

Enhancing Geography's Role in Public Debate

Each December I face a moment of discouragement when I scan *The Economist's* annual list of influential books published within the past year. Rarely do my eyes fall on even a single title in geography—even though the list includes such categories as "Politics and Current Affairs" and "Science, Technology, and Philosophy." Geography still seems to fall below the radar screen of many influential publishers, journalists, and policy makers.

I raise this point not to set off another round of collective hand wringing. To the contrary, there is much to celebrate at the moment. Geography's profile has expanded substantially over the past two decades, built on everything from the GIS revolution to the spatial turn in neighboring disciplines. Moreover, the scholarly work of geographers is increasingly well known outside our field.

Yet for all of our successes, we still occupy a relatively minor role in the public conversation about society, politics, and the environment. The *New York Times* does not feel the need for regular commentary by a geographer, as it does an economist; geographers are scarce at the major think tanks and policy institutes inside the Beltway; and with the notable exception of Harm de Blij's stint on "Good Morning America," geographers are a rarity in the broadcast media.

What can we do about this? The most important response is the least flashy: we need to do excellent work on matters of importance. We can only enhance our stature by producing some of the best books and articles, by teaching some of the best classes, and by offering some of the best ways of tackling applied problems through the use of geographic techniques and perspectives.

Our numbers are small in comparison with many other disciplines, so if we care about the role of geography in public debate, it is also incumbent on us to be as strategic as possible in our efforts to

reach a broad audience. Three things occur to me as particularly important in this regard: publishing books, connecting our teaching to the issues of the day, and writing opinion pieces for wide dissemination.

At a time when we are mourning the death of Terry Jordan, it is appropriate to remember a key theme of his AAG presidency: the importance of books. Much that happens within geography does not lend itself to book-length treatment, but when it does, it's hard to beat books for reaching a broad audience. Think of the impact people like Jared Diamond or E. O. Wilson have had. The general public knows them not for their articles, but for their books. Of course, geographers have produced some wonderful books, but the paucity of geography titles in *The Economist* reflects not just a lack of demand, but a limited supply as well. This is why I championed AAG book prizes when I was a National Councillor in the late 1990s, and why I think we need to continue to push ourselves to produce books.

As for our teaching, I would be the last one to propose a narrow "relevance" test for education. I have long been a proponent of a broad, liberal arts education, for an over-zealous concern with relevance can undermine the broader intellectual foundations that are necessary to create an educated citizenry. Yet there is nothing wrong with making connections between the things we study and the issues that are shaping the contemporary world. Given the appalling geographical illiteracy that is so evident these days in the public arena, making those connections is a matter of signal importance. When we teach about the cultural diversity of a place like Iran, we should not simply be telling our students that it is a place with a distinctive language and religion; we should be

talking to them about what that means for simplistic understandings of "the Islamic World," or for the prospects for regional integration in the Middle East.

One of the most important things we can do is write about our work for a general audience from time to time. The editorial pages of newspapers are logical outlets. From the applied sphere to the theoretical, geographers are working on a myriad of interesting and relevant topics. What if, just once every three to five years, every professional geographer sat down and wrote an op-ed piece for the newspaper about the connection between their work and an issue of current interest? For such an endeavor to help raise geography's profile, the geographical dimension would have to be made explicit. But if done right, the cumulative effect could be quite striking.

So let me end this column with a challenge. If you have not produced an op-ed piece in the last few years, plan to write one. Soon. Identify yourself as a geographer and explain how geography is integral to assessing the problem you are raising. Of course it takes a special writing style (and often a certain amount of simplification) to do this, but with some effort I am convinced that most professional geographers can produce interesting, provocative pieces. To encourage this further, and to help geographers with the mechanics of the process, I would like to organize some sort of workshop or session at the 2005 AAG Annual Meeting in Denver (Philadelphia is too full) to address this matter. Suggestions about what this might look like and how it might be carried forward are welcome. ■



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