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## THE COGNITIVE RENAISSANCE IN AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY: THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF A MOVEMENT

Geographical cognition (environmental perception) has swept into American geography in the last decade. Books of readings variously entitled "spatial cognition", "environmental cognition", have been followed by bibliographic essays in *Progress in Geography*, and by two or three-author works attempting initial synthesis. The sequence is familiar and heralds a new field, approach, or paradigm. Whether this is a "cognitive reformation" (Burton et al., 1974), "the post-behavioral revolution" (Kasperson, 1971) or the renaissance of a school of thought, it behooves us as historians of geography to ask questions about cognition that have not been answered in the literature. In whose writings is the cognitive approach first recognizable in American geography? What were the philosophical and intellectual stimuli for these early expressions of cognition in geography? Were there any major forerunners of the cognition movement that developed in the 1960s? When did they appear and in what intellectual situations? This paper presents some tentative and preliminary answers.

### THE FIRST PHASE 1920-1926

The crest of the first cognitive wave occurred in 1925-1926 in the writings of John K. Wright and, to a lesser extent, in those of Carl Sauer. Both were disillusioned with American geography's interest in environmental determinism and physical geography. To American geographers largely trained in the physical sciences both of them advocated the importing of proven continental European emphases, notably the historical and humanistic methods of French and, to a lesser extent, German geography. Passages in Sauer's early work reveal his efforts to see and evaluate regions in the American West, particularly the grasslands, through the eyes of settlers. He advocated and produced studies of regions whose cultural landscape was the expression of a succession of assessments of the land by cultural groups. At times in *Morphology*

of *Landscape* (1925) there are echoes of the Vidalian quest in the French *pays* studies to get inside the mind of a region and to interpret it sympathetically. Explicitly at one point, a Sauer influenced by Benedetto Croce makes it clear that a cultural landscape is not an objective three-dimensional reality that can be studied only by the scientific method. It consisted of the three traditional dimensions but also quality and time. This addition of aesthetic and historical dimensions demanded the adoption of both the humanistic approach and the philosophic stance of Croce's idealism: knowledge gives birth to the world, landscape does not exist apart from mind, and hence must be appreciated from a subjective viewpoint.

It would be remiss to over-exaggerate the importance of these outliers of the cognitive approach in Sauer's early writings for they are often counterbalanced by statements that smack of positivism and historicism. *Morphology of Landscape* reveals the ambiguities and philosophical confusion of a young man searching for a new definition of the field and a new method. Through a glass darkly one detects an implicit cognitive approach.

There was no such ambiguity in the thinking of John K. Wright or in the cognitive approach to geography that he advocated in 1925-1926. As an undergraduate Wright brought to Harvard a habit of seeing and feeling times and places through the eyes and minds of the historian and explorer. In a word he was perhaps unconsciously an idealist before becoming aware of what that meant as a Harvard graduate student in history. His dissertation (1920), published later as *Geographical Lore at the Time of the Crusades* (1925) attempted to reconstruct the geographical cognition of Europeans, their conceptions of the world, true and false, their cosmology and cosmogony, their regional and physical knowledge, their attitudes to nature and mountains, and their appreciation of landscape and scenery. In one work Wright provided a model and method for studies in geographical cognition that is still unrivalled.

From 1920 onwards Wright's crusade for the cognitive approach was pushed further in a score of items in the "Geographical Review" concerning such topics as "Geographical Conceptions of a Primitive People", "Aboriginal Geography", "The Geography of Dante", "Chinese Geography of the West in Antiquity", to explorers' misconceptions of Australia, the Americas and Africa, and to the works of French geographers, some of whom he had met and heard lecture while he was in France. The crusade culminated in the publication of *Geographical Lore* and with two programmatic statements to the AAG and the History of Science Society in 1925. Taking as his inspiration von Humboldt's second volume of *Cosmos*, Wright in *A Plea for the History of Geography* advocated the study of nonscientific geography: that written by travelers and those with a geographical sense. In *History of Geography: A Point of View* he encouraged geographers to study the environmental, national, and cultural setting of geographical ideas, and the world views of different peoples as a key to their geographical behavior.

No sooner had the first wave crested in 1926 when it died, as a direct result of the sudden paradigm change in American geography from environmental determinism to chorology. Only Whittlesey, who was later to join Wright in revivifying the cognitive movement in the 1940s, showed any interest among AAG members in

Wright's papers in 1926 (Wright, personal communication, 1960). Sauer's *Morphology of Landscape* became an important intellectual stimulus for an American brand of regional geography, ahumanistic and ahistorical—of which Sauer increasingly disapproved. To make the rejection of the first cognitive wave by American regional geography complete, Wright's attempt to write an American regional monograph in the French mold, was aborted by Isaiah Bowman in the early 1930s (Wright, personal communication, 1960).

#### THE SECOND PHASE 1941 - 1949

The cognitive approach was revived by Carl Sauer and John K. Wright who both made important statements in 1941. Both were in their own ways reacting to what Sauer called "The Great Retreat":—regional geography as practised in the U.S. in the 1930s and its philosophic justification in Hartshorne's *Nature of Geography* (1939). In his presidential address to the AAG *Foreword to Historical Geography* (1941) Sauer preached what he had been practising in his Mexican work: sympathetic understanding of groups and times past that led to reconstruction of the "personality" of the region. In this he reflected the influence of the Vidalian school of French geography and the Welsh school of anthropogeography (Fox, Fleure) but above all the influence of Boas and the cultural relativists in American anthropology to whom he had been introduced by Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber. Unwilling to follow the relativists to the extreme position of evaluating a culture in terms of its own values, Sauer and many of his students in the Berkeley School did follow them to the point of envisaging the environmental situation and belief systems that framed their *genre de vie* and resultant landscape.

As in the 1920s so in the 1940s, what was implicit in Sauer's approach was explicit in Wright's. In 1941 Wright presented a program, ostensibly for the study of exploratory behavior but with obvious application for geography as a whole. His threefold approach to behavior suggested that geographers (I) reconstruct the cognized world that framed behavior; (II) compare the perceived with the real; and (III) assess the influence of particular experiences and changes in knowledge on world views. There followed a series of papers showing how subjectivity, personal biases and predilections and human nature impinge on all work in the sciences and the humanities. The crest of the second cognitive wave occurred in 1947 in Wright's presidential address to the AAG: *Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography*. Wright defended subjectivity in geography, the cultivation of the periphery, and the inclusion of the humanities as a critical element in American geography. Furthermore in a major advance from his position in the 1920s he proposed the study of "historical geosophy": "the geographical ideas, both true and false of all manner of people". The statement was truly revolutionary in advocating the study of the individual and his conceptions and in effect opening up the border zone between geography and the behavioral sciences.

Whittlesey's *Horizon of Geography* (1945) with its elaboration of man's closed and open conceptions of space, was an important addition to the literature in this

period, as was Ralph Brown's *Mirror for Americans* (1943) which took Wright's model and method in *Geographical Lore* and applied it to the Eastern Seaboard 1790-1810, and Brown's *Historical Geography of the United States* (1948) which succeeded in weighing the effectiveness of beliefs as against actuality in the settlement of the Great Plains and the Eastern Seaboard.

Classic studies by "geographers" with affiliations outside American geography also contributed to the groundswell of cognitive studies. Notable among these men was Erich Zimmermann, a resource economist influenced by cultural relativists, who presented a cultural theory of resources in which knowledge was seen as the greatest resource and as necessary to the existence of resources. His *World Resources and Industries* (1951, revised edn.) was used as a text by many economic geographers in the next decade.

The sociologist Walter Firey's classic *Land Use in Central Boston* (1946) pointed out to urban geographers that their socio-economic models of city structure failed to take cognizance of the symbolic values attached to place by different groups. James C. Malin in *Grassland of North America* (1947) told historical geographers and historians that in assessing and interpreting grasslands they must learn to think like one. Similarly Aldo Leopold in *Sand County Almanac* (1949) advocated "thinking like a mountain" to build a land ethic that would ensure long-term survival of the environment.

In the late 1940s a period in which American geography was looking for new directions, and in which there was growing dissatisfaction with the practice of regional geography, the cognitive approach thrived. But by the early 1950s the old spatial (container) paradigm had been replaced by a new one, concerned with distribution, localization and the nodal region (Hartshorne, 1950). Studies in cognition faded from view as witnessed by *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect* (1954) which overlooks the movement completely.

#### THE THIRD PHASE 1959-1976

The third cognitive wave was initiated by the students and disciples of Wright and Sauer. At the University of Nebraska in the late 1950s a new group of historical geographers inspired by Wright, attempted to reconstruct evaluations of the dry-land environment and to assess the consequences as expressed in land utilization (Bowden, 1959; 1969; 1975; 1976; Heathcote, 1959; 1965). At the same time occasional essays with a cognitive dimension by members of the Berkeley School began to appear in *Landscape*. Lowenthal's *Geography, Experience and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology* (1961) made explicit much of what Wright had left implicit in *Terrae Incognitae* fourteen years earlier but also drew attention to an extensive psychological literature dealing with perception and cognition. The essay acted as a rallying point for humanistic and historical cultural geographers of the Berkeley and Historical Geosophy groups. Work in geographical cognition increased in the early sixties as the new positivistic locational mainstream became fascinated by mathematical models and quantitative methods.

Geographers became aware of work in kindred fields, notably Firey's *Man, Mind and the Land* (1960), Boulding's *The Image* (1956), Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960) and Hall's *Silent Language* (1959). The Chicago environmental management groups were, in their hazard studies the first of the non-humanists to adopt the cognitive dimension (White, 1961; Kates, 1962). They were followed by innovators operating in the locational tradition (Wolpert, 1964).

The third wave crested in 1965-1966 with publication of a plethora of articles and collected papers, including the reissue in paperback of Wright's *Geographical Lore* and a book of Wright's collected essays (*Human Nature in Geography*, 1966). In the late 1960s, the cognition movement grew rapidly as geographers turned away from the locational paradigm. The cognitive approach was accepted into the previously nonhumanistic mainstream of American geography in the early 1970s with a forecast that "the geography of the 1970s will be a geography of humanism and of values" (Kasperson, 1971, p. 12; Buttimer, 1974).

#### CONCLUSION

There were two early outliers of the cognition movement in American geography with peaks in the mid 1920s and the mid 1940s. These and the third movement which began to peak in the late 1960s originated in the humanistic and historical studies of John K. Wright and Carl Sauer. The ultimate source of the cognitive approach to geography found in the writings of Wright and Sauer was early twentieth-century idealism derived from Croce and certain German idealists. Indirectly both Wright and Sauer received this influence from work of the French humanistic geographers in the 1920s and from the cultural and historical relativists in the late 1930s and 1940s. Each cognitive wave crested in a transition period when American geography was searching for a new paradigm. The difference between the first two and the last movements was that the dominant social science group (mainstream) in American geography rejected the addition of the cognitive dimension in the late 1920s and early 1950s but accepted it from the humanist group in the late 1960s.

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