Orthodoxy and new directions:
cultural/humanistic geography
by Lester B. Rowntree

For geographers accustomed to the low, yet enduring profile shown by cultural/humanistic geography over the decades, a silhouette that sometimes engendered a certain defensiveness by its practitioners, this last year has been characterized instead by highly visible activity: a well-known, committed and productive cultural geographer as AAG president, recognition of cultural geography as a specialty group within the association, a multitude of panels and special sessions on 'new directions' and 'emergent themes' in cultural geography, even multiple-edition textbooks that attest to strong undergraduate enrollments in the area. Has a phoenix arisen? While we might blush from the renewed interest shown for our traditional concerns with culture, landscape and place, by both our own discipline and neighbouring fields, cultural geographers might also reflect upon and assess the positive and creative tensions resulting from the interplay between our traditional roots and contemporary social theory. I have shaped and structured this report to foreground the linkages between orthodoxy and our new directions; I write as one interested in a more 'theory informed' cultural geography, yet also as a participant sensing that our intellectual heritage has given us far more than we normally appreciate and that it would be more constructive to build from these roots than to sever them.

I Thinking about Carl Sauer's influence

Because so much of the practice of contemporary North American cultural/humanistic geography is linked to Carl Sauer and the 'Berkeley School'; an appropriate starting point is with recent works in 'Sauerology', the unpacking of and critical reflection upon the intellectual history, context and influence of that pioneer. In a posthumous article, John Leighly, who accompanied Sauer to Berkeley in 1923 and died in 1986, writes that Sauer used the term 'ecology' sparingly and, when he did, apparently only as metaphor and analogy in order to emphasize the moral responsibility humankind has towards the environment (Leighly, 1987: 406). He (Sauer) used this metaphorical power to move the study of human-environment relationships away from the morally neutral, mechanical

explanations appropriate for the tabulation of nutrients in a plant community (Leighly, 1987: 411).

While Mathewson (1987: 412–13) reinforces Sauer's arcadian historicism, Turner (1987: 415–16) comments on the influence this position has had on geography's cultural ecology subfield; more specifically, while Sauer's research path was increasingly pluralistic, atheoretical, humanistic, and his field work tended toward exploration and observation, these attributes were:

> not the exhaustive and systematic collection of detailed data and field tests that became the hallmark of ethnography, archaeology, plant ecology, geomorphology and so on (Turner, 1987: 415).

Turner concludes that while Sauer's approach fared well in the humanities, it stood in sharp contrast to social science practice at midcentury, consequently, anthropology, which took a specialized path, seized the subfield of cultural ecology away from geography, and to mute this contemporary trend toward specialization would further weaken geography's position (Turner, 1987: 415; see also, Turner, 1988).

Sauer's philosophy was instrumental in shaping the Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth conference, and the subsequent volume (Thomas, 1956) was a foundation for building cultural ecology's research agenda. Williams (1987) draws upon archival correspondence to document Sauer's view that the conference needed stiffening with historical depth to counter the reductionist, futurist and prescriptive tendencies of 1950s social scientists (Williams, 1987: 231). What shaped Sauer's philosophy? Detailed linkages are drawn by Speth (1987a; 1987b) between Sauer's ideas and German historicism with its opposition to imperial positivism; Sauer's conceptualization of culture and culture area are examined by Entrikin (1987), and debated between Kenzer (1987c), Speth (1987b) and Solot (1987), who advocates more critical discussion of Sauer's ideas, with movement away from the 'kind of hagiography which has dominated until now' (Solot, 1987: 478). Additional information is found in an edited book by Kenzer (1987a), a volume of writing that weaves together traditional biographies, personal reminiscences, scholarly analyses and works by Sauer's former students that offers valuable insight for assessing Sauer's influence on cultural geography; Kenzer (1986) has also written a useful guide to the organization and content of the Sauer papers for those interested in working with primary sources.

II Beyond Sauer: cultural ecology today

Cultural ecology, because of its close association with Sauer, has long been a traditional theme within cultural geography and two recent research articles illustrate the spectrum of method and theory currently employed. Karl Butzer, perhaps best known for his substantial contributions to geoarchaeology,

operationalizes a convincing humanistic research framework reminiscent of Sauer to investigate the transfer of cattle and sheep from Spain to Mexico during the sixteenth century to answer questions about the diffusion of adaptational strategies that had a profound effect on New World environments (Butzer, 1988). In this compelling study, he seeks out the specific regional roots and agrotechnology introduced to Mexico using the historical method favoured by Sauer and, in doing so, presents a study that answers key concerns of social theorists without the often distracting and cumbersome overburden of forced terminology found in some contemporary works. For example, matters of structure, agency and locality are detailed in the study and succinctly summarized:

> The early transfer of livestock can probably best be understood as the collective results of decisions by individual settlers from many parts of Spain, exploiting opportunities within the constraints of royal policy and local ecologies (Butzer, 1988: 50).

In contrast, we turn to a study that could be seen either as an example of the specialized, theory-driven research favoured by some, or, less flatteringly, as research enslaved by unquestioned acceptance of mechanistic adaptional theory, tyrannized by unrefined terminology, and unable to traverse the distance between hypothesis and evidence. Abruzzi examines the ecological implications of historical Mormon settlement in the Little Colorado river basin by framing his study with (1) the application of general ecological concepts in human ecology; (2) an ecological basis for the evolution of complex human communities; (3) the interactive, hierarchical relationship between community diversity and environmental stability; and, last, with a concern for (4) the positive contributions that human ecology can make to the general discussion of diversity and stability in ecological systems (Abruzzi, 1987: 317). While the intent might be noble, his conclusions are unfulfilling: 'These findings clearly support the proposition . . . that diversity derives from stability in ecological systems', yet, because of nagging contradictions within the study, 'the research, therefore, also provides support for the alternate thesis that stability drives (sic) from diversity within ecological communities' (Abruzzi, 1987: 335). Cause and effect appear inseparable.

While the method and theory of cultural ecology may be debated, there have been two recent AAG plenary session talks on the value of the subfield to the general health of geography. Kates argues that 'we need to develop . . . a more powerful, distinctive theory of the human environment, not merely a retread of existing ecological or economic theory' (1987: 553). This research road still beckons because of the challenges of understanding problems of population and resources, the nature and determinants of human transformation of the earth, and the sustainable development of the biosphere (Kates, 1987: 525). Turner, speaking to the 1988 AAG meeting at Phoenix, opined that a revitalization of geography in the United States will not result from resurrecting geographic education but, instead, will arrive when geographers establish a foundation for specialization and then bridge their material to related disciplines. Cultural ecology is particularly well suited for this task (Turner, 1988).

III The humanistic core: landscape and place

I now draw a forced and exaggerated organizational dichotomy to continue this review by separating research emblematic of our traditional humanistic roots from those explicitly linked with contemporary social theory. This distinction is made not to judge one category as better than another, but to facilitate explication of the pluralism, tensions and parallels between what might be called the core and the periphery of cultural geography. Textbooks are usually a conservative paradigmatic anchor and a logical entry point for inquiry into traditional content, method and theory; furthermore, their appearance and revision also give clue to enrollments and audiences. The second edition of Jordan's *The European culture area* (1987) deeply reflects the humanistic dimension of cultural geography, for a:

> particularistic rather than a normative approach is taken to explanation, consistent with the traditional values and methodology of humanism. European diversity is emphasized and celebrated, rather than being reduced to oversimplified models and universals (Jordan, 1987: xi).

A similar philosophy pervades a new edition of *The human mosaic* (Jordan and Rowntree, in press) in which the traditional four themes of cultural geography (cultural landscape, region, ecology and diffusion) serve as organizational reference points in one of the few introductory geography textbooks to reach five editions.

Another reference point for humanistic geography is *Landscape* magazine, guided by an incessant curiosity about humans and our vernacular, everyday landscapes. Three recent articles exemplify its coverage of that theme. Zelinsky (1988) explicates the diversity of town welcoming signs along America's highways, symbols through which towns advertise and celebrate their uniqueness, however dull and mundane those settlements might be in other versions of reality. While cautious about generalizing grand theory because so little is known about these phenomena, Zelinsky posits that these icons of locality are an expectable response to cultural convergence and environmental blandness. Parsons (1988) investigates another dimension of elevated locality, the giant letters that dot western hillsides; cultural signatures traceable in time and space from the first 'Big C' constructed in 1905 on the slopes above the University of California in Berkeley to more recent and modest hillside monograms tended by service clubs and highschool students. Although a common precept of humanistic geography has been the innocent notion of unfettered human voluntarism, O'Brien (1988) moves away from that assumption with a fascinating study of how the British Travel Authority monitors and shapes our experiencing of public images in that country:

> One of a nation's vital signs is the strength of the interplay between its public images and what they pretend to represent in the environment . . . but Britain today is experiencing a dangerous mismatch between overly charming images and underrepresented realities (O'Brien, 1988: 33).

For those wishing to understand the central role of phenomenology in humanistic geography, Seamon's review article, 'Phenomenology and environment-behaviour research', is mandatory (1987a; see also Seamon and Mugerauer, 1987b; 1985). This is not only a lucid introduction to the philosophical foundations of phenomenology, but also outlines and addresses the tensions within and criticism directed at that approach. These are, briefly: (1) the problem of validity and objectivity, or getting at the issue of verifiability when the foundation for phenomenological truth is intuitive insight; (2) whether phenomenology can be more than a method for describing idiosyncratic experience and events; (3) the embeddedness of observation and description in language; and (4) the phenomenological emphasis on human agency at the neglect of socioeconomic structure (Seamon, 1987a: 16–18). In treating this last topic, Seamon argues for a phenomonology more attentive to structural constraints and one that recognizes immersion in the context of place and region.

Warf (1986) also addresses these concerns by seeking a bridge between traditional phenomenology, structuration and structural marxism, as he calls for an 'emancipatory phenomenology' that links the phenomenological concern with everyday life and the sensed world with the problematic and politics of social theory:

> Phenomenology's exuberant voluntarism overstates the efficacy of intentional action and assumes a fixed set of social relations, asserting that consciousness is produced in an historical vacuum (Warf, 1986: 279).

Like Seamon, Warf sees value in a cultural geography that explicates the origins, boundedness, and consequences of human agency under specific historical circumstances (Warf, 1986: 272). Working in this direction, Marsh (1987) frames his study with a subtle sort of structuration as he probes into the tension between means and meaning in Pennsylvania anthracite towns.

IV New directions and emergent themes in cultural geography

Recent activity on both sides of the Atlantic conveys the notion that a 'new' cultural geography is emerging that explores and expands traditional concerns with landscape and place through linkages with that diffuse corpus commonly referred to as 'contemporary social theory'. To simplify and dichotomize once again, if traditional humanistic cultural geography is thought of as particularistic, individualistic, atheoretical, apolitical and unproblematic, then the 'new' cultural geography is presented as explicitly theory-informed (but not necessarily theory-driven), political and attentive to the problematic of power relations and social structures. Quite obviously, this simplified dichotomy is weak because some 'traditional' cultural geography had attended to these concerns long before contemporary social theory became fashionable in the social sciences. Yet to dismiss the new cultural geography as 'old wine in new bottles' is premature; let

us wait, participate, add constructive criticism and then judge after substantial works have appeared. While several articles articulate the substance of this emerging cultural geography, more overt is discussion on the shape and form of the theoretical framework.

Before the IBG Social Geography Study Group meeting in London (September, 1987), Cosgrove and Jackson offered their agenda for a new cultural geography, one that:

> 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 (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987: 95).

Cosgrove and Jackson argue that this new cultural geography builds upon the Berkeley School tradition with a revitalized emphasis on the landscape as a cultural construction that structures and gives meaning to the external world. These symbolic qualities of landscape, they suggest, produce and sustain social meaning, and once landscape is conceptualized as a configuration of symbols and signs, this strengthens methodologies that are more interpretative than morphological. Consequently, we get the current emphasis on the metaphor of landscape as text. Cosgrove and Jackson opine that social geography can contribute to theorizing culture by drawing upon stimulus from contemporary cultural studies that foreground the various strategies of resistance employed by subordinate groups to contest the hegemony of those in power; emphasis here is on the appropriation of certain artifacts and significations from the dominant or 'parent' culture and their transformation into symbolic forms that sustain and reinforce the subculture (1987: 99).

While Cosgrove and Jackson provide an optimistic agenda, a follow-up report on the London meeting is more muted. Were there 'new directions'? Not really, answers Kofman (1988: 86). Why not?

> The problem was that most of the papers, which were empirical, did not elucidate their assumptions or methodologies. In fact, there was virtually no recognition that different interpretations of the cultural, of which there are many, would have implications for the nature of cultural geography (1988: 86).

My interpretation of Kofman's remarks is that if we are promoting the centrality of culture in geographic problem-solving, then we should be sensitive to and explicit about how differing conceptualizations of culture influence method and theory. Norton presents his solution by synthesizing four extant and traditional conceptualizations of culture in his search for 'a clear and agreed upon method [that] will encourage subsequent theoretical development' (1987: 28).

This concern with an elaboration and definition of culture also emerged in a panel discussion on new directions in cultural geography at the 1988 AAG meetings. Jackson once again focused on the potential of British contemporary cultural studies with its assumption that 'the cultural is political: that cultures are domains in which material contradictioins are ideologically contested' (1988: 1).

And Entrikin reminded us that in spite of the seeming unanimity of support for a theoretically informed cultural geography, this vision is somewhat unclear because of different conceptualizations of culture as an analytic category (1988: 2). To better understand the culture and socialization of cultural geography research, Rowntree (1988) proposed that a critical method be developed specific to landscape studies so as to make overt the influence of narrative structure, typologic subversion, subtext and the double hermeneutic in our work.

Three articles serve as illustrations of the differing directions taken by this 'new' cultural geography. Duncan and Duncan (1987, and in press) present an elegant and compelling case for the convergence of social and literary theory applied to (re)reading the landscape text. Poststructuralism is used to explicate the ideological 'naturalizing' of social realities in landscapes; once they become concretized in the landscape, they become a structuring process that creates and maintains social processes, making them seem natural and unquestionable. Case studies drawn from vastly different cultural configurations reinforce the theoretical structure of their work. Additional insight to their theoretical position is found in James Duncan's review and critique of semiotics (Duncan, 1987). Anderson emphasizes that 'racial categories are cultural ascriptions whose construction and transmission cannot be taken for granted' (1987: 580) as she examines the interaction between a place – Vancouver's Chinatown from the 1980s to the 1920s – social structure and political practice:

> I argue that 'Chinatown', like race, is an idea that belongs to the 'white' European cultural tradition. The significance of government is that it has granted legitimacy to the ideas of Chinese and Chinatown, inscribing social definitions of identity and place in institutional practice and space. Indeed, Chinatown has been a critical nexus through which race definition process was structured (Anderson, 1987: 580).

Many discussions of contemporary social theory somehow touch upon and implicate the notion of postmodernism, yet, because the term is hydra-headed and chameleon-like, articles that refine and critique postmodernism are pertinent to emergent themes in cultural geography. Gregory (1987) accepts three basic positions of postmodernism: (1) it is a questioning of 'foundational epistemologies' and Eurocentric bias; (2) it shows a sensitivity to difference by moving away from generalizing and totalizing models; and (3) postmodernism includes the continual theoretical interrogation of deconstruction (1987: 246). Dear (1986), in his article on postmodernism and urban planning, distinguishes between postmodernism as style, method and epoch; the section on 'method' is the most helpful as he examines the linkages between postmodernism and poststructuralist deconstruction (Dear, 1986: 372–73). Ley (1987) uses postmodernism and neoconservatism as contrasting ideological reference points for examining emerging landscapes in Vancouver.

The postmodern rejection of totalizing discourse and metanarrative creates a tension with traditional marxism that Graham (1988) addresses, concluding that there can be positive interaction between the two positions rather than exclusion. Although postmodernism is not the explicit focus, these tensions are also

expressed in 'Reconsidering social theory: a debate' (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1987). Dear sets the scene (and acts as referee) in his introductory editorial by noting that, while marxian social theory has contributed enormously to our understanding, so has non-marixan social theory, consequently 'there is no theoretical incentive to subsume all work into a single marxist realm' (1987: 365).

Before leaving this topic of social theory and new directions in cultural geography, we might glance quickly at the neighbouring field of archaeology to see how their epistemological debate is progressing. An informative entry point is Hodder's article (1987), tracing out the search for symbolic meanings in both geography and archaeology. Besides an important literature review that shows commonalities and covergence between the two disciplines, he also offers some important qualifications on the current emphasis on ideology (Hodder, 1987: 142). Amplification is found in *Reading the past* (Hodder, 1986); critique of Hodder's ideas, along with elaboration on social theory and its articulation in contemporary archaeology, comes from Shanks and Tilley (1987). One of the most cogent review articles on the theoretical foundations behind critical method is presented by Shennan (1986), and, finally, another view of the shared territory between archaeology and geography is authored by Gamble (1987).

V Conclusions

I wish to end this review, and my three-year term monitoring progress in cultural geography, with a personal assessment and agenda. To begin, while I have used terms such as 'new cultural geography' and 'new directions', we should be critically aware of what we are doing by employing these simplistic dichotomies to construct a history and vision of our field. There are vastly different personal and communal strategies for conceptualizing a discipline, and the 'old-new' duality tends to be a paradigm-trashing replacement strategy that reinforces and reifies one component at the expense of the other; it privileges the new over the old, usurps intellectual territory, and severs connections with the past. While some may argue that this is exactly what is needed, I caution there is danger to this strategy if it proceeds in an uncritical and unexamined manner, so, instead, I choose to stress the continuity and evolution of cultural geography. Problem-solving is a function of the kinds of questions we ask and the particulars we use to answer them, and those familiar with the subfield know that for decades a handful of cultural geographers have asked and answered the same sorts of questions that currently occupy the 'new' cultural geography. Though terminology and conceptual emphases may differ slightly, this should not prevent us from building upon these works as we refine and reshape our contemporary problem-solving. But to simply write off these works as 'old' and traditional is unproductive.

And I ask a similar courtesy from those inclined to deny and mock current

research employing unfamiliar terms, concept and theory. While I remain somewhat agnostic and sceptical regarding a full conversion to 'theory-informed' cultural geography, I nevertheless find much of value and stimulation in these emerging notions; in fact, after 20 years in the field, I find more excitement, internal dialogue, crossfertilization and discourse with other social sciences now that in the past. What are the sources of this optimism? I conclude by briefly reiterating those components that show promise.

1) The centrality of culture: cultural geography must foreground and elevate to an explicit level the linkages between an active conceptualization of culture as a constructed system of communication, meaning and symbols with landscape, place and locality. Furthermore, the cooperative, reciprocal dimension of culture should have equal footing with the contestatory.
2) Recursiveness and interactivity: our method and theory should emphasize the interactiveness of places and landscapes in reinforcing and reproducing culture and social structures; conversely, we should play down the assumed one-way arrows of linearity in our traditional treatment of landscapes as passive cultural spoor.
3) Text and textuality: the aforementioned concerns are treated nicely in the hermeneutic projects emphasizing landscapes as constructed textual systems of meaning that are interpreted and interacted with by users and inhabitants.
4) Structure and agency: the interplay and tension between individual action and socioeconomic context, enabling and constraining, can be brought out using structuration as a heuristic 'sensitivity device' rather than as rigid theory.
5) Ideology and landscape: the recent concern with interrogating and unveiling the 'naturalizing' linkages between ideology and landscape seems fruitful provided we refine, critique, and operationalize the notion of ideology appropriate to specific scales of inquiry.
6) Critical method: expanding effort to understand how we in cultural geography construct knowledge is a worthwhile endeavour, because it explicates the conditions and influences of a tacit and largely unexamined sociology, tradition, and set of implicit conventions.

What do we want from 'theory'? We in cultural geography should debate and clarify what we mean by and what it is we seek in promoting 'theory-informed' research. As conceptualizations of theory defined and adapted to contemporary social science replace natural science definitions and biases, I urge cultural geographers to participate in this process so that an analytic framework emerges appropriate to our long-standing concerns with landscape, place and locality. If we do not, other social sciences will gladly and effectively poach our territory.

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