

Rethinking the Place of Regional Geography

Each day brings news of momentous events unfolding in far-flung corners of the world: the emergence of North Korea as a nuclear power, crises of governance in West Africa, power struggles in Southwest Asia, and ethnic conflict in Israel and Palestine. The causes and consequences of these events are varied, but we cannot even begin to understand them without the benefit of geographical analysis. Nonetheless, geographers are largely absent from public debates about their nature and implications.

Why is this the case? Partial answers can be found in matters well known to readers of the *AAG Newsletter*: the comparatively small size of the discipline of geography, the trivialization of geography in the public imagination, and the absence of geography programs in some institutions of higher education with disproportionate influence in the public arena. Yet geography cannot solely blame the outside world, for the discipline itself bears some responsibility for this state of affairs. A number of points might be made in this regard, but surely an important one concerns the marginal status of regional geography in the United States today.

To some, regional geography connotes an encyclopedic march through regional facts, and of course it was the rejection of that type of geography that led to a major shift away from regional approaches in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, our discipline moved away from regional geography without adequate consideration of either what might constitute good regional geography or what is lost when geography programs fail to produce strong regionalists. In practical terms, this has undermined the discipline's ability to contribute to discussions about developments in different parts of the world, has limited geography's involvement with communities of scholars and practitioners focused on regional issues, and has worked against the expansion of geography programs in colleges and universities.

Turning to the first of these practical matters, over the past two years Afghanistan and Iraq have loomed large on the international scene. Yet when a student comes to me and asks for a reading list of geographical works focused on these countries and their regional setting, I am hard pressed to come up with more than a small handful of (sometimes outdated) publications. As far as I know, the number of American geographers who have done any serious fieldwork in Afghanistan or Iraq can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that geography is rarely looked to as a source of information or insight.

More broadly, the complexities of the globe are so great that, for better or for worse, discussions among specialists are often organized along regional lines. Meetings of Africanists, Europeanists, and the like bring together individuals with a strong grounding in the languages, histories, and political economies of different parts of the world. "Geographies" should be part of this list, but are often missing—both because members of other disciplines rarely think in geographical terms and because few geographers define their areas of expertise in regional terms. Hence, geography and the perspectives of geographers are notably underrepresented in regionally oriented organizations and debates.

Finally, by turning away from regional offerings, geography programs have deprived themselves of a powerful opportunity for growth. My perspective on this matter may be biased by particular experiences at my home institution, but if the University of Oregon is at all representative, it is clear that careful nurturing of regional geography can play a vital role in a department's success. Our introductory

regional courses are among the more popular offerings on campus, attracting strong students and leading many of them to consider geography as a major. Moreover, many of our regional courses have come to play a vital role in area and regional study programs at the university, winning friends for the department and making geography indispensable to a range of academic programs. Finally, our areas of regional emphasis have helped us attract strong graduate students who have developed a focused interest in a region of faculty expertise. I am convinced that a serious investment in regional geography could pay similar dividends in other places—and indeed in some cases it already has.

The discipline will not benefit from reengagement with regional geography if such an initiative is handled simply by organizing a perfunctory introductory regional survey course or by marching students through a set of regional facts devoid of concepts or meaning. Instead, our goal should be to produce students who have a sophisticated understanding of different parts of the world and their relationships to other parts of the world. This means focusing a critical geographic eye on regions: looking for explanations as well as descriptions, and situating regions in the context of developments at different scales and across time. It also means encouraging students to acquire the language skills, historical background, and field experience that is critical to in-depth regional understanding. The task is not a small one, but it is critical if geography is to play a more significant role in the national and international arenas. ■



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