

Thoughts on Geography's Diversity

A glance at the program for the upcoming annual meeting confirms the obvious: geography is a diverse discipline. Some believe that geography's diversity works against its acceptance as a discrete discipline worthy of attention and support in the modern academy. Yet this view is arguably based on a conception of diversity that is both dated and overly narrow.

The idea that geography is more diverse than many other disciplines dates back to a time when the conceptual lines among the various social and physical sciences were relatively sharply drawn. Sociologists studied society, economists the economy, biologists the living world, and chemists the components of the material world. In recent decades, the boundaries between these categories of inquiry have come under increasing scrutiny. How can we study society without economy and politics? How can we unravel the secrets of the living world without moving across the divide between biology and chemistry?

As questions of this sort have come to the fore, the disciplinary matrix that was forged around the turn of the twentieth century has come under attack. One response has been the founding of interdisciplinary programs and institutes: molecular biochemistry, environmental studies, international studies, etc. Another response has been an explosion of what happens under the umbrella of certain disciplines. This came home to me a year ago when I served as an outside member of a search committee for a senior position in sociology. I would be very hard pressed to explain why the different applicants to the position were grouped within the same discipline.

I mention this anecdote not to pick on sociology, but to call into question the assumption that geography is significantly

more diverse than other disciplines. Perhaps this assumption made some sense several decades ago, but it seems much less convincing today. Of course, one might protest by pointing out that sociology does not have a physical component to it, just as the traditional physical sciences do not have a human component. Yet to sustain such an argument, one's conception of diversity must be narrowly focused on topics of study, as opposed to the perspectives from which inquiry proceeds.

Yes, geographers work on very diverse topics (even though, as I have already argued, that can easily be exaggerated). But what about the matter of perspective? One doesn't have to buy into a neat Kantian compartmentalization of form, time, and space to recognize that geography's integrative spatial perspective gives it a certain integrity that is lacking in traditional disciplines whose topical foci appear increasingly fuzzy. (I hasten to note that I am using the term spatial perspective in a broad sense—one that encompasses not just spatial science, but the differential character of places and landscapes and the relations of humans to the environment; cf. Bill Turner's recent article in the *Annals of the AAG*, which uses the term in a narrower sense. To my mind questions of human-environment relations are a necessary part of a broadly based integrative spatial concern.)

The point is that, however great the topical diversity of our discipline, much geographical work proceeds from an interest in the variable character of the earth's surface—including how and why things are organized on the surface of the earth,

how and why they relate to one another, and how and why they come together to produce distinctive places and landscapes. This geographical perspective can transcend the physical and human, and it opens the door to studies that range from the geospatial to the ethnographic.

This is all common sense to most geographers, of course, but we tend not to give it its full due. To my mind, we should be

less ready to concede the diversity point than we often are, for it is not at all clear to me that our diversities give us any less coherence than most other disciplines. And in some ways our commonalities of perspective may give us an edge. (Indeed, various new initiatives are headed in precisely this direction—witness

the Earth Systems Science initiative that seeks to promote topical diversity around a set of interrelated themes.)

Of course, any effort to advance geography in this way will be unsuccessful unless it is accompanied by a sense of the substantive value of the discipline's point of entry on the world. And I hope nothing I have said will be interpreted as an effort to stake out disciplinary turf vis-à-vis other disciplines; much interesting work happens at the intersection between disciplines, and exercises in disciplinary boundary drawing are usually counterproductive. But if one believes that important insights and ideas will be missing if geography is not part of the mix, then it is useful and important to argue that the discipline has a discernable core. We do, and we ought to make the most of it. ■



Murphy

Alexander B. Murphy
abmurphy@uoregon.edu

Reserve Hotel Rooms by February 23 to Receive Discounted Rates.

Call the Philadelphia Marriott at 800-228-9290.