Hooson, David

National Rootedness and the Variable Success of World Geography

Organon 20 21, 205-207

1984 1985

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

David Hooson (USA)

NATIONAL ROOTEDNESS AND THE VARIABLE SUCCESS OF WORLD GEOGRAPHY*

Throughout the world, proper understanding of the role and value of geography is remarkably uneven. While in some fortunate countries it has a secure, easily recognizable and vital role in national life and thought, there are as many others where it seems ominously invisible. The general question which arises here, and in the whole symposium, is what seems to account for such startling differences? What seem to be the factors which create a fertile soil for the deep-rooted perennial growth in a particular country of an effective geographical approach in the academy and among the educated public alike– a soil that does not erode away under competitive and ideological pressures?

While it seems clear that more and more of the problems we face as world citizens have a strong and to us obvious geographical component, the paradox is that in some important countries, for example the United States, the status and recognition of geography as a discipline has actually been declining in recent years. But since it is clearly difficult to summon up enthusiasm for investigating the history of a subject unless one is convinced of its present and future value, I should emphasize that I think that the geographical approach is becoming more indispensable than ever for understanding our world and its problems and that the cost to us of geographical ignorance is immeasurable.

Fortunately there are some countries, large and small, where geography is well understood and appreciated and enhances the personal and national life of the people. Comparative histories of national geographies, revealing such things as preoccupation with theories which turned out to be dead-ends, competition from neighboring disciplines and the influence of the historical

* Read at the I.G.U. Symposium on the History of Geographical Thought in Geneva, Switzerland, August 1984.

context, priorities, environments and place in the world of the countries involved, should provide some of the clues to understanding the national discrepancies. In such comparative studies, it may be hoped that the less "successful" nations in this respect can gain light from the experience of the more successful.

It is in this context that I will attempt to examine the record of success or failure of various national geographies in the hope of throwing light on their international image and role. I will concentrate on four countries which are of prime importance and with which I have developed considerable acquaintance over the years. Although I was born and educated in Britain, I have lived and worked in Canada and the United States for the past quarter-century, mainly studying developments in Russia and the Soviet Union, while throughout this time France has been on my geographical horizon and close to my heart.

In the French case, my conclusion is that the rootedness of the subject which was so securely and sensibly established by the convergence of several propitious influences in the late nineteenth century, is still a key factor in keeping it in the public consciounsness and in the academy. The traditions are there—humane, ecological, historical, regional and literary—and should ensure that the discipline there largely remains the international success story that it has been throughout this century.

The importance of the early and secure establishment of geographical roots in the consciousness of a people and in response to long-term local conditions, needs and perceptions is also confirmed, to my mind, by the Russian experience in remarkably telling way. In spite of the extraordinarily disrupting effect of the Stalin period, which had the effect of almost transmuting geography into a physical science while strictly separating the physical and human sides, the strength and appropriateness of the pre-Soviet Russian traditions has played a crucial part in enabling post-Stalin Soviet geography to recover a good measure of its former breadth and balance, in spite of the different political climate. Similarly the deep and rich traditions of German geography must have been instrumental in their successful revival after the devastating effects of the Nazi Geopolitik period.

Though the specifics of the traditions and historical context were very different, geography in Britain had taken its place firmly in the universities and, perhaps even more important, in the schools, by the end of the nineteenth century. These traditions have proved sufficiently broad and secure to override certain temporary aberrations and to account for the relatively healthy state of geography there today. This health may well be reflected in part in the strength of geography in such countries as Nigeria, New Zealand, or Canada, the latter also benefiting from the French tradition.

The situation in the United States in much less satisfactory, particularly if one takes into account the enormous potential, considering that it has come to lead the world in most branches of scientific research and is

called upon to take the lead in many spheres of world affairs, generally. Alone among the "developed" countries, geography is actually unrepresented in several of the most prestigious universities, and even in most of the high schools as a subject of any recognizable independence. Although the causes of this situation are complicated, an important pointer seems to lie in the fact the theories and approaches espoused in the formative stages of the modern discipline at the outset of this century—chiefly environmental determinism and "cycle" geomorphology—were subsequently disowned by the profession at large. The resulting lack of tried and true traditions, or rootedness compared with the countries noted above, or even with neighboring Canada, may well account in large measure for the hazy and insecure image of American geography today. Moreover, in view of the leading role in the world increasingly accorded to American research and scholarship, the situation in America cannot fail to be of vital concern to the international community of geographers, and help us to discern the roots of our successes, failures and potential.