

Harnessing Public Conceptions of Geography to Our Advantage

Like many professional geographers, I have mixed reactions to surveys purporting to measure the level of geographic literacy in the United States. On the one hand, I am always pleased when geography receives attention. On the other hand, I worry that such surveys reinforce the view that geography is nothing more than a set of location facts to be memorized in the early grades.

In an effort to distance the discipline from overly simplistic conceptions, many professional geographers turn away from these surveys – or from anything else that smacks of a popular understanding of geography. Instead they focus attention on the insights to be gained from a sophisticated application of geographic analysis or techniques. This effort is important, of course, but to much of the outside world it can seem disconnected from the geography of the popular imagination. You may be tempted to say, “Good—we need to get rid of that conception anyway.” Yet such a stance arguably makes no sense in either practical or intellectual terms.

Let's first look at the intellectual side of the issue. No one wants to reduce geography to a matter of finding Mexico or the Pacific Ocean on a map. At the same time, there is something fundamentally wrong if people lack a basic conception of how the world is organized. Yes, knowing the location of Rwanda may seem like a trivial matter in and of itself, but how can one possibly assess the context or wider implications of a conflict between Hutus and Tutsis without that bit of rudimentary knowledge? Similarly, how can one begin to see El Niño-related events as part of a larger process without some basic understanding of the geography of ocean-atmosphere interactions?

More sophisticated geographic analyses may seem far removed from such introductory matters, but they build on

them in important ways. Global patterns of climate and vegetation underlie our understanding of the interaction of the terrestrial ecosystem with a changing climate. The pattern of states is deeply implicated in geographies of resource extraction and uneven development. The outputs of complex geographic information systems are often framed by the traditional spatial units used to collect geographic data. Unless we consider the connections between what we do and how geography is popularly understood, we can easily overlook how those popular understandings shape the very conceptualization of our research. (Witness the continuing tendency to use political units as unproblematic frames of reference for a wide array of economic, social, and even environmental studies.)

There are practical issues to consider as well. Geography's profile has risen substantially in recent years, in part because some of our best practitioners are doing such good work that they simply cannot be ignored. At the same time, we are still seriously underappreciated because the vast majority of people do not understand what we really do. Yet many of those same people would easily acknowledge that the citizens of a democratic society need a basic understanding of how the world is organized and how things are related to one another in space.

Why not capitalize on that sentiment? If we do so in an overly narrow way, we of course risk reinforcing simplistic notions of our discipline. Yet if we ignore the connections between what we do and how geography is generally viewed, we lose the opportunity to broaden the base of support for the discipline. The challenge

is to harness geography's popular image to meet our ends—which are also, of course, society's needs.

If we are to meet this challenge, we must rise above our collective skittishness about geography's popular image. Instead, we should make the case that popular geographic understandings can be important points of entry to more sophisticated understandings. To do this, we must ensure that the drive to specialization which is often needed to get to the “cutting edge” is not accomplished at the expense of at least some broader training. Without such breadth, we are less likely to appreciate the links

between our work and broader conceptions of geography, and we are unlikely to be seen as nurturers of a geographically literate population.

I want to make it clear that I am not arguing for some kind of narrow geographical canon that everyone should master and then pass along to others. Yet eschewing all responsibility for knowing and teaching something about how the world is organized physically, culturally, economically and politically is not helpful either. Few historians want to see their discipline reduced to the memorization of dates; yet most of them, I suspect, would argue that there is a problem if the average American cannot place World War II in or around the early 1940s. Shouldn't geographers hold the same attitude about the location of Brazil or the reach of the Amazon Basin? This is not all that we are about, of course, but in an era when places are often treated as black boxes, it's not a bad place to start. ■

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