

THE 'NEW' GEOGRAPHY

Lectures and a Symposium presented to the 1977 Workshop
of the Geographical Association of Rhodesia,
Victoria Falls, August 30 - September 3, 1977.

The 'New' Geography: Overview	D. H. Davies
The Quantitative Revolution	C. C. Mutambirwa
Trends in Physical Geography	J. R. Whitlow
Perception and Mental Maps	D. H. Davies
'Relevance' in Geography	D. H. Davies
The New Geography in the Classroom: A Teachers' Symposium (Chairman: I. H. Glover)	
Reported by	R. G. Wheeler

*Produced by the Staff of the Department of Geography,
University of Rhodesia for the Geographical Association
of Rhodesia, October 1977*

D. Hywel Davies

'Relevance' in Geography may be described as a debate or movement concerned, not with the nature of the subject, but rather with the use to which it should be put; it is concerned, as it were, not with the design of the ship but with its proper compass heading. It is not a branch of Geography but rather an outlook or attitude that may permeate many if not all its recognised branches. The movement is of very recent origin - perhaps within the present decade - and it is currently fashionable in some circles. It should, perhaps, be seen in the wider context of a 'relevance' debate throughout much of the academic world at present, which asks the question 'what use is this knowledge'; for it is certainly not confined to Geography.

The term 'relevance' is not precisely defined, and appears to mean rather different things to different people, from a perceived need for rather minor curriculum changes to lobbying for political action. Broadly, however, its proponents argue that Geography as a discipline has obligations beyond the classroom: it is no longer sufficient to teach teachers to teach teachers ad infinitum. Geography, it is claimed, offers useful (spatial) perspectives and a kit of methodological tools that can assist materially in tackling some urgent real world problems, such as poverty and social injustice, that are essentially seen as socio-political in character. The spatial aspects of such problems, with which we are professionally concerned, are not unimportant and are worthy of more practical attention than they have received to date - why not, for example, research into the geography of drug abuse? In practice, however, we have only rather recently become problem-orientated at all, and have barely begun to turn our attention to problems calling for social action. Partly in consequence of our own lack of initiative, we have to date not been able to 'sell' the use of geographical methods in such areas - indeed, many would say we have been so content with a purely academic role that we have not been able to sell the subject at all as one with any practical value. In so far as human geographers (the ones perhaps most concerned) have turned to problem-solving, they have concentrated more attention in the broad field of economic geography, and here in terms of neo-classical (i.e. capitalist) economic theory based on competition and concerned with creating models on the basis of an idealised, rational 'economic man' and of idealised, smoothed spatial surfaces. In the real world, however, (it is argued) there is also Marxian economics, and many of the most urgent problems are perceived as socio-political rather than economic, but we have to date paid very little attention to them. In the view of the champions of relevance, it is time for a major change in our orientation. We must come down from our ivory tower and into the market place; we must 'become involved'.

It is interesting to speculate on some possible causes of this debate - for debate it is, with some geographers arguing for a retention of traditional research goals and a detached objectivity. In part it may derive from the conceptual and quantitative 'revolution' in general, for this has provided a shiny new power tool which some have naturally wished to put to new and wider uses. It could also be interpreted as

part of a widespread malaise in western society, some intellectual rejection of materialism and concern for third world poverty and social injustice, largely as a result of the communications revolution, which enables bread riots in one part of the world to be seen 'live' in another. With its marked leftist leanings, it may reflect a world-wide swing to radicalism and socialism, particularly among the young. In a period of academic unemployment it may in some measure simply reflect a concern that academic training should equip one for a secure job. Whatever its causes, its geographical origins in its current form certainly lie in the United States, where social concern is at its most strident as well as most recent (Commonwealth geographers, for example, have for decades been concerned to study aspects of third world poverty).

The implications of the relevance movement extend in varying degree to geography teaching and research and beyond these academic limits to a call for direct (i.e. political) action. In teaching, it means a call to redesign courses and rewrite textbooks to focus less on traditional economic scenarios and more on the social conditions and problems of the masses: to write, for example, geographies of poverty, of racial segregation and drug addiction. Research should be based (as should teaching) on 'stated social attitudes and more attention should be paid to realistic inputs than to sophisticated outputs. But, above all, according to the proponents of relevance, geographers should move directly into fields of social and political action. Some would be content with active lobbying for such causes as environmental conservation or pollution control. Such lobbies are already powerful in the United States: David Lowenthal has described how Harvard Square was left knee-deep with the discarded posters of an anti-pollution rally! Others wish to see geographers moving strongly into direct planning fields, and this, too, is happening. Others call for the direct participation of geographers in local government or even national politics. The rationale here is often that geographers are intellectually better equipped than many 'to interpret social goals in terms of planning outcomes' (Blowers, 1974).

To date 'relevance' in geography is largely equated with the politics of the radical left. This appears again and again in the language of relevance as it appears in publications such as Area. For example: '.... the embryonic revolution of social responsibility'; and in the resolutions passed at meetings, e.g., 'get out of Vietnam' and 'release Angela Dabs' (Area). It emerges even more clearly in some intemperate language about traditional geographers. Thus such 'reactionaries' are described as:

- 'the mechanics of neo-classical economic theory';
- '(showing) a cold lack of moral sensibility and human compassion!'
- 'a profession of hired mercenaries', and including
- 'fascist tycoons and wishy-washy professors pushing environmental reform so as to sidetrack the women's-student-worker revolution', (etc.)

Thus to date the relevance movement and the geography of radicalism are closely related, and there is now even a journal of radical geography, called Antipode. (Would a movement for a geography of conservation be related to right-wing politics?).

In conclusion it appears that relevance, a new trend, remains essentially a debate capable of rousing strong emotions both for and against. While its impact cannot yet be objectively assessed, it has already posed some important and 'relevant' questions. Is it particularly American, or will it spread much wider? Does relevance threaten the hitherto prized academic objectivity which is born of detachment - i.e. acquired by remaining in the ivory tower and only looking on at the market place? If it is, is the energy and drive of the movement worth the price paid in the loss of such detachment? Is it, in fact, the proper task for the academic to leave his cloisters for the market place and, if he does, how useful to society will he be there? Does the relevance debate impinge significantly upon the physical side of geography as it undeniably does on the human side? If not, does the movement contribute to imbalance between the two sides? Finally, is it a passing fashion or has it come to stay? Will the pendulum swing back or is it part of a more or less steady progression of change within contemporary geography as part of a true revolution in the discipline? Only time will tell.

REFERENCES

1. BERRY, B.J.L. 1972. 'More on relevance and policy analysis'.
Area 4,2.
2. BLOWERS, A.T. 1974. 'Relevance, research and the political process'.
Area 6,1.
3. CHISHOLM, M. 1971. 'Geography and the question of "relevance"?'
Area 3,2.
4. PRINCE, H. 1971. 'Questions of social relevance'.
Area 3,3.
5. SMITH, D.M. 1971. 'Radical geography - the next revolution?'
Area 3,3.
6. SMITH, D.M. 1973. 'Alternative "relevant" professional roles'.
Area 5,7.



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>