

# PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY: SOME ISSUES

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## Abstract

*A search for the philosophy of geography is perhaps prompted by a chaotic development in geography during the last quarter of the twentieth century following swift paradigm shift. Too much emphasis on definition and attempt to predetermine the boundary may not serve the purpose. Philosophy of the subject may evolve through practice. This paper intends to raise certain issues for further debate.*

## Introduction

Philosophy in general is traditionally known to evaluate the validity of concepts, ideas and principles. By philosophy, what is perhaps meant is what Wooldridge and East wrote more than half a century ago as the 'Spirit and Purpose of Geography'. The discipline has, however, moved so swiftly from one paradigm to another, that one wonders if the definition, purpose and even philosophy of the subject, if any, have remained the same. A search for the philosophy of geography is perhaps prompted by a chaotic development in geography during the last quarter of the twentieth century- a trend that keeps surfacing in new mantle- and the proliferation of novel ideas and approaches about geography. This has created some confusion among the younger generation who are wooed to volunteer their loyalty to a supposedly more purposeful approach to geography under a new rubric. To those of the older generation brought up on the staple of Richard Hartshorne, Carl Sauer, Preston E. James, George B. Cressey, Wooldridge, O.H.K. Spate, down to Peter Haggett, the new wave is bewildering. It is

a movement, oriented less to what we call geography and more to activism anchored in Marxist dogma and doled out to us as Radical, Marxist, Humanistic, Postmodern, Feminist and lately 'uncritical Critical Geography'(the last phrase is not of the author, but coined by Nicholas K. Blomley, 2006).

## On Definition of Philosophy of Geography

A formal definition of Philosophy of Geography as given by Peet is quoted here. 'Philosophy of Geography is that system of general ideas concerned with the direction and content of geographical work which practitioners elaborate during praxis.-----  
--The philosophy of Geography basically concerns the main themes of a group of practitioners, the fascinations of a time and space among people thinking about similar topics. It is an arena where geographers meet to discuss their practice in general ways, to put it simply-----'Philosophy of geography' has a dynamic structure of its own represented by 'the history of geographical thought'- that is, the temporal sequence of general notions about the content

and themes of a study. All these contribute to a disciplinary philosophy. But, to repeat, philosophy is best when formed through empirical and theoretical practice, rather than abstract speculation, reading philosophy in general, or reading theoreticians through the lens of other theoreticians'. (Peet, 1998: 9)

Through this definition, not universally accepted or acceptable, one can evaluate the content and rules of the philosophy of geography as practiced by geographers till the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century---a period the present author takes the liberty to characterize as the watershed, in thinking and approach to geography as demonstrated by the conservative, progressive and critical (transformist) geographers. It all started with the misplaced attack on R. Hartshorne by Schaefer (1953) who thought that geography was confined only to the study of unique regions, an 'idiographic' approach, neglecting the 'nomothetic' approach elaborated by Hartshorne (1959) in his later publication. The limitation of Schaefer's understanding was obvious; he had little notion of the course of history of geographical thought and was a Visiting Professor at Iowa university. But, as James (1971/1980:476-77) put it, Schaefer was anointed, posthumously though, as the 'patron saint of those who rebelled against the image of geography as an idiographic field'. Many, not least 'David Harvey turned the heavy artillery of logical positivism and scientific method against the mere description of unique regions, blasting it to smithereens'(Peet,1998:32).

### **Systematic Geography and Logical Positivism**

The notion that geography is only confined to the study of regions evoked sharp

criticism in the United States and much less in Europe and other continents. The dominance of regional studies virtually blinded many American geographers to the spirit and merits of what is generally labeled as systematic geography. The empirical approach and verifiability or falsification of the facts, phenomena or processes, as the basic tenet of positivism, as adopted by science in general, was also adopted as a valid method of analysis to test any generalization, by geographers engaged in systematic branches of the discipline like Geomorphology and Climatology. This part of the discipline was ignored and the irrelevance of regional studies was time and again projected as something misleading and futile.

There are many, and they far outnumber those critical of regional approach, who adopt and undertake the study of regions, regional landscape - physical, cultural and economic- with significant findings to be applied to the benefit of the society. Such studies may not pass the test of being science as they don't come out with laws and theories, but their methods are scientific, and their findings and presentations a link in the addition of knowledge that often fill the gap in the information base of a society for progress.

### **The Value of Traditional Knowledge**

In India, and it may be elsewhere, there is presently a great deal of emphasis on re-evaluating, garnering and applying traditional knowledge. The modern geographical scholarship, spanning a period of over one and a half century, ironically called traditional by neo-modernists, cannot be wished away, not because the conservatives are reluctant to embrace new

ideas, adopt new methods and join the main stream of social sciences. It is observed that the modernists align themselves only with social scientists, juggle with social theories, some with a strong base and some ephemeral, and spin a mystique that is far remote from the reality.

A co-existence of what one might call traditional and what passes off as modern and ultra-modern will be the ideal way in which the traditionalists follow what they consider geography, relating to humankind, nature and nature-human interaction, creating a landscape more fashionably called relative space, and the modernists who pave the way for a new thinking on the discipline through their vigorous analytical and philosophical approach. How important the traditional approach is, elaborated by David Harvey, one of the vanguards of Marxist or Critical Geography.

“When I sought to bring together the positive aspects of traditional geographical thought and the philosophy implied in quantification, I was amazed to observe how much more vigorous and vital the whole philosophy of geography became. It opened a new world of thought in which we were not afraid to think theoretically and analytically, in which we could talk of individuals and populations in the same sentence, in which we could generalize about patterns and particularize about locations in the same context. There seemed to be nothing wrong with the aims and objectives of traditional geography (indeed, they are to be prized and cherished), but as an academic enterprise, it had hedged itself about with so many inhibiting taboos and restrictions that it could not hope to realize the aims and objectives, it had set itself” (Harvey, 1969:vi)

Disenchantment with regional studies which portray unique cases is, to my mind, unfounded. Regional studies may not apparently qualify to be treated as science, yet they provide the laboratories from where most of the generalizations emerge, besides being the most effective arena with constant human-nature interactions, that with continued observations offer scientific explanation

### **Disenchantment with Geography: Its Content and Methods**

Despite the undoubted merits in regional studies and the study of individual elements which lend themselves to scientific laws and generalizations embodies what is known as systematic geography, more specifically physical and bio-geography with their branches and sub-branches, there is a general disenchantment with the quality, status and utility of the discipline among the practitioners of the subject. This is more so with the younger geographers who entered the profession during the last three or four decades. A serious questioning about the philosophy, content, method and utility of the subject led to a strand of thought that produced a succession of new approaches to geography, as dictated by contemporary events, and perhaps in the belief that a kind of geography, with its own style and method, that touches the society directly would be far more appropriate to adopt. Thus, there started appearing on the scene, a succession of new geographies, one a trifle different from the other, each with its own method and purpose and groups of adherents. One has only to look at the labels like Radical Geography, Marxist Geography, Humanistic Geography, Gender Geography, Post-modern Geography, and now Critical Geography

Most of these new approaches originated in the USA where geographers, unlike in Europe, were concerned and engaged more with the human aspects of the discipline, assigning a minor role to the study of physical elements.

### **A Flurry of recent Geographies**

As a consequence of an accentuated social concern a flurry of geographies appeared on the scene after the sixties of the last century. The move for a new kind of geography was initiated with Radical Geography appearing on the scene as a part of civil liberty movement in the USA, against inequality, racism and the Vietnam War in the late sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea was to inject the issues of social relevance in the discipline. It was formalized with the publication of a new journal-‘ANTIPODE- A Radical journal of geography’ in 1969. The group practicing radical geography emphasized social concerns, and used a language that was ‘confrontist, optimistic and anarchistic’ (Peet 1998:68). Radical geography yielded place to Marxist Geography that was intellectually closer to the Marxist philosophy and aligned itself to Marxist social theories. Humanistic Geography largely based on the philosophical principle of phenomenology where ‘experience of the phenomena’ provides the real picture of reality. This was opposed to the long existing positivism where ‘empiricism and verifiability’ form the base scientific generalizations. The concept was closer to critical theory that outright rejects positivism.

Several other strands like Post-modern geography and lately Critical geography have been initiated and engaged the attention of geographers. Critical geography is perhaps the latest entrant in this bewildering

array of geography that have appeared and given place to a subsequent school of thought.

The present writer takes the liberty of calling this kind of geography as ‘geographic activism’. This school aligns itself to ‘critical theory’ of Frankfurt school, opposed to analytical positivism and pushing forth the boundary of academic geography where active participation is socially warranted.

### **Multiplicity of Themes and Approaches**

The emergence of multiple branches is neither anti-traditional geography nor is it any way detrimental to the health of the discipline. Disappointment with the present must lead to a novel approach with a focus on what is considered relevant. What is not quite understandable is the ephemeral nature of many of these approaches and adoption of themes and issues that may not appear relevant to all. Secondly, geography, unlike many other disciplines is running for novelty and in the process adopts one or the other contending theories from philosophy, like positivism vs phenomenology. Does adoption of these Philosophical theories or their derivatives help? It will be premature to pass any judgment, but what is certain is that contending views, founded on any specific philosophical base, are hard to reconcile. As it appears, despite the principle of uncertainty, science has, by and large, adopted positivism as the basic principle to understand the laws of nature.

### **The Flaw in Traditional Geographical Practice**

One of the problems geographers have been facing is the domain of uncertainty in which they find themselves about their own discipline. This, to my mind, has

resulted from adopting a definition which does not satisfy the changing nature of the society and the man-nature relationships, following technological innovations and social transformations. Thus, it would appear prudent and logically sound to think of a discipline not only in the light of its evolution, accumulated knowledge, contemporary trends, but it should also explore the future possibilities, uncertain though these may be. One could think of discussing the philosophy and the scope and purpose of the discipline without a definition. I would, thus, think of approach to geography in two separate manners. The two approaches could be termed as: (i) Intra-definitional and (ii) Extra-definitional. Definitional approach has certain limitations. Any elaboration about the role and purpose of geography, within the framework of a predefined characteristics is bound to be constrained and shackled by the parameters of its definition. This would, inevitably, tend to stifle the growth of the subject and create disciplinarian boundaries, a situation not amenable to growth of knowledge. Limiting the growth of a discipline is detrimental to the society. How far and how much expansion is permissible should be defined by the practitioners of the discipline and not predetermined.

Extra-definitional approach relies on the fact that the division of knowledge and the emergence of different disciplines have resulted not from an innate difference in the laws of nature which operate uniformly, given certain conditions, but as a convenient mode of its re-organization. There is a general convergence among the social sciences and straddling of the disciplinary boundaries is not only common often even indispensable among the natural sciences.

## **The irrelevance of Geography-Non Geography debate**

Excessive emphasis on the definition, nature and scope of geography as a discipline and its restrictive character has led not to a sophisticated, well defined discipline but has created rebels among geographers who promote a kind of geography, they think well serves the cause of humanity, perhaps deservedly ignoring the given definition and trend of geography.

Most of the new geographies, however, converge in their purpose, i.e. creation of a just, not so much, prosperous society. The aim is noble. It is to be seen if these strands gather enough mass, and consolidate in a brand that is unassailable and adapted universally in the interest of the discipline, knowledge and the humanity.

## **Where is the Philosophy of Geography Today?**

Is intellectual activism to be associated with geographical studies or the geographic efforts have to be confined to the preservation of existing knowledge and advance our understanding of Nature, Humans, Society and the landscape produced by their interaction. There is certainly a heightened concern for social relevance of their work among Indian geographers. How to channelize this interest and concern for advancing geographical knowledge relevant to the society is a major challenge before Indian geographers. Can this task be performed by designing a new mode of geographical study and research? Let the geographers ponder over it, come to a consensus and implement programmes to this end.

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