naep/geography_daniel.html) and Secretary Rod Paige (www.ed.gov/speeches/06-2002/062102a.html). Secretary Paige notes that this in a country where earlier, James Madison observed that “No studies seem so well calculated to give a proper expansion to the mind as Geography and History.”
- [2] “A central tenet of geography is that “location matters” for understanding a wide variety of processes and phenomena”: National Research Council, *Rediscovering Geography: New Relevance for Science and Society* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997), p. 3.
- [3] And geography “does not argue: it simply is.” Hans W. Weigert, et al., *Principles of Political Geography* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p. 5.
- [4] Department of Education and Science (UK), *Geography and Education* (London: HMSO., 1961), p. 14.
- [5] Malcolm P. Douglass, *The History, Psychology, and Pedagogy of Geographic Literacy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), p. 143.
- [6] Boise Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420–1620* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 316–25.
- [7] See Lesley B. Cormack, *Charting an Empire: Geography at the English Universities, 1580–1620* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- [8] Department of Education (UK), *Geography and Education*, p. 10.
- [9] Margarita Bowen, *Empiricism and Geographical Thought From Francis Bacon to Alexander von Humboldt* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 80.
- [10] Kant’s *Physische Geographie* (1802) in Tim Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992), pp. 70-73.
- [11] See Unwin, *Place of Geography*, pp. 74–80; S. W. Wooldridge and W. Gordon East, *The Spirit and Purpose of Geography* (New York: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1951), p 20; and Bowen, *Empiricism and Geographical Thought*, p. 8.
- [12] Morse’s *Geography Made Easy*, first published in 1784, went through dozens of editions, and geographical drills were a familiar activity in America’s “one-room schoolhouses.”
- [13] Susan Schulten, “The Transformation of World Geography in American Life,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1995, p. 148.
- [14] Richard von Kuhlmann asserted that “no matter what form of government has been instituted or what political party may be in power, the foreign policy of a country has a natural tendency to return again and again to the same general and fundamental alignment.” French historian/geographer Edmond Demolins went so far as to suggest that “if the history of mankind began again and the present surface of the earth were unchanged, that history would be repeated in its essential design.” Michael Don Ward, ed., *The New Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), pp. 4–7.
- [15] Semple cited by Unwin, *Place of Geography*, p. 93.

- [16] Schulten, "Transformation of World Geography," pp. 161–64.
- [17] Spencer Trotter, *Lessons in the New Geography* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1895), p. iii.
- [18] *Ibid.*, pp. 4–9.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- [20] Albert Perry Brigham, *Commercial Geography* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1911), pp. 446–48.
- [21] Schulten, "Transformation of World Geography," p. 53
- [22] Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Pinter, 1998), pp. 18-20.
- [23] Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), pp. 18–20.
- [24] Parker, *Geopolitics*, p. 29.
- [25] Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics*, p. 206.
- [26] The Social Studies in Secondary Education, Bulletin 1916, no. 28 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Education, 1916), cited by Schulten, "Transformation of World Geography," p. 195.
- [27] Harold Fairbanks, *Real Geography and Its Place in the Schools* (San Francisco: Harr Wagner, 1927), p. 14.
- [28] Geoffrey J. Martin & Preston E. James, *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993 [1972]), p. 356. Richard Hartshorne even acknowledged geography could never be understood as a discrete science, but as a synthetic, unsystematic enterprise that aggregated data from the other sciences to create a larger understanding. He urged geographers to focus on the regional and unique, not the universal, lest the very historical dimension of geography drain the discipline of its legitimacy. Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography* (Lancaster, Pa.: Association of American Geographers, 1939), cited by Schulten, "Transformation of World Geography," pp. 101–10.
- [29] "The teacher should enlist in her aid all illustrative material possible, of whatever character, that will help to form real images in the minds of the pupils regarding the life conditions of the region they are studying. Photographs and photographic reproductions . . . lantern slides (their importance cannot be overestimated), travelogues and moving pictures, depicting primitive life or various industries. . . ." Fairbanks, *Real Geography*, p. 197. See also Edwin H. Reeder, *Geography for Public School Administrators* (New York: Teachers' College of Columbia University, 1931).
- [30] Guy Montrose Whipple, *The Teaching of Geography. Thirty-Second Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Bloomington, Ill.: Public School Publishing Co., 1933), pp. 33–39.
- [31] Schulten, "Transformation of World Geography," pp. 240–41.
- [32] Paul R. Hanna, et al., *Geography in the Teaching of Social Studies: Concepts and Skills* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. vii.
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[33] S. W. Wooldridge and W. Gordon East, *The Spirit and Purpose of Geography* (New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), p. 11.

[34] Department of Education (UK), *Geography and Education*, pp. 5–6, 9.

[35] A 1966 curriculum proposal imagined “a preschool child standing in the middle of his vast and dimly lit world. He is keenly aware that around him exists an exciting world of people, objects, institutions, and events.” How could the bewildered child be helped? “We select *history* as one highly luminous source, the bright light of the historical method and cause-effect relationships. We recommend history, geography, and fused history/geography.” Hanna, et al., *Geography in the Teaching of Social Studies*, pp. 77–78.

[36] Philip Bacon, ed., *Focus on Geography: Key Concepts and Teaching Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1970), p. 391.

[37] See for instance the Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers, *Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography* (London: Hutchinson, 1984). It should be said, however, that the majority of female geographers are just good geographers, not feminists.

[38] David Harvey, “Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, no. 3 (1990): 418–34.

[39] Gearoid O’Tuathail and Simon Dalby, eds., *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 19. See also Joe Painter, *Politics, Geography, and ‘Political Geography’: A Critical Perspective* (London: Arnold, 1995).

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Geography: Why It Matters. Corey Johnson, Marie Price, Glen MacDonald, William G. Moseley, Dawn. Wright & Alexander B. Murphy. To cite this article: Corey Johnson, Marie Price, Glen MacDonald, William G. Moseley, Dawn. Wright & Alexander B. Murphy (2020) Geography: Why It Matters, The AAG Review of Books, 8:1, 34-42, DOI: 10.1080/2325548X.2020.1689054.Â students who like maps but are not (yet) convinced that. geography is a legitimate academic îf€eld of study, or their. parents who worry their child will never get a job with this. major.Â ful ways, and to become emotionally attached to places so. that we learned to care about them. In Desert Solitaire (Ab- bey 1968) he observed, â€œEvery man, every woman, carries. Simon learned more about the problem with the river. by looking on the internet. by asking the people who owned the river. by talking to his school teachers. Why did Simon do a special course? A. to join an organization that protects the river. B. to learn about the geography of the river. C. to be able to check the water quality of the river. Simon is pleased because. He'll learn anyway if other factors are beneficial. Most times I have seen references to these studies they do them in closed or overly academic environments, which prove nothing more than â€œchildren learn better in this environment under these exact criteriaâ€. Exposing both adults and children to the same environment is wasteful because adults and children learn and think differently.

Learning the significance of that outlier to the geography of Islamic terrorism (as well as its unappeasable aims) typifies many of de Blij's informational surprises, which are arranged clearly and spiced with the author's allusions to his career and travels."--Booklist. About the Author. Harm de Blij is Distinguished Professor of Geography at Michigan State University.Â If one sentence were to describe De Blij's "Why Geography Matters" it would be that geography is so much more than maps. Yes, maps play a pivotal role in geography. Required reading for my geography class, and it is one of the few books I really enjoyed reading for close. Why Geography Matters book. Read 41 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Over the next half century, the human population, divided by ...Â In Why Geography Matters, de Blij makes an urgent call to restore geography to America's educational curriculum. He shows how and why the U.S. has become the world's most geographically illiterate society of consequence--and demonstrates that this geographic illiteracy is a direct risk to America's national security.Â National Geographic provided maps for schools. But the offering has done little to improve America's geographic literacy, according to de Blij. Studying a map during one's freshman year of high school seems a chore. Download Citation | On Mar 1, 2003, Walter A. McDougall published Why Geography Matters | But Is So Little Learned | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â From educator's perspective, geography is one important subject that students need to learn [4][5] [6]. However, the students see it as difficult subject to learn. Linked Data Driven Geographic Mobile Learning Application. Conference Paper.