

The Functions of Geography in American Studies

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I

The most easily understandable reason for the absence of a strong geographical element in American Studies in Britain is the difficulty geographers specializing in America experience in carrying out research. While more and more of the primary source material used by geographers is in the form of quantitative data published by government and commercial agencies, the real primary source is the earth's surface, and thorough fieldwork is still a basic necessity. Clearly, if the material or evidence (whether in the form of soils, crops, retail stores, traffic networks, minority population groups or polluted rivers) is in Vermont or Nebraska, it is infinitely easier for the geographer to work there and teach there, than to teach in Britain and commute to his fieldwork in Winooski or Red Cloud.

However, this paper is not a plea for larger fieldwork grants; it aims to consider, briefly, other reasons for the small contribution geography seems to be making to American Studies at present, and, in some greater detail, the types of contribution it could make in the future to the teaching of American Studies at college and university level in this country.

The many possible permutations of the disciplines which contribute to American Studies, and the question of whether the American Studies department has its own full-time staff or has to borrow from other departments, admittedly result in a great variety of special situations. However, a common situation is the one in which the department has centred on history, or on literature: certainly these disciplines were at the heart of departments of American Studies from an early date. Geography, together with other disciplines such as sociology, more often than not is in the position of being either a newcomer, or a subsidiary.

Thus it is much too easy for misunderstandings to exist on both sides, so that geography is prevented from making its full contribution even when both the American Studies department and the Geography department or geographer concerned earnestly desire this. One misunderstanding will

develop with any discipline which joins an existing American Studies programme, simply because the newcomers are not as fully aware of the aims, ideals and methods of the department as are the original members. When a new historian joins a department of history, for example, he will very quickly get an accurate impression of the interests and philosophy of the department from familiarity with his colleagues and their work. They, in turn, from his area of specialization and work, should be able to fit him into an appropriate slot in their model of history fairly quickly and easily. But this may not be the case with a geographer joining forces with an historian and a specialist in literature. He will have prolonged difficulty in becoming familiar not only with their special interests within America, but also with their aims, their philosophies of their own disciplines – not to mention their thoughts on the nature of this beast called American Studies. It is just as easy for the geographer to misunderstand the others as for them to misunderstand him.

The difficulty of his colleagues in American Studies understanding the interests and aims of the geographer, and appreciating the type of contribution his discipline could make, stems from a general lack of awareness that there are markedly distinct schools of geography. Moreover, specialists in history and literature can readily be forgiven for being unaware of this simple fact, when, in the author's experience, many geographers do not seem too clear about the matter of schools themselves. In fact, 'schools' may well be the wrong word, for the types of geography are not clearly linked with one name or one university, or one country, so that terms such as 'aims', 'themes', or 'traditions' of geography are used more often than the term 'school'. Some observers argue, in fact, that it is rather a matter of different themes having been dominant at different times: for example, the regional theme, dominant earlier this century, has now given way to the theme of spatial analysis not necessarily linked to a regional frame.

There is also the problem resulting from the role that the geographer is required to play. Here the author can rely only on his own experience, in the belief that it is better to write about one department than to imply any misunderstanding elsewhere by generalizing. At Lincoln, at one time, not only was geography a newcomer to American Studies, but some individuals assumed that it would play a subsidiary role. At the time of writing, although geography, history and literature play exactly equal roles in the whole course, there is the concept that, in a particular topic in a particular term, one of the three may be 'foreground' or play the lead, and the others may be 'background' or play supporting roles. At the beginning several individuals clearly expected geography not only to provide the 'background' but to stay in the background and to be content with a supporting role.

There was no animosity in this, and there is none now. The attitude

merely resulted from a misunderstanding of the nature of modern geography which was as much the fault of the Geography department in not making clear as of the American Studies department in taking for granted. To many a specialist in the history of the United States, it may seem perfectly natural that the geographer's function is simply to set the scene for him, to describe the rocks, relief, climate, soils and vegetation, the physical environment in which the much more important historical movements took place, and leave the rest to him. Similarly, to some specialists in American literature, the geographer might be of some little use in describing a region – New England, or the South for Faulkner, or Chicago for *The Jungle*, or Paterson for the poem – in those few cases where the regional background has some bearing on the work; but more often than not, geography is not seen to be relevant.

The specialist in the geography of the United States, however, who is equally an enthusiast for his subject may feel that it is literature and history which ought to be playing the 'background' supporting roles. To him, the only use of the historian may seem to be to give a *résumé* of the events leading up to the present situation which he studies, and which is the really important thing to study. To the geographer, the chap from the English department is just somebody who provides a poem about Indians, a novel about a steelworks, a play about rural strife, or a splendid description of Oregon in the rain.

Removing tongue from cheek, then, one hopes it is clear that, just as other disciplines would be very depressed to be misunderstood in this way, so the geographer is depressed when he is mistaken for a technician who can just sketch in a regional description, or give the hard fact, nothing more, of the physical environment or background. However, it seems that the burden is on geographers to make their higher aims and interests explicit and to show that some aspects of the discipline can make a unique contribution to teaching American Studies, complementary to, and different from, the rest. When that has been achieved, then geography could have a much more educationally interesting and useful function in American Studies along one or more of the lines suggested below.

II

The problem of specialists in other disciplines understanding what contemporary geography is about and what expertise a geographer may have to offer is aggravated by two conditions. First, geography has always been what Chorley and Haggett now call a multivariate discipline.¹ Second, not

¹ R. J. Chorley and P. Haggett, *Frontiers in Geographical Teaching* (London: Methuen, 1965), chap. 18.

only are there these various themes, but the author has argued elsewhere that the branches of geography are growing further and further apart to the point where they are becoming separate disciplines in their own right.² For example, one of the oldest divisions of geography, familiar to all, is the division into physical and human geography. In spite of the efforts of Haggett and others equally concerned for the wholeness of geography, physical geography may well in fact already have become geology, geomorphology, climatology, meteorology, pedology and bio-geography. In particular, the study of landforms, long the key element in physical geography, has become the discipline of geomorphology with methods and aims different from geography, although the two disciplines share the same subject matter.

Several observations can be made on this one example which may help in appreciating later points. First, that physical geography was something much wider than just the study of landforms. Second, that geography is not defined by its content, by its subject matter. The study of rocks, landforms, farms, factories, towns and population is not unique to geography, nor are the techniques of mapping and statistical analysis. Geography is defined by the types of questions it asks about these phenomena. Third, as the branches get further and further apart, geography is shedding the burden of pretending to be an integrating discipline. Very few geographers now attempt to make the complete regional synthesis of, seemingly, all phenomena under the sun, which was the aim of the French geographers at the turn of the century.³

Fourth, it might be very difficult indeed to find a geographer interested in the physical features of the United States as much as he is interested in the human features, and virtually impossible to find one interested in the physical features alone. This may be almost incredible to anyone whose last contact with geography was at school more than five years ago, for the change is so recent that most well-educated people have been brought up in the tradition of the regional description and the study of man's relationship to his physical environment. Study of any leading work on contemporary geography, however, will show that the trend is now to concentration on human geography, and to the construction of ideal models of human spatial behaviour undistorted by the complicated physical background.⁴ It is not surprising, then, if an American Studies department cannot find a young geographer willing to describe the physical features of the United States.⁵

² R. Minshull, *The Changing Nature of Geography* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1970), chap. 12.

³ G. Taylor, ed., *Geography in the 20th Century* (London: Methuen, 1951), chap. 3.

⁴ Abler, Adams and Gould, *Spatial Organisation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971); P. Ambrose, *Analytical Human Geography* (London: Longman, 1969).

⁵ R. L. Morrill, *The Spatial Organisation of Society* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1970); E. J. Taaffe, ed., *Geography* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

Equally difficult would be the task of finding one to describe the regions of the United States, a thankless task even in the good old days. Admittedly a specialist in the geography of the United States could plough through New England, the Mid-Atlantic Coast, the South, the Midwest, the Plains, and so on, with just the same interest and worthwhile result as an historian ploughing through every year since 1492, with equal emphasis on each, or the student of literature reading every word of some prolific writer and giving equal weight to every paragraph. Within the large region of the U.S.A., another approach is to deal with the topics of farming, mining, manufacturing, transport, settlement and population, and here we come to the crux of the matter; whether the regional geographer takes the regions of the U.S.A., or the general geographer takes the topics of economic and social life, what does he contribute in addition to mere description? Or, perhaps more pertinently, what kind of an explanation can he give of how the present state of affairs came about, other than an explanation that many historians are well able to give? What is unique about the geographer's analysis?

Within the last five years these questions have been given some detailed attention by the Commission on College Geography in the U.S.A. and by Harvey in this country.⁶ In spite of the variety of terms used, aims, themes, traditions and so on, both Harvey and the Commissioners, and many of the authorities to which they refer, identify four major themes in what the Commissioners describe as 'a pluralistic research field'. These four major themes, to paraphrase diverse terminology, are the study of: regional variation, landscape development, man-land relationships, and spatial relationships. There is some argument about the age and order of origin of these, and even more argument about their relative importance in geography as a whole. However, the order of presentation here is no comment on either chronology or relative importance.

The Study of Regional Differentiation

This theme exists because of the self-evident differences in landscape and human economic activities seen in different parts of the world. It has long been under attack from advocates of the three other themes for being exceptionalist, for looking for the differences between regions, and at its worst, paying attention only to the different and the unique. However, one presumes that British colleagues who study the history and literature of the United States do so, in part at least, because the history and literature are

⁶ *New Approaches in Introductory College Courses*, Commission on College Geography, Publication No. 4, Association of American Geographers, Washington D.C., 1967; D. Harvey, *Explanation in Geography* (London: Arnold, 1969).

different from our own, in addition to their intrinsic interest and importance. One of the greatest difficulties in understanding any aspect of the United States is the failure to realize that their resources, their experience, their systems, social, economic and political, are in some measure different from our own. If we judge the Americans just as more people exactly like us in every respect, we will fail to understand them.

The regional geographer, then, can make some contribution to the understanding of many aspects of life in the United States. The best regional geography is a balance of comparison and contrast, weighing the known and unknown, different and familiar, against the only norm available, the very doubtful norm of one's own country. The United States does have some geographical similarities with Britain, particularly its economic and urban system stemming from the same origin as our own. But in size – extent of latitude and longitude; range of climates – range, in fact, of completely different environments from Alaska to Florida; in resources; in the fact that it is forty times larger than Britain with only four times the population, the U.S.A. is significantly different from this country. Some of the significant geographical differences have been factors in their history, and are dominant factors in the present economy and society.

It is suggested that a more useful approach to regions within the U.S.A. is not to plough through them all, just for the sake of a neat, complete course in regional geography, but again to look for the significant differences. Turner's theory of the sections may not seem to be as important now as in the past, but the regional geographer can work closely with the historian in evaluating the theory, and in looking at sectional claims before and after World War II. Perhaps the two most significant developments from the regional geographer's point of view at present are, first, the combination of rural depopulation and dispersal of manufacturing which together are rapidly changing the economic base of many regions in the U.S.A.; second, the fascinating coagulation of the population into enormous conurbations – not only Megalopolis (Boswash) but also Chipitts, Sansan and the rest – which seems destined to concentrate the population on the edges of the country and to split it apart, into new regions, in the future.

The Study of Landscape Development

Just as regions have been regarded as objects of study by some geographers, so the landscape has been regarded as the object of study by others. The most common approach to the landscape has been to explain how what we see as we look through the window came about. This type of explanation may start with a theory of the creation of the world, with the formation of

the oldest rocks still to be found at the surface, with the last glaciation, or with the arrival of the first Spaniard or Frenchman on the scene. Wherever it starts, the last stages in the investigation are necessarily concerned with the material changes to the landscape, the material remains and structures resulting from the sequent occupance of Indians, miners, pioneers, settlers, later farmers, and possibly industrialists and urban dwellers.

Although the landscape geographer would pursue this study for its own sake, regarding his work as 'foreground' in this instance, clearly some of the work will be of interest to the historian; but this throws up a much more important point for American Studies. By definition, the type of explanation the landscape geographer aims to give is an *historical* explanation, and others in the American Studies department may well fail to see that geography has something unique to offer if they are most familiar with any of those branches of geography which do seek an historical explanation. Too often, what is claimed to be geography turns out, in fact, to be superficial economic and social history which an historian is trained to do better.

Therefore one would argue that the most important change in geography, a corollary of the placing of the emphasis on the spatial theme, is the change from historical to spatial explanations. The fundamental change in the last few years, and, in the author's view, the greatest improvement, has been that the type of explanation a *geographer* is called on to give of any system on the earth's surface is not how it came about in the past, but how it works now. This is where the use of conceptual models and systems theory is so important. The geographer identifies the elements of a system in the landscape, and is concerned to hypothesize how they are related, how they work together or react upon one another. His unique point of view is the attempt to see the functioning in space of certain systems on the earth's surface, and to offer a functional explanation.

One other aspect of landscape development needs emphasis. Landscape can mean the urban landscape, and thus one of the reasons for geographers paying less attention to the Rockies or the Mississippi Delta today is the fact that nearly 70 per cent of the U.S. population is urbanized and over 50 per cent is concentrated in the great conurbations. The study of the development of the American city landscape, then, is one of the most important contributions which geography can make to American Studies. In the former trend to concentrate round the central business district, producing the skyscraper nuclei of American cities, the congestion, the immigrant ghettos, the rigid pattern, we see the development of so many of America's contemporary problems. In the present attempt to disperse, to the low density suburbs, to the out-of-town supermarket, motel, entertainment centre, for industry to disperse along the motorways, we see an attempt to solve the bad

spatial arrangement which is in turn creating more landscape problems than it solves.

The Study of Man-Land Relationships

This theme has thrown up such extremes in the American context as the aim of G. P. Marsh to study what man has done to the earth, and the belief of Ellen Churchill Semple that physical geography has determined both the course and the outcome of the American Civil War.⁷ This theme fell into disrepute because it developed at its worst into crude determinism, simple statements such as that soya beans are grown in the Midwest because the relief, climate and soils are thus and thus; a type of explanation which ignores completely any social and especially economic factors. But the theme at its best is worthy of attention, if the stress is placed on relationships, on a two-way interaction between man and land.

There are certainly two topics where the man-land theme is of vital concern to American Studies. Increasing attention is being paid to the American Indian, and it is all too easy to assume that each Indian culture was adapted to the environment of the plains, the south western deserts, or the eastern woodlands. Any academically rigorous investigation must go deeper than this, and, for example, must test the hypotheses that each environment offered a range of possible economic activities to the Indians, that the only control was in limiting factors to agriculture and, above all, that if there were determinants, these were in the technology, history and traditions of the Indians, not in the physical landscape.

The other is of more immediate appeal to those students who must see the direct relevance of their courses to their own lives. At last we are conscious that we are on spaceship earth, that its fuel and other resources are finite. The American energy crisis is just one aspect of this, and it can be either a forerunner of worse to come, or a well-heeded warning. The study of man-land relationships, or man-resource relationships, in the U.S.A. in the 1970s is of vital concern, and can be very demanding intellectually, if an emotional response is to be avoided. America may set the pattern either for disaster for the rest of the world, or for sensible stewardship of finite resources. Clearly we have to learn how to live off income, in the forms of solar energy, water power, geothermal power and the rest, rather than living off capital of the fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas), and of non-renewable uranium. Man must live in harmony with the atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere and biosphere; if not, he will suffocate or be poisoned by his own pollution.

⁷ T. W. Freeman, *A Hundred Years of Geography* (London: Duckworth, 1961), pp. 41 and 77.

In the U.S.A. we are observing the laboratory trials, and workshop bench tests of methods of conservation and energy production which will directly affect our lives.

The Study of Spatial Relationships

This theme is, at one and the same time, the one now becoming dominant in Britain and America, the one probably least familiar to people working in other disciplines, and the one capable of giving American Studies students a unique viewpoint of the geography of the U.S.A. which goes beyond mere description and historical explanation of man's activities as they operate on the earth's surface this year. Some of the assumptions behind this approach are necessarily different from the assumptions of the other three approaches. For example, spatial geography assumes a basic similarity between the economic and social systems in many different parts of the world. Therefore it attempts to build normative models of human behaviour which are merely distorted by the differences which the regional geographer believes to be of fundamental importance.⁸ Similarly, historical development of the systems in the landscape, and the distortions caused by local peculiarities of the physical or cultural environment are both of less importance than the identification of the elements of the system, and the understanding of how they would work ideally on a surface undistorted by coastlines, mountains, lakes, deserts and the like. This approach, it is suggested, has links with the structuralist approach in disciplines as diverse as linguistics and anthropology.⁹

In order to make a living off, and to live on, the earth's surface, it is assumed that man must locate his activities carefully, distribute his fields, farms, mines, factories and cities logically, and arrange the transport and intercommunication between them as efficiently as possible. Thus there should be an ideal spatial arrangement of farms, minimum cost locations of mines and factories, an ideal spatial arrangement of the functions and residential zones of cities. Yet clearly American farming is different from British and from Nigerian; can they all be ideal? The American city has unique characteristics¹⁰; we have our city problems in Britain, but not as bad as those of Los Angeles and Megalopolis, so what went wrong? While the author is convinced that the spatial approach offers the best chance yet of understanding the geography of the U.S.A., he is equally certain that as it *is* of the U.S.A. then the size, shape, position, relief, climate and soils of

⁸ R. J. Chorley and P. Haggett, *Models in Geography* (London: Methuen, 1967).

⁹ M. Lane, ed., *Introduction to Structuralism* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); J. Ehrmann, ed., *Structuralism* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday Anchor, 1970).

¹⁰ M. Yeates and B. J. Garner, *The North American City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

that sub-continent are just as vital to an understanding of America now, as are the spatial models of farming systems, industrial systems, settlement patterns, city structure and population distribution. There is logic in man's spatial behaviour, the ideal models can be disentangled from chaotic reality, but it is argued that the earth's physical environment is such an important factor and the ideals are so far from being achieved, that the regional manifestations of these human systems in that part of the North American continent present us with some very complicated problems worthy of detailed study.

The elements of the spatial approach may be summarized by the economic and social topics studied, as suggested above, or by the types of problems faced both by the 200 million people in the U.S.A. and by the geographers who study their spatial behaviour. These are the problems: of using space to grow food, provide other resources, power, water, space for transport and for living on; of overcoming distance, whether this is the distance between field and farm, Schefferville and Pittsburgh, Alaska and Washington, the downtown office and the urban split-level; of locating farms, factories, cities, shops, banks, offices in the right place, economically the most effective place; of arranging complex systems in the best spatial order on the earth's surface, in particular arranging the thousands of functions of the metropolis so that they can both work efficiently today and allow for rapid growth and work equally efficiently twenty years from now.

In the American context, investigating these problems will involve the study of at least the following topics. By world standards the Americans are not using their share of the earth's surface intensively enough; as they own land out of all proportion to their numbers, what is their responsibility to the rest of the world? As with food production, so with mining, and in spite of the many contradictions, the net situation is that they are saving their own minerals, while importing and stockpiling what they can from the rest of the world. Turning from the international to the domestic situation, we observe such major spatial re-adjustments taking place, that, if the model-builders are correct, and there is one spatial arrangement which is so much more efficient than other possibilities, then either the American arrangements were very bad in the past, or will be a disaster in the near future.

The imposition of the gridiron pattern of mile-square sections over two-thirds of the country was one of the world's major spatial mistakes, making much farming difficult by the end of the nineteenth century, and rural depopulation inevitable in the twentieth. In contrast, the present dispersal of industry out of the manufacturing belt and out of the city centres is a clear improvement, spreading wealth more evenly, and slowing the increase

of city congestion. However, this beneficial change may be damaged by the transport crisis as railways close, as airlines fail to expand, and as road transport is seen to be unable to provide efficient long distance bulk service. The Americans, like the British, may find they have neglected what is best in the long term, for the sake of short term gain and local advantage.

In a very short time America has passed from the phase of encouraging immigration and movement on the frontier to the phase of talking about Z.P.G. (zero population growth) and about a population policy. Not only may there be an ideal population size, but also an ideal distribution and spatial arrangement within the continent, balancing rural and urban, between depopulation of the centre and congestion on the coasts and borders. But the provision of new towns and cities would need as much government planning, and cause as much violent argument, as a national population policy. That people can be in serious spatial predicaments, and need specialist knowledge and help to get them out, is clearly illustrated in the existence of Megalopolis and the Black ghettos, and their deteriorating condition at the present time.

With 75 per cent of the population now concentrated into the 5 per cent of the land surface which is urbanized,¹¹ the Americans have created massive spatial problems, of which traffic congestion, urban renewal, difficulties of city servicing, the confinement of the Black ghettos are just some of the manifestations. The elements and functioning of the city system are so complex, so intricately interconnected, that none of the models so far constructed, the concentric, sector or multiple nucleus models,¹² have even approached an adequate explanation. The study of urban geography is now a major activity in the U.S.A., led by the geographers in Chicago, and American cities form the great majority of the examples put forward to illustrate the urban models which may in time prove to be applicable to the whole world – a fact which plays nicely into the hands of the geography teacher who sees the importance of the American city, and can use this wealth of detailed information.

In short, the study of the geography of the American city most conveniently combines and emphasizes the key themes summarized in this paper. It focuses attention on the major social and economic problems of America today. It embodies, first, the regional approach in the study of different city zones; second, the landscape approach in the study of the development of the urban landscape; third, man-land relationships, represented by the study of man's relationship to his urban, artificial environment;

¹¹ R. Estall, *A Modern Geography of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), chap. 13.

¹² R. J. Johnston, *Urban Residential Patterns* (London: Bell, 1971), chap. 3.

and fourth, the study of the working, growth and optimum layout of the American city demands the spatial approach. Moreover, not only can geography thus focus on vital aspects of America, not only can it contribute its unique point of view to American Studies, but this type of study is also immediately relevant to our life, to the matters of making a living, and the quality of life in British cities – in fact, in any part of our Western, industrial, urban society.