

An Imperative (and an Opportunity) for Geographic Education

Et the end of a talk I recently gave to a high school advanced placement geography class, one of the students asked me to identify my favorite travel destination. It was an impossible question to answer of course, but I thought for a moment and replied, "the place I haven't been to yet." I suppose the answer wasn't quite what the student was looking for, but I just returned from one such place, and the experience has left me thinking that I gave the student exactly the right answer. The place I visited was Iran, and the experience was extraordinary.

I went to Iran to address the Second International Congress of Geographers of the Islamic World. My participation in the congress also gave me the opportunity to make presentations at two of Tehran's universities, to discuss contemporary issues with the media, and to see some of the country. My experiences and impressions could fill a year's worth of presidential columns, but one reaction to my trip dominates all the others: the extraordinary importance of challenging the stereotypes people hold about one another.

In making this point I know that I risk sounding incredibly trite. Yet on both ends of my trip I was struck by the generalized view that each side has of the other. When two places are separated by half a globe some stereotyping is probably inevitable, but the magnitude of the misunderstandings between the United States and Iran has reached dangerous levels.

A very specific set of circumstances has, of course, fed into the stereotypes that divide the U.S. and Iran. For many Americans, Iran conjures up images of hostages being held captive in the American embassy in Tehran, of dissidents disappearing in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, or of the *fatwa* issued against the author Salman Rushdie. For many Iranians, America brings to mind CIA efforts to intervene in local politics, U.S. military aid to Iraq

during the 1980s, or the worst excesses of an unrestrained pop culture.

These impressions are all rooted in actual events, but they obscure a much more complicated—and ultimately more hopeful—reality. Within Iran for example, there is significant opposition to some of the repressive aspects of the current regime among a population that is quite divided about where the country should be going. Moreover, the reality of Iran utterly belies the simplified notions of the so-called Islamic World that are often bandied about. Not only does Iran see itself in sharp contrast to its neighbors because of its distinct history, culture, and contemporary experience; the country itself encompasses a wide spectrum of cultural practices and political orientations.

All of this suggests a great challenge for geographic education: to expose the complex geographical realities that lie behind—and frequently undercut—the dominant geopolitical generalizations of the day. The challenge is as critically important as it is vast. Whatever position one may take on recent developments in North Africa or Southwest Asia, we cannot even begin to have an intelligent discussion about them if terms such as the Islamic World or the Middle East are deployed in a highly caricatured way. My visit to Iran impressed upon me the need not just to teach our students about the differences between Persians and Arabs, or to make sure they know that Iran is the state with the largest Shiite population. There is an even greater need to deconstruct the notion that Shiites are necessarily repressive fanatics, that Iranians have a monolithic view on the issues of the day, or that Iranians are victims of a backward culture.

Much has been written in recent years about the ways in which geography has served the interests of military conquest, colonialism, and economic exploitation. Yet geography can be an equally powerful tool in the effort to forge a more peaceful, stable, and environmentally sustainable world. As the stakes rise in confrontations over people and the environment, so the importance of geographic education also rises. And there can be few causes more worthy than combating the dehumanizing stereotypes that so often seem to be the currency of the day.



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One experience I had in Iran drove home to me the importance of this project. During the course of my visit I was asked to appear as a guest on a current-events television program that draws a wide audience. The topic that day was the changing geopolitical scene in the wake of the American war on terrorism. My aim was to discuss, in as frank and honest terms as I could, aspects of the emerging geopolitical picture in the region. I tried to make some good points, but it soon became clear to me that my specific comments were far less important than the overall impression I conveyed. By coming across as an American who understood and appreciated something of Iran, who did not buy into the simplifications that dominate news coverage on either side, and who was a clone of neither Donald Rumsfeld or Eminem, I was in a position to challenge one set of stereotypes. As geography educators, it is imperative that we challenge the stereotypes that run in the other direction. Whether trite or not, such endeavors carry with them our best hope for a better world. ■

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