

Julio E. Quan R.

Visiting Fulbright Professor, Hamline University

Geographic Method: A Latin American Perspective

All phenomena in the universe, organic or inorganic, have an origin and an end, or time relationships with other phenomena. Besides time relations all phenomena have place and spatial relations with other phenomena. In synthesis every phenomenon has a history and a geography. So, in order to understand any type of phenomenon it is necessary to utilize a method that combines time and space.

The concepts of time and space have been part of the development of the human understanding since the beginning of society. The first attempts to understand space and time were intermixed with magic and religious thinking. It took thousands of years to develop space and time as philosophical categories, as a foundation of the scientific method, apart from religious thinking.

We find space and time well developed as philosophic categories in the Mediterranean rim as early as the 5th century before Christ, as scientific method began to develop. But with the monopoly of ideology by the Catholic church during the Middle Ages, religious thinking replaced scientific and philosophical method. The categories of space and time suffered a setback because they were contrary to the established religious thinking, which was dominated by problems such as eternity and infinity and so was opposed to scientific categories of space and time.

The Arabs, being non-Christians, retained the scientific method of classical times and returned it to Europe by way of Spain. In Spain the categories of space and time were not used to explain human phenomena but to impose an economic and political system: colonialism.

During pre-Columbian times in America, the most advanced civilizations, the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas, had greatly developed their philosophic, scientific, and technical understanding of time: the Mayan calendar is a good example of this. Maps, paintings, and units of measure that have survived until today tell us about the development of their concepts of space. Even though much more research is needed in this field, we have enough evidence to assert that space and time (that means geography and history) were part of the pre-

Columbian scientific, philosophical, religious, and technical way of life that was radically changed with the European conquest.

With colonization, history and geography became tools in the hands of the colonial power. The writings of the *Cronistas* who accompanied the conquering forces were a fundamental part of the dominant structure because the ruling classes needed accurate information of what America was (space) and what was happening (time) in order to develop a coherent set of rules to dominate. History and geography were fundamental parts of the strategy for domination of the vast majority by a very few.

During the colonial era a tremendous flow of information about space and time went from America to Europe and from there, after being politically processed, was returned to America as the foundation of the process of governance and exploitation. The New Laws (*Leyes Nuevas*), introduced in America in 1542, are one of the clearest examples of how the two basic categories, time and space, were fundamental for the exercise of power by the new rulers. Where to relocate the population, to build the cities, to build the transportation system, and to grow new crops were the essence of the New Laws.

The legal dispute between Portugal and Spain concerning the conquest of America was finally settled by the Pope, who utilized a geographic approach to determine which area of America these two countries had the "right" to conquer and exploit.

The illegal dispute of the other colonial powers against Spain and Portugal was based on a very careful analysis of space on the part of such countries as England or France, which by placing a few forces in strategic locations such as Jamaica or Haiti were able to disrupt the links between the colonies and Spain. The net result of this phenomenon is that the Caribbean is a mosaic of remnants of the colonial powers.

Independence put forward another spatial problem. After the dissolution of such colonial organizations as the *virreinos*, and *capitanias generales*, it was necessary to reorganize space into different new nations. With independence, history and geography were part of the new socialization process helping to form a "national" consciousness. Geography and history were not used to resolve problems of space and time but as "disciplines" taught through the school system as part of the prevalent French positivism. Geography was transformed

from a method to a discipline. Later on, with the Liberal Revolutions that swept through Latin America reinforcing positivist philosophy a new impulse was given to geography and it became, besides a discipline, a profession.

After the independence of most of America, geographers from France, Germany, or England wrote about Latin America, and their findings were used by the neo-colonial powers to establish the foundations of economic dominance in countries that were supposedly politically independent. After the French, English, or German geographers came the French, English, or German companies to take advantage of the raw materials and markets of the new nations. Ironically for Latin America, the writings of those geographers were the basis of the geography taught as a discipline in the school system.

In the last part of the nineteenth and during the twentieth century the most important power external to Latin America has been the United States. From the early days of the Monroe Doctrine to the strategic defense of the Panama Canal, to the defense of the Western Hemisphere we see the application of spatial political categories as excuses for the intervention of the United States in the political and economic affairs of the Latin American nations. The different invasions of the United States Army in Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, or the overthrow of the Arbenz and Allende regimes, or the blockade of Cuba, the Andean Pact, or the Central American Common Market are just a few of the examples of the use of spatial knowledge in the application of political, economic, or social decisions at the international level.

At the national level the two most important forces, the government and private enterprise, base their decisions for planning on a geographical approach. Where the roads, schools, ports, and air ports are to be built, or whether to have or not to have an agrarian reform are all political decisions based on space.

On the other hand, the revolutionary movements in Latin America are very rich in the use of space, from the *foco* theory of Ché Guevara to the location of Fidel Castro's forces in the Sierra Maestra to the places where the Sandinistas attacked Somoza, there are but a few examples of how space is of fundamental importance for revolutionary strategy and tactics.

In synthesis, we find a tremendous use of the concepts of space by governments, private enterprise, and revolutionary movements, but it is a use that has been little or not at all systemized by Latin American or Latin Americanist

geographers. A fantastic amount of theoretical work is ahead; unfortunately very little is being done now.

What I am proposing here is for the study of space to become a discipline and not a method, and especially for the creation of professional geographers. The development of geography as a method is nothing but a fetus trapped by geographers in their discipline and in geography as a profession. It is essential that we change this. It is fundamental that we rescue space and time as the basic philosophical categories that should be part of any analysis of the different forms of matter, whether it be rocks, vegetation, population, economy, or politics. For geographers interested in the real development of geography, much philosophical and scientific research is needed in our field, because for centuries geography, as a discipline, has been used as part of domination by ruling classes.

Finally, once space is clearly understood and its introduction into the political, social, economic, and environmental way of thinking and doing is resolved, a new ethical decision has to be made by geographers: Where and by whom is our work going to be used? Is it going to be used to oppress or liberate? Are we going to side with the exploited or with the exploiters? Are we going to be part of the solution of the environmental, economic, social, political, and cultural problems, or are we going to be part of the problem? That is our challenge.