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John Agnew

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# Of canons and fanons

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## Abstract

As a field, geography has always been a prisoner of its times, no more obviously so than today. Texts from the past fail to speak to today's concerns. Now we are more interested in the fashionable than in the canonical.

## Keywords

canon, fanon, historicism, intellectual authority, knowing, state power

I have always thought that one of the great advantages of 'geography' as a field with which students and academics identify themselves is the absence of the sort of theological canon (for the origin of the word lies in theology) that dominates in such fields as economics, political science, and sociology. Those disciplines always strike me as locked into the worlds of the 18th and 19th centuries in which they first emerged as modern areas of study. Their founders have left long shadows that are not always very productive in understanding the present. As something of a historicist when it comes to questions of 'knowing', I do not find arguments between neo-Weberians and neo-Durkheimians about moral order, or those over whether the Marx of *Capital Volume I* still offers the secret key for understanding just-about-everything, very enlightening when applied to the contemporary world. That said, a nodding familiarity with the 'classics' of a field certainly serves to avoid the reinvention of the wheel or the reinstatement of questionable positions that more open-ended fields like geography can occasionally exhibit.

It appears to me that the problem for geography with respect to its intellectual heritage is threefold.

The first two arguments that I briefly discuss here are about the reasons we do not have a canon. The third I propose is that we may have something different and perhaps worse: an obsession with the 'novel' and the 'fashionable'. The first involves the question of the determining effects of historical-geographical contexts for the texts that could possibly count as canonical. The second is the question of intellectual consensus in a notoriously fragmented field. Finally, one may argue that in the absence of much agreement on a canon, the field has become highly subject to sweeps of fashion or 'fanons' (a term I am coining with apologies to the great dependency theorist Frantz Fanon and users of papal vestments).

Much of what went for 'geography' in the late 19th century was a combination of environmental determinism, the enumeration of simple geographic facts about places and peoples, and the exploration

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of exotic locales by heroic individuals. Given that most of us have moved away from defining geography as it then was, why should we find the main texts from that period (e.g. Ratzel, Mackinder, or Semple) to be of persisting intellectual rather than simply antiquarian significance? Just as the travelogues of Richard Burton no longer speak to most of us except as an example of an imperialist and Eurocentric mindset, Mackinder's geographical pivot of history offers little for understanding an era when geopolitics is increasingly about control of financial flows and less and less about command of territory. Ratzel and Mackinder, for example, were deeply involved in the inter-imperial rivalry of the period. Knowing about that can help us understand their perspectives and the history of geography as a discipline, but what real relevance do their writings have for understanding today's world? I would say, little or none.

Apart from its typically rather informal connection to European empire building, at least outside of Germany and France, academic geography never had much of the direct connection to state- and nation-building that gave such powerful impetus to political science and economics as relatively new fields in the western universities of the late 19th century. Their canonical unity rested initially and ultimately on the functions they came to perform for state political, administrative, and economic purposes. Geography's very global scope setting it apart, the subject fit uneasily into the analytically defined academic division of labour of the modern university. What was its 'variable'? Was it 'region', 'place', 'space', or 'human-environment interaction'? Well, at one time or another and in different places, it was one or all of these, depending on which authority you might choose to rely. The field's relative lack of connection to state building proved its Achilles' Heel. Those recent geographers who see academic geography as a handmaiden to state power and empire building miss the degree to which it was in fact a marginalized field with limited influence beyond that exercised by a few individuals like Bowman in the United States. We should beware of exaggerating the field's real influence in the past as in the present. Contrary to what the essay implies, there has been no decline from

grace (Keighren et al., 2012). In the absence of external political pressure, there was never any incentive to impose a central core of, say, cartographic analysis, on what long remained a dilettantish field without much connection to seats of power.

The absence of much external selective pressure until recently to emphasize this or that definition of the field has meant that geography has never had much intellectual unity as a discipline since the retreat from physical-environmental determinism in the mid-20th century. Even in its heyday that heady brew never inebriated everyone. Various efforts to reunify the field on methodological grounds – using quantitative methods, employing spatial analysis – have proven futile. The recent rapprochement between the 'sides' of geography over the human dimensions of global climate change and various environmental questions offers renewed hope for greater communality. This notwithstanding, at the postgraduate level in particular the field has long exhibited a high degree of substantive and methodological fission. Academic geographers typically identify more with a subfield than with the field as a whole. The Complete Geographer is as rare today as the Compleat Angler. To the extent that there are canons, therefore, they exist within subfields wherein students are inducted, as in economic geography, into the mysteries of a central place theory that no one really believes in anymore, or, as in cultural geography, students are expected to be *au fait* with Carl Sauer's approach to the morphology of landscape, even though their teachers have long abandoned that approach for something completely different. The canon is used to show how far we have come rather than to suggest continuing relevance.

In the absence of much by way of a discipline-wide canon, geography has been particularly subject to what might be called 'fanons': the tendency to lurch from one intellectual fashion to another without much attention to what came before. Many graduate students see little or no point in reading the 'old stuff' when the rewards come from being up-to-date with the latest imported ideas from other fields that they then bend to their own purposes. The canonical vacuum leaves little alternative. Some of this can be put down to the contemporary age of

celebrity in which some people are simply famous for being famous. We are all increasingly fans of opening acts (Foucault, Latour et al.) more than self-critical intellectuals or scholars building on sources from within our own 'tradition'. So, writers, typically non-geographers who have some fugitive but golden nugget of spatiality hidden deeply in their writings, are exploited to provide novel agenda-setting articles for some fashionable and potentially profitable gloss on some 'problem' not necessarily of obvious geographical relevance. I think that the current administrative emphasis within universities on 'innovation' and 'newness' is also at least partly responsible. This serves to detract from reexamining 'old' or 'new' problems with reinterpretations of 'old' sources. These days,

the 'old' simply does not count. We now only value research orientations – in one memorable turn of phrase I recall from a colleague – that involve 'citing new books in hardback from other fields that the rest of us read only later in paper'. Needless to say, those hardbacks are not reprints of anything we might define as the 'classics' of geography itself. Geography needs a canon but for various reasons cannot have one, and we are left with fanons. This is our dilemma.

### References

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