

Our Charge for the 1990s

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In this essay I propose to take advantage of seniority to roam at will and at large over the often-controversial panorama of geography in general and geography in Latin American studies in particular. More specifically, I want to address questions such as where did we come from? What are we doing in the here and now? Where are we going, and what are chances of getting there? All this will be a highly personal view of the situation. I would be surprised, perhaps even a bit disappointed, if the element affected by the new geography were to agree with my assessment.

Our ancestral roots, of course, go back to the once-strong traditions for regional and international studies in geography. Time was when regional geography was at or very near the core of the field, and every aspiring professional was expected to identify with both a regional as well as a systematic specialty. Thus, we already had a beginning when a wave of interest in area studies swept the country following World War II. The shock of realization that the United States was still in a parochial straight jacket with few qualified people in language, area experience and expertise, to cope with foreign peoples and cultures gave rise to vast programs to remedy our shortcomings. The government, the foundations, academia -- everybody -- tried to get into the act. The government and the foundations provided the funds and academia assumed the task of producing foreign area experts, including Latin Americanists, on a huge scale.

Interdisciplinary in makeup, the new Latin American area studies programs often lacked representation from geography. And for good reason! There simply were not enough trained geographer-Latin Americanists available. (I, for example, was thrust into the role of elder statesman 20 years before my time because of the paucity of geographers with experience and exposure in Latin America.) And so interest in Latin American geography expanded as did the establishment of centers of Latin American studies during the glory decades of the 50s, 60s and part of the 70s. Graduate students flocked to our doors, travel money was there for the asking, the god of area studies was in his place, and everything was right with the world.

It was during the heyday that the idea of creating an organization of geographer-Latinamericanists occurred to several people, some of whom are still here with us tonight. I can't cite all of them, but I do want to single out Art Burt who became a moving spirit in the establishment of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG). Incidentally, because Art is not in academia, some are inclined to forget his enormous efforts on behalf of this organization. Those of us in the Old Guard, however, remember with gratitude.

But change was in the wind even as CLAG came into being, and by the time our organization celebrated its 10th anniversary the glory days of area studies were over. Graduate students dried up as fast as the financial aid, and the question of whether organizations such as the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) and CLAG could or should survive had already arisen.

As most of you know, the dismal data on the decline of Latin American geography are well documented in the piece by Robinson and Long that appeared in the *Professional Geographer* (Robinson and Long 1989) as well as in some of the excellent papers on this same subject presented at the Association of American Geographers meetings in Toronto (April, 1990). It is scarce comfort to know that other disciplines and overseas regional specialties other than Latin America also were negatively affected by changes in

government and foundation policies. In many respects, simply because regional studies had been so close to the heart of the profession, geography suffered more than other disciplines. But what was worse, of course, were the changes within the profession vis-a-vis regional geography.

I need not remind this group that among the reasons for the decline of Latin American geography, none has been more devastating than the perception concerning all regional geography that has been created in the American geographic profession. Many of the more arrogant prophets of the new geography mounted a deliberate and conscious effort to discredit the work of regionalists by loftily dismissing it as mere compilation and so much [end p. 365] thick description. All became method and theory, form and structure. (Incidentally, most traditional geographers welcome new methods and theory provided that they are not placed on an altar and worshipped as ends in themselves, and provided that form and structure are not in lieu of content and process.) At any rate, the advocates of the new geography, like most economists, shunned associations with a particular region in order to work on "higher levels of abstraction and generalization." The need to understand the language, way of life and historical experience of regions was dismissed on the grounds that all places could be reduced to abstract space without reference to culture. In the process they made regional geography synonymous with bad geography, and they almost succeeded in destroying the rich regional tradition in our field. The jury is still out on whether the new geography had developed a viable tradition of its own, but more on this later.

What are we as geographer-Latinamericanists doing now? In an effort to answer this question, I approached a cross-section of my colleagues and graduate students at Kansas. After showing them the program of papers for this CLAG meeting, I asked them to disregard the fact that all papers focused on Latin America, and to concentrate on the systematic themes with which the papers were concerned. Then, I asked them, "What themes are absent from this CLAG program of papers that you would expect to find in a more general meeting of geographers?" Virtually all my respondents noted the paucity of physical geography; other absent themes noted by various people were insufficient emphasis on skills such as remote sensing and cartography, on internal urban structures, and on perceptions. By and large, however, my respondents indicated that there was little difference thematically between the research interests of CLAG members presenting papers at this meeting and those of professional geographers in general. The problem we face seems to stem from the perception that if people do urban geography in Rio and Mexico City, they are Latinamericanists and, therefore, regionalists and, therefore, generalists without claim to in-depth systematic know-how.

Given this state of affairs, where do we as geographer-Latinamericanists go from here? The answer depends in part (but only in part) on where the geographic profession as a whole is going. And right now, I don't know where it is going. We are rapidly losing our international dimension; regional geography has become passé; we are missing the boat on ecological and environmental studies; the interest in cultural geography continues but is puny compared to interests in geographic information systems, computer cartography and other skills that many students believe provide job security. Worse still, field work is largely neglected and so is the geographic literature that preceded the new geography. Students have scant acquaintance with the history of their discipline, and geography's intellectual giants (the Semples and Sauers and the Hettners) are disregarded to the point that current graduate students don't even know their names. The so-called cutting edge of the profession has cut itself adrift from so many of the time-honored traditions and practices that they invite questions such as, "What is the core of geography anymore? What is the indispensable minimum training that all geographers should share in common? If all places can be reduced to abstract spaces, why do we need geographers?"

I reach the end of my professional career with the impression that geography is drifting like a rudderless ship. It could fragment into a dozen lesser disciplines with everybody going his own way. Note the myriad of specialty groups in the Association of American Geographers (AAG). No observer taking note of the

chaotic variety of papers presented at the annual meetings of the AAG can help but conclude that geography is lacking in consensus as to what it has to offer. New sets of specialties are being founded around the margins of the field, often aping what other disciplines do and often do better. And the marginalists are already leaving, finding niches in situations where they feel more comfortable. Where are the Bill Garrisons and even the Brian Berrys of yesteryear? With what geography departments are they still associated? And since so much of the new geography was launched in a desperate search for scientific respectability and acceptance, it is reasonable to ask, "Is geography any stronger, any more widely accepted and respected today than it was before the revolutionary avant garde tried to cut it adrift from its traditions?"

In the face of this uncertainty and revolution, what is our charge as geographer-Latinamericanists for the 1990s? The answer is simple. Survive! Survive not only for our own sake, but as keepers of two great traditions in geography, survive for the sake of geography as a whole. Let us batten down the hatches and weather this revolutionary storm with some hope of a better day. For revolutions, whether political, economic or academic appear to share at least one trait. In their early stages, they tend to the extreme left of the old order; traditionalism is equated with heresy; and the first generation of revolutionary leaders wraps itself in a cloak of messianic or conceptual infallibility. But with the passage of time, a mellowing process set in. Both the mistakes of early stage extremism and the more positive features of the pre-revolutionary order are seen in a clearer perspective; and the **[end p. 366]** pendulum of revolution swings back to a more moderate position (check out the Russians and the East Germans). Perhaps it is only wishful thinking, but the swing back may already have begun in geography.

How do we survive? Let me begin by belaboring the obvious. My generation entered the profession as generalists, regionalists and internationalists. In terms of contemporary geography, this describes a round peg in a square hole, and most of us would have a rough time finding a job today. We lacked the sophisticated tools, training and even part of the conceptual framework that are accessible to the current generation. If today's young bloods can combine the best of what we produced with the best of the technology currently available, we shall have a new and viable breed of geographer-Latinamericanist.

Is there still room for the generalists of my generation? Some entities outside academia seem to think so. (Personally, I am doing more consulting and guest lecturing now than I ever did.) But even in academia, there is still an important role that the generalists can play in liberal education. We don't all have to be applied scientists, and to paraphrase Professor Scarpaci, we don't all have to be of the "have model, will travel" variety. People still associate geography and geographers with "place" (not economic and spatial models), and there is still room for the geographer-regionalist to impart a sense of place to students at every level of our educational system. (Incidentally, what has happened to that vast and costly material prepared primarily under the guidance of anti-regionalists and of prophets of the new geography for the High School Geography Project?)

Again to belabor the obvious, perhaps the most reliable survival tool of them all is the quality of our work. There is no technical substitute for scholarship, and real scholarship can survive the test of time, of revolutionary change and even the destructive attacks of those prophets who are "armed with contempt." Quality does not have crises of confidence, nor does it have the need to change its paradigms.

Ellen Semple's regional study of the Mediterranean is still being read for its provocative scholarship; I have a gut feeling that the contributions of Sauer and the Berkeley School may be around long after the methods and theory printouts of the present have become obsolete. As a contemporary example, Harm de Blij does not espouse the new geography and he may even be called a regionalist. But such traditionalism hasn't kept his work from winning honors from the American Geographical Society or recognition from the National Geographic Society or, most recently, from being given a position as geographer in the prestigious School of

Foreign Service at Georgetown University. At any rate, we are a minority without an affirmative action office to guarantee our place in the sun. And like all minorities we not only have to be good, we have to be obviously better than the next guy.

Other of my suggestions for survival parallel those already cited by colleagues at the Toronto meetings and need only modest elaboration. They include a special kind of dedication particularly on the part of graduate students who aspire to the label of geographer-Latinamericanist and internationalist. But this is nothing new. It never has been easy for would-be Latinamericanists and other internationalists. For example, even 45 years ago those of us at Harvard who chose to do a field problem abroad for our doctoral dissertation paid for the privilege by getting our Ph.D. two to three years later than our peers who did their research at home. The dedication may have to be especially strong today because jobs for those who are identified as Latinamericanists are few and far between. The student's best bet rests in giving emphasis to a systematic specialty in the hope that he or she can also indulge a Latin American interest.

Another survival tool is comparative studies. Let's take some of these made-in-the USA models and see if they fit or fail to fit Latin America and why. Perhaps we can learn from the mistakes of the dismal science, economics. Number-crunching Anglo economists have not achieved reality in Latin America precisely because they have disregarded both the physical environment and the historical-cultural milieu. Similarly, those among us who strain to stuff all the lands and people between the Rio Bravo del Norte and Tierra del Fuego into a single economic or spatial model are bucking reality. It may be convenient and, therefore, popular to dress Latin America in a cloak of uniformity, but that cloak is, like the wandering minstrelite, "a thing of rags and patches." Latin America may be a useful pedagogic device to emphasize a few common denominators, but it does not lend itself to the sweeping generalization and the pursuit of universals. The only universal with reference to Latin America is that there are no universals.

Some of my most promising graduate students right now are what I call "retreads." These are people who already have a degree in botany or biology or environmental studies and who want to work in Latin America. I look upon them as examples of the kind of student that we ought to encourage if we want to overcome the bias against regional geography. César Caviedes made an eloquent plea on this and related matters at Toronto, and I [end p. 369] take pleasure in paraphrasing him:

"The progressive environmental deterioration underway in many Latin American countries demands the attention of committed biographers, geomorphologists, natural hazard specialists, climatologists and hydrologists. [But]...the traditional approach to the various fields of physical geography has been lacking the human dimension needed to achieve scientific and social relevance."

What are our chances of surviving? I believe that they are better than they were 10 years ago, and they may be improving. Nor is this merely a gut feeling or wishful thinking. On the strength of a survey that I conducted among a selected group of 33 geographer-Latinamericanists, it is clear that many of you also view the future with a modicum of optimism. For example:

- 1) In terms of the future continuity of interest in the geography of Latin America at their respective institutions, 57.5 percent rated the chances Good and 42.5 percent rated them Fair.
- 2) The chances of being replaced upon retirement were rated as nil only by 12.5 percent. 88 percent rated them Good or Fair.

Partially on the basis of the survey and partially on gut feeling, I conclude that professional and related interest in the geography of Latin America bottomed out about 1985 and that since then, it has either been

holding its own or actually increasing somewhat.

The challenge facing CLAG and each of us in the 1990s looms difficult and fraught with potential frustrations, but it is not an impossible one. The proud geographic traditions of regional and international studies can continue to lure imaginative students for the same reasons that they lured my generation. I'm a geographer-Latinamericanist because I'm still fascinated by what is south of the Rio Bravo del Norte and because doing field work in Latin America is still the most fun you can have with your boots and pants on.

Finally, given my forthcoming retirement and the fact that I shall be 70 in January, I could easily justify that sad tango farewell: *Adiós muchachos, yo me voy y me resigno*. But my parents are well into their nineties and so, I make bold to predict that both CLAG and I will be around to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of this organization in the year 2000. Join us, and we'll never die!

Reference

Robinson, D.J. and B. K. Long. 1989. Trends in Latin Americanist Geography in the United States and Canada. *The Professional Geographer* 41(3):304-314.

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