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The struggle over geography: Prospects for advancing public pedagogy

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Abstract

This commentary is sympathetic to Murphy's (2013) call for more 'grand regional narrative' in a public key. However, by failing to recognise the root causes of, and prevailing obstacles to, change, his call risks being purely declarative. I argue that only a few, typically established, geographers will be willing and able to occupy the ideational territory currently populated by the likes of Robert Kaplan. Even so, a few is better than none, and I also argue that teaching offers a more feasible, if indirect, arena in which public thinking about world geography can be shaped in ways consistent with Murphy's vision.

Keywords

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Abstract This commentary is sympathetic to Alec Murphy's (2013) call for more 'grand regional narrative' in a public key. However, by failing to recognise the root causes of, and prevailing obstacles to, change his call risks being purely declarative. I argue that only a few, typically established, geographers will be willing and able to occupy the ideational territory currently populated by the likes of Robert Kaplan. Even so, a few is better than none, and I also argue that teaching offers a more feasible, if indirect, arena in which public thinking about world geography can be shaped in ways consistent with Murphy's vision.

Keywords Public pedagogy, geographical knowledges, academic freedom

... the work of education takes place in a range of ... spheres such as advertising, television, film, the internet and the popular press. Rather than invalidate the importance of schooling, it extends the sites of [learning] ... The concept of 'public pedagogy' underscores ... the central importance of formal spheres of education that, unlike their popular counterparts ... must provide citizens with those ... capacities, ... literacies, knowledges and skills that enable them to both read the world critically and participate in shaping and governing it. Henry Giroux (2004: 77).

Though he never uses the term, Alec Murphy's essay is squarely focussed on public pedagogy. Who, he asks, is currently shaping people's thinking about 'world regions'? Implicitly, the people in question comprise a diverse group of sub-publics based largely in North American and Europe, though found elsewhere too. These publics are dominated by university graduates and occupy the professions (teaching, the law, public administration, accountancy, management etc.). Typically, they read 'quality newspapers' and not a little non-fiction in their spare time. Alec rightly remarks that, when seeking enlightenment about regions of global importance, they are obliged to turn to authors who write about geography (the subject) absent any involvement in Geography (the discipline). Americans are especially prominent here, and command a readership that transcends national boundaries (think Robert Kaplan, Samuel Huntington or Thomas Friedman). They engage in the struggle over geography from which, as Edward Said famously and correctly observed, none of us is free. "That struggle", to repeat Said's well-known words, "is complex and interesting because it's not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (1994: ?). Alec asks why, when it comes to 'grand regional narratives', professional geographers have been largely absent from the battlefield. He offers few answers, preferring to focus on the problem of absence and to highlight how a greater presence might be achieved in the years ahead. Stimulating though his essay is, it proposes a cure having identified the symptoms of a metaphorical illness without much sense of its root causes. In this all-too-short commentary I want to speculate about what explains the problem Alec identifies. I then explore how far his calls for change constitute a medicine unlikely to have the desired effect on more than a few. First, though, let me situate and summarise his argument. As will become clear, I write as a sympathetic critic.

Alec's essay is a further attempt to shape our understanding of what 'public geography' could be. I say further attempt because, nearly a decade ago, he helped to initiate a debate about the causes and consequences of academic Geography's relative invisibility in most of the contemporary public spheres we can conceive of (Murphy *et al.* 2005). This debate has, of necessity, been highly normative. I should know, I've been an occasional participant (Castree, 2006). In various ways it's been argued that 'we' need a 'public geography' as much as our addressees, not least because public geography is actually alive and well – it's just that we're not usually involved, and that, in the hands of others, it's all too often demotic. Alec draws comparison with the battlefield of history, where the likes of Niall Ferguson, Simon Schama and Tristan Hunt have commanded sizeable public audiences. With these historians' success in mind, his *Dialogues* paper insists that many of us can and should write for the constituencies that the likes of Kaplan, Huntington or Friedman do – in large part because we have the potential to offer a range of 'better' representations of world regions than those found in a book like *The revenge of geography* (Kaplan, 2012). Alec offers us three snapshots of such alternative depictions. Too few geographers offer 'big picture' analysis, Alec argues, and hardly any of these address the interested general reader, preferring to write for their peers or else for degree students. He attributes this to contemporary geographers' preference for small-scale, local level studies – itself partially the result of criticisms of 'meta-narratives' in the social sciences and humanities voiced powerfully from the mid-1980s. We might also note a preference for 'theory' in its several forms, and not a little philosophy, in some quarters. Alec posits a counter-factual: if geographers had not left such a vacuum, the likes of Kaplan would not so easily have commanded a public audience for their disquisitions on China, India, the Middle East etc. He acknowledges that most individual geographers would be taking a risk if producing 'grand regional narratives' became their new *modus operandi*. But he ends on a hopeful note, pointing to the efforts of precedent-setters like William Moseley and his sometime co-author Harm de Blij. In Alastair Bonnett's (2003) terms, for Alec it's desirable *and* possible to revive Geography as a 'world discipline' designed to illuminate the intricate dynamics of places, peoples and environments at all points of the compass.

I see the value in more of us committing to Alec's agenda, as I'm sure several other readers of his essay will do. The sort of research, writing and lecturing he has in mind could be highly rewarding in all senses of that word, both for individual geographers and the wider discipline their actions serve to reproduce. As my Henry Giroux epigram implies, it would also be rewarding for civil society because, as Alec argues, the work of geographical education outside universities is too often simplistic and often-times fosters fatalism, prejudice and antipathy. As a regular reader of *New Left Review* – one place where essay-length grand regional narratives are routinely published (by people like Alec's brother, R. Taggart Murphy!) – I've often wondered why me and most of my peers no longer regard such work as a core part of our mission. I also have powerful positive memories of a whole year undergraduate module I took in the late 1980s. It was designed and delivered by Tony

Lemon, of Oxford University, and titled 'Southern Africa'. Tony spent some part of almost every year of his professional life in the region about which he taught. His course was a heady mix of history and geography that obliged me to consider a complex, often tattered and barely sustainable, weave of European colonialism, political economy, migration, state power, racism, international relations, militarism, natural resources, and much more besides. Why is it no longer *de rigeur* to research and teach about 'areal differentiation' on a grand scale? And can things really be changed?

The second question can, of course, only be answered if a perspicuous response is offered to the first beforehand. Here, I'm afraid, Alec offers us little help. His comments about the 'chilling effect' of the post-prefixed approaches that came into their own through the 1990s imply that the problem we face is 'group think'. Despite academic Geography's remarkable diversity, I do agree with Alec that there is (though he doesn't use this term) a 'structure of feeling' abroad, that is "... characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone" (Williams, 1977: 132). This structure cross-cuts our diverse pursuits as scholars and teachers. Most of us choose to be specialists in some way – topically, theoretically, or empirically – and most of us resist the attractions of Alec's grand regional narratives (such as they are). However, the 'choice' to take the risk that Alec rightly acknowledges to be real is far more constrained than he implies – at least in North America and Britain, whose higher education systems I know fairly well. It's as if Alec believes academic freedom is something able to elude its institutional structuring, which I'm quite sure he does not. To be specific: I suspect that the reason why more professional geographers do not make good on Alec's agenda is that our discipline's structure of feeling exists not only in practitioners' heads but is insinuated into the systems of progression, reward and recognition that are both our own creation and yet regulatory forces appearing to stand over against us.

David Harvey's recent 'public turn' is arguably a case in point. Since his book *The New Imperialism* (2003) he's tried to make his own big picture predilections perform work outside the academy, and with some success. In this endeavour he's not only authored a string of new titles, but created an impressive website and committed to numerous speaking engagements without as much as within university campuses. But he's arguably been able to do all this only because of his absolute institutional security as a world-renowned tenured professor. Most of the rest of us might consider it too much of a risk to emulate Harvey in whatever way we see fit. The risk only becomes tolerable for more than a few if the just mentioned systems of progression, reward and recognition create a safer operating space for the kind of work Alec commends. That requires a collective rethink of what sort of work we value in Geography, and shows Alec's implicit focus on individuals 'choosing' to take a public turn to be rather too narrow.¹ It also, in my view, shows why

¹Indeed, Harvey aside, some other individuals I can think of in Geography who write or lecture in a public register about 'big issues' have enjoyed a position neither central nor entirely secure in academia. Gray Brechin, author of the magisterial *Imperial San Francisco* (1999), is a journalist with only a foot in Berkeley's

similar injunctions made by Ron Johnston 30 years ago failed to have much of an impact, as evidenced by the so-called 'new regional geography' of the period which attracted few serious supporters once position-pieces like Johnston's had set many heads nodding.

There are also mundane practical issues to be considered that I'm sure Alec would want to acknowledge. It almost seems trite to enumerate them but here goes anyway. First, producing authoritative and sophisticated grand regional narratives requires a lot of time. That's true of all research, of course, but the time in question here is rather particular: it is time in the field, rather than only or largely in libraries or archives. One of the reasons a book like Kaplan's *The revenge of geography* is so intellectually impoverished is that he clearly lacks a textured understanding of most places outside the USA. Given current institutional and financial constraints, who among us can spend weeks, let alone months, in far-flung places? Second, and relatedly, to develop the linguistic and cultural skills to understand the why and wherefore of life in regions that may not be one's own requires huge consistency and focus over a long period. Maintaining consistency and holding a focus can be very hard, especially when so many other pressures and enticements cause us to research and write other things for other audiences than those Alec commends. Thirdly, as Bonnett (2003) intimated, the post-colonial critique of how 'otherness' and 'difference' were routinely assimilated and erased by geographers in years gone by have surely made many nervous about speaking about – which is to say at some level speaking *for* – regions beyond 'the West'. It's true that Anglophone Geography is far more culturally diverse and gender-balanced than a generation ago. But ongoing debates about the discipline's persistent Anglocentricism and 'whiteness' suggest enduring problems many practitioners are happy to acknowledge but less able to address for fear of failing in their endeavour. Finally, if Alec's analysis is correct, the sheer paucity of people currently willing and able to author grand regional narratives creates real inertia: how are we to learn the skills, and where are we to turn to, if Alec's aspirations for Geography are to be realised? His claim that professional geographers can offer a usefully 'different' view of global regions is one I'd like to believe. However, it may be a hopeful one given that we have few powerful recent precedents to inspire the professional 'adjustment' he calls for. For the backstory to much of what I've just said readers can usefully consult James Sidaway's recent *Annals* essay (Sidaway, 2012).

In light of all this is there any real prospect of Alec's aspirations for more grand regional narrative being realised in practice? As my comments have made clear, I suspect only a few will feel able to act on his injunctions. Like Harvey they will typically be established mid- or late-career people. *But* even a few people like this could contribute a lot to Alec's agenda for change. Piecemeal, rather than systemic, adjustments to publishing practices could prove useful. Where I see space for rather more people to write and speak

Geography Department; then there's Nick Middleton, English documentarian and author, who has been at Oxford University's School of Geography for 30 years though remains a college, not University, employee.

about world regions is in the realm of teaching, which Alec mentions in passing. Let me elaborate briefly with reference to the British situation. Education here is undergoing rapid change at all levels, and in Geography schools and universities are having cause to ask big questions about the content and aims of 'a geographical education'. British geography degrees are chock-full of thematic modules. Some rebalancing is required, if only to prevent students seeing the world as a set of 'case studies' in which China, Brazil, Russia or Mexico become mere metonyms for one or other 'issue' (e.g. modernisation, corruption, or environment degradation). It tells you a lot that many of the exam questions I see as an external examiner of British Geography degrees instruct students to 'illustrate with examples'. What sort of geographical imagination requires directing towards the spatial differences it purports to be interested in?! At any one time over 20000 18-21 year olds take single or joint honours degrees in Britain: that's 200000 members of the sub-public Alec has in mind every decade. Providing these individuals with modules that offer deep insights into the why and wherefore of life in the Middle East, North America or South East Asia is an important act of public pedagogy. These modules, especially at an introductory level, are far easier to create on the basis of desk research than the sort of authoritative works of public scholarship Alec has in mind. In addition, there's little professional risk in offering them, since one can continue on with one's normal research concurrently.

In sum, I share Alec Murphy's hope that more geographers can make world regions a focus of their concern. But structural reform to Geography's reward and recognition systems will be required to make good on his agenda for change. In the meantime, one can only hope more than a few individuals are so minded to resist the allures of theory, case studies, topical specialisation, and all the rest.

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2. = Williams, R. (1977) *Marxism and literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

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