From colonization to cyberspace – some challenges for contemporary geography

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Koskela, Hille (2001). From colonization to cyberspace – some challenges for contemporary geography. *Fennia* 179:2, pp. 185–187. Helsinki. ISSN 0015-0010.

Comment on Professor Ronald F. Abler's speech.

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It has been claimed that geography, as an academic discipline, has its roots in natural science. The core of geography in the 19th century – a core that one could identify – was tied closely to natural science. From another point of view, geography has historical roots in two processes that describe its role in the society: in colonialism and in nationalism. These roots are perhaps not exactly contradictory to the definition 'natural science' but tell us another story where geography is seen as making social contributions. In Finland, for instance, geography was important in the early building of the national identity.

These tasks meant that geographers also had an important role in the academic community. Geography was respected and acknowledged by other disciplines. This is an historical point of view. From the present perspective one can ask, provocatively, whether there still is a discipline called 'geography'? Divisions begun to appear a long time ago and, lately, fragmentation has been ever more intense. The question we face now is whether geography still might have a core that would unite its various branches? Has it been inevitably dispersed? Do we still need a synthetic perspective, and if yes, what might that include? How does geography look like now? From inside the academy, and from outside of it?

It is clear, that there is a risk that a discipline that is wide-ranging and dispersed, will look like a discipline not worth noticing. It might be perceived as empty inside – 'like a donut'. This has partly contributed to the fact that geographers often have a weak self-esteem. A lot of time is spent in discussions around the question 'what is geography?' in geography departments world-wide. However, one might form the question in another way. The most crucial point here, arguably, is not 'what geography is?' but rather 'to which questions geographers are seeking answers for?' Are these questions trivial and without social meanings, or are they in the center of the contemporary discussion? What do geographers do? Are there research questions addressed that might unite various divisions within geography? What are the most important challenges for this discipline right now? What are 'the geographies' of the information society?

I will now go on in discussing some topics that can be described as current challenges. My purpose is by no means to claim that these would exclude other research themes as less relevant. Rather, I wish to use some research topics as examples that show the point that despite dispersion there still are common areas of research. At least four significant focus points can be identified.

First, environmental problems are in the very heart of present geographical research. *Sustainability* is a crucial challenge. 'The risk society' (Beck 1992) is here and now. Human impact on the nature and global environmental change are traditional geographical topics but their role seems to be ever more important in the contemporary world. The influence of this is clear in physical geography, but environmental problems are also included in planning geography where Environmental Impact Assessment plays a crucial role from basic research to its applications. In the most recent research, basic research and applications come close to each other. Indeed, the dis-

tinction between physical geography – as 'pure' – and applied geography – i.e. the application of geographical knowledge to solve problems within society – is not perhaps as exact as we are used to think. The aims for sustainable development and solution of environmental problems are identical.

Second, *globalization* has been one of the most widely discussed subjects lately – this summer it has had quite a lot of attention in the Finnish media, for example. Cultural, political, economic and environmental processes now operate at a global scale more than before. Globalization has sometimes been described as 'the end of geography'. Local uniqueness is, if not disappearing, at least fundamentally changing (Meyer & Geschiere 1999). Paradoxically, this is a field where geographers do important and valid research ranging from the understanding of the time-space compression to the finding of new scales at which different processes operate. It must be emphasized that change does not occur everywhere in the same way: the processes of globalization are not geographically uniform. Geography matters – even in the globalized world. If this is acknowledged, then geographers have new challenges to meet.

Third, *regionalism* is currently perhaps a more important question than ever before. New boundaries and new meanings for a region or regional identity have been one of the most widely discussed subjects, especially in contemporary Europe. Although conventional boundaries have been contested, the fact that modes of production, social relations and identities are locally specific has not changed. Research on borderlands and conflict areas show that there are various reasons for new regionalism: for example, cultural, religious or those based on the share of natural resources. Here, again, geographers from different subdivisions have had their important role. Regions and identities of place have always been in the focus of geographical research but the re-evaluation of the traditional concept of region is essential for understanding the new forms of regionalism.

Fourth, perhaps not so obvious, focus point is the concept of *cyberspace*. Namely, the alternative worlds created by computers. 'A there that was not there' as William Gibson (1999) originally described. Geographers play a crucial role in this discussion from two different perspectives: with their technological skills as well as with their developing of the theoretical concept of space. From theoretical point of view, it has been argued that cyberspace is changing our notions of space, distance, and the meaning of place, for example by creating 'virtual cities and communities'. The 'online geographies of power and exclusion' modify not only spatial but also social relations (Dodge & Kitchin 2001). From practical point of view, one must note the fact that geographers spend more and more time using computers. Sometimes, however, it is forgotten that a computer is a tool, a method perhaps, but not the research question itself, not to speak about 'theory'. The geographers involved with theoretical reasoning on cyberspace and those developing practical computer skills – GIS, for example – have, until now, been ideologically quite far from each other. However, both dimensions are clearly part of the present geography, and it is interesting to see how these relations will change in the near future.

These four subjects of research all show where geographers, and geography stands: in the very center of the most important scientific discussions of our time. They are all interdisciplinary. Further, these are all very different in their relations to our society than the historical themes of colonialism and nationalism were. The aim is to explain, understand and emancipate, rather than exploit or colonize. These four subjects were only examples but they do, I believe, show an important point. Geography might be dispersed as regards theories, methods or even epistemologies used, but it might still be surprisingly solid in relation to the research questions asked. However, if we take geography seriously, it becomes more important to look at its role in the society than its self-esteem. Clearly, we should be more concerned about problem solving than disciplinary orthodoxy. Academic discipline has no value of its own, torn apart from its context. To some extent, specialization is inevitable – and important. It is essential if we wish to take seriously the tasks ahead.

It is common for geographers to ask 'what is our scientific identity?' or even 'what do others think about geography and about what geographers do?'. Indeed, we spend a lot of time in convincing ourselves, as well as others, that what we do is important. Perhaps we should re-direct these thoughts, and ask, as I suggested, 'what are the questions we seek answers for?' and another question 'how important are these questions – locally, globally, scientifically, and politically?'. This

would not only help us to find our true identity as a discipline called geography, but would also help us to develop this discipline further.

The historical perspective might teach us another lesson. All knowledge is power. And once created, can be used in a variety of ways. These ways may be more or less acceptable. Most of us do, nowadays, look at colonialism very critically, although it might be agreed that it was one of the roots of geography as a discipline. As regards more up to date problematic questions we tend to be silent. This applies, for example, to GIS technology used in the 1991 Gulf War, GPS technology and the risk of invading privacy, or cartographic attempts to justify Serbia's claims to Macedonia, or similar processes in other conflict areas.

A discipline with true and solid identity should not avoid difficult questions, or deny its responsibility as a producer of scientific knowledge. Knowledge can be produced to promote particular political projects. It is not enough that we teach our students the methods and technological skills required in new geography. A wider context of understanding should always be included – both in relation to the strengths of our discipline and in relation to the dangers we face. While doing research on sustainability, we should maintain sustainability within our own profession. We should not deny that there are important questions concerning social justice and ethics – in every field of science – including geography. The more these are discussed and the more seriously they are taken, the clearer and stronger is our scientific identity.

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