

You Can't Argue with Geography | Foreign Policy Research Institute

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I suppose I am an old-fashioned teacher. My subject — diplomatic history and international relations— could not be further removed from the avant-garde of post-modern cultural studies. My methodology is traditional, centering on the critical interpretation of documentary evidence and the logic of cause and effect in the belief that facts exist and falsehood, if not perfect truth, is discoverable. My lectures and books are in narrative form, because in political history sequence is critical to understanding why decision-makers acted or reacted as they did. And my assignments require students to demonstrate knowledge of at least the most important names, dates, and events because concepts and theories are empty unless one knows what factual evidence inspired them and what phenomena they are advanced to explain.

Old-fashioned, demanding, some would say boring— and yet, my courses in diplomatic history draw hundreds of students. Evidently, the collegiate consumers of history, not to mention the book-buying public, find more value and enjoyment in rigorous studies of the origins of wars and peace than in speculative studies of, for instance, the “gendering” of gravestones in 17th century France. The downside of having large classes, however, is that the only students I get to know personally are those who come to my office hours and voluntary discussion sections. So it was that I was taken aback when one anonymous face from my 19th century European diplomacy lectures visited my office accompanied by a big and decidedly businesslike black Labrador dog. I was about to make a joke, or a protest, when I looked up and realized the young man was blind.

He felt for a chair and asked for my help: he had received a B+ on the midterm, but was used to getting straight A's. His problem, he said, was with maps. He could understand the ideological or commercial motivations for the foreign policies of liberal Britain, Napoleonic France, the multi-national Hapsburg Empire, or reactionary tsarist Russia. But he had trouble visualizing the strategic, balance-of-power relationships among the various states. Suddenly I felt both wholly inadequate and ashamed of feeling inadequate given the courage he boldly displayed. If a student unable to read by himself could aspire to study history, it was incumbent upon me to assist him. So I pulled out a map of Europe, took the boy's finger in my hand, and traced for him the coastlines of the continent and the location and boundaries of the various states. I showed him where the mountains and rivers were located, and tried to convey their strategic significance. I described how large the countries were — hoping that he had some notion of distance — and told him how swiftly (or slowly) pre-industrial sailing ships and armies could move so that he might imagine how railroads and steamships exploded the old equation between space and time. Never letting go of his finger lest he become disoriented, I repeated the lessons until he stopped me. His memory was extraordinary, and he soon displayed a better feel for the geopolitics of Europe than many, perhaps most, of my students blessed with sight. He would return periodically, however, for more information, such as the locations of the provinces of Italy and Germany that united into national states between 1859 and 1871, and I recall having an especially difficult time when the European colonialism of the 1880s ushered in the era of world politics. But he finished with an A in the course.

The blind student had to learn his geography in order to understand history. My own love affair with history began with a fascination for geography. As a youngster in the 1950s I enjoyed sports and games, but was transfixed by atlases, globes, stories of the explorers, my parents' *National Geographic* magazines, and travel and nature programs on television. I traced my own maps and prided myself on knowing all the countries and capital cities, highest mountains and longest rivers. By high school this thirst for information about the world turned into a thirst for history, including the origins of civilizations, the rise and fall of empires, the “lost worlds” of South America or Africa, the flora, fauna, and human cultures that characterized different climatic zones, the patterns of politics and military strategy. If someone had asked me then to distinguish between geography and history as distinct academic fields I could not have done it. And I cannot do it today, any more than a blind person can explain European diplomacy without a mental image of the map. But I was not the whiz at geography I imagined, as I found out in graduate school at the University of Chicago. The professor asked

our seminar on Central Europe why after 1918 the new nation of Czechoslovakia was uncomfortably dependent on Germany. Disgusted by the silence that ensued he gave us a clue: “Where does the only major river of landlocked Czechoslovakia reach the sea?” After a few flustered movements I replied, “But, the Vistula runs through Poland.”

The professor fixed a cold stare on me and hissed, “Look at a map!” The answer, of course, was the Elbe River, which runs from the Czech heartland to the great German port of Hamburg.

Why Geography Matters

I learned then that one can never know enough geography— or, to put it another way, one must learn more geography whenever one endeavors to learn more history. That is why it is so disheartening that most Americans emerge from their schooling as functional illiterates in geography despite the fact that 90 percent of U.S. adults consider some geographical knowledge a prerequisite to being a well-rounded person. The poll, conducted on behalf of the National Geographic Society, showed that only one-third of Americans could name a single country in NATO and that half could not name any members of the rival Warsaw Pact. The average adult could identify only four European countries from their outlines on a map, and less than six of the fifty United States. One in four could not find the Pacific Ocean. What is more, the group that performed the worst in the survey were those aged between 18 and 24, a finding that would not surprise those of us who teach history in universities. For it appears that many American students were not even given a chance to learn much geography in their elementary and high school years. Why is that? Is it because educators have just been unaware of the importance of geography to many branches of knowledge, not least history? Is it because they once knew, but have forgotten? Is it because geography seems to involve rote learning of “boring” facts rather than development of the “thinking” faculties? Is it because the influential political-correctness and multiculturalist movements are suspicious of a subject that emphasizes distinctions among regions, invites unflattering comparisons and hierarchy among nations and cultures, and has been used in the past as an intellectual tool of empire? Is it because geography just seems passé in an era when communications technology, commerce, and ideas “transcend boundaries” and make the earth a “global village”? Or is it because geographers themselves have failed to define and promote their subject?

Whatever the answer (it is probably “all of the above”), the Rediscovering Geography Committee, appointed by the Board on Earth Sciences and Resources of the National Research Council in 1997, lamented not only the “astonishing degree of ignorance in the United States about the rest of the world,” but that most people think of geography as a matter of memorizing place names. The committee rebutted, “A central tenet of geography is that location matters for understanding a wide variety of processes and phenomena. Indeed, geography’s focus on location provides a cross-cutting way of looking at processes and phenomena that other disciplines tend to treat in isolation. Geographers focus on ‘real-world’ relationships and dependencies....”

That would seem to be such a commonsense proposition that no one would challenge it. It is, in fact, the first fundamental reason why geography is indispensable to a sound school curriculum. We are all geographers, after all, from the moment we learn to navigate the playpen or find the bathroom and refrigerator, to the years we explore the neighborhood on our bicycles and take a family vacation, to the careers we pursue as adults. The general, admiral, or statesman is a geographer, but so too is the common soldier or sailor, the corporate executive deciding where to build a plant and which markets to target, but so too the salesperson, not to mention the farmer, fisherman, miner, oil worker, pilot, engineer, truck or taxi driver, real estate agent, manufacturer, consumer or, for that matter, golfer.

One Jimmy Sneed, a legendary caddie at the Pinehurst resort in North Carolina, was unschooled, but he knew his golf course and golfers so well that he invariably chose the right club to use for each shot ... until, after World War II, Pinehurst began to provide yardage markers on the fairways, whereupon “Sneed’s circuits blew.” Numbers meant nothing to him, and his feel for club selection deserted him. The Polynesians who crossed thousands of miles of open ocean to populate the Pacific Islands, and the Native Americans who navigated the

trackless Great Plains in search of game likewise had no need of maps and instruments. But that only meant that they were natural, intuitive geographers all the more keenly alive to the sun and stars, winds and currents, landscapes and weather about them. So whether we steer our way through the world by feel and folklore or maps and instruments, geography is the context in which “we live and move and have our being” (to paraphrase the apostle Paul). You cannot argue with geography, as Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé liked to say, and geography in turn “does not argue, it simply is,” as Hans Weigert put it. Geography concerns the way things are, not the way we imagine or wish them to be, and thus it is as fundamental to a child’s maturation as arithmetic, which teaches that $2 + 2$ are 4, not 3 or 22.

Second, geography is fundamental to the process of true education in that it serves as a springboard to virtually every other subject in the sciences and humanities. Children, as a British government study observed, are like the mongoose in the Rudyard Kipling tale: “The motto of the mongoose family is ‘run and find out’ and Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was a true mongoose.” Children’s minds are much the same. They “will enjoy merely discovering what is just ‘round the corner’ or finding out from pictures, and most will need no encouragement to explore the banks of the river or visit a farm or even to investigate the well-known streets of their own town.... So, too, when faced with glimpses of Everest, the Victoria Falls, the lonely deserts of Arabia, Tibet and Antarctica, they often find food for their sense of wonder and feeling for beauty.”

What happens next, usually in secondary school, is that the student who was originally enthralled just by the sheer variety of the world and its people, begins to ask, not only “what?” and “where?” but “why?” and “how?” Why are deserts or rain forests here and not there? Why do Asians eat rice and Mexicans tortillas, instead of bread? Why did the Europeans discover routes to China instead of the Chinese discovering routes to Europe? Why did democracy emerge in Greece and not Egypt? How did the colonial powers manage to conquer the world, and how did today’s two hundred odd countries emerge? What is a “country,” for that matter, and why are some big, rich, populous, and mighty, while others are small, poor, or weak? Asking such questions inspired by geography opens up a universe of intellectual inquiry, because to answer them the student must turn to geology, oceanography, meteorology, and astronomy, anthropology, economics, comparative religion, sociology, and history. Geography is the window on the world of the mind as well as the senses, and can be dispensed with no more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. To educate, after all, means to “lead out” (*educio*, in Latin), and no subject leads the student out of the narrow, familiar, and “taken for granted” better than geography. That is the second reason why it is indispensable in a sound curriculum.

Yet a third reason why geography is fundamental to true education is that students without geographic knowledge are helpless when confronted by adult issues, whether in school or outside of it. Geography is vital to the examination of economic competition, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, health care, global warming, literature and culture, and, needless to say, international relations. But the universality of geography’s relevance has perversely contributed to its demise as a subject in its own right. As Malcolm Douglass observes, “The strange fact of the matter is that the role of geography in the school curriculum is at once anomalous and ubiquitous. Geography lacks a clear identity.... Nonetheless, by its very nature, geography is integral to all human inquiry. It is difficult, or even impossible, to separate what is geographic from what is not. In this sense, then, geography is everywhere in the school curriculum. The major problem, both for geographers and geographic educators, and for all curriculum planners and teachers, is to find ways to acknowledge and act on this reality.”

The ways have always existed. They need only to be rediscovered.

Three Programs to Push

Assuming a given state or school board is persuaded of the need to reintroduce geography into the K-12 curriculum, what principles should guide its planning?

First, teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum designers must restore an “old-fashioned” emphasis on basic topography, place names, and map reading. For whatever your ideological preferences, the grammar of

geography is conventional and grounded in reality. The Earth, as Galileo insisted under his breath, does revolve around the sun and rotate on its axis, and that was not just his “point of view.” The motions of the Earth and heat of the sun are what create climate, volcanism, erosion, and all the features of lands and waters. On some points we may argue, for instance whether Europe ought to have been considered a continent separate from Asia, or whether the term Middle East is a Eurocentric conceit. But the geographical and cultural distinctions that first inspired people to invent those terms were real and are also worth understanding. Likewise, the Mississippi River exists. Its name, like all names, is a social convention, but the river is real, and no student can claim to “know” American history without understanding the river’s importance.

How much factual knowledge is “enough”? One useful exercise which teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum designers might try is to recall the history surveys they took in college, or study some syllabi from current surveys, and ask themselves what geographical knowledge is needed in order to master that material? Conversely, they might ask themselves what knowledge they would wish to assume their students possessed if they were teaching the course. Thus, in my Modern History survey I do not expect students to know anything about the political map of Central Europe during the Renaissance, but I am crippled if they do not even know that Venice is an Italian port city, that the Alps divide Italy from the rest of Europe, that Germany lies north of the Alps, that the Austrians speak German, that the Turks were Muslim and militant, that all Europeans were still Catholic, and that Rome was the historic seat of the papacy. If I must “go back to square one” to lay out such basics, then the best students will be bored and the poor will be paying Ivy League tuition for high school instruction. It is all very well to say that education should teach youngsters to think rather than memorize. But unless their “memory banks” are filled with facts and categories in which to deposit new facts, then their “RAM” will have no “data to process.”

Second, history and geography should be kept as close as possible to each other, perhaps even merged, because so much of history is best approached through geography, and so much geography is taught best through an historical approach. The former point is obvious: the human stage is the world, and the plot of the play is the activity of human beings in relation to their environment and each other. The latter point may be less obvious. What I mean can best be expressed by a comparison to courses in physics and astronomy that begin with the knowledge and theories prevalent in the ancient world and then march forward in time, teaching students their science in the same progression as Europeans (and others) learned it. Thus, one studies Galileo’s experiments to learn the laws of mechanics, Kepler, Tycho, and Newton to learn orbital mechanics and the laws of gravitation, the experiments of Faraday, Ampere, Ohm, and Marconi to learn the formulas of electricity, and so forth through atomic physics. Geography ought to be taught the same way, however much that may seem to “privilege” Europeans who explored and mapped the world with their galleons and brigs and geodetic satellites. For in learning the progress of geographic knowledge from Ptolemy to the present the students will not just be memorizing names and concepts but witnessing an adventure story without parallel. They will discover America, penetrate the interior of Australia and Africa, and race to the South Pole along with the historical figures, and the geographical knowledge they acquire will be linked to causes and effects rather than stand alone as trivia.

Third, history and geography teachers ought to convey to students how the realities of space and time have indeed changed over the millennia, centuries, and sometimes mere decades as a function of human technology, which is the nexus between the mankind and its environment. From the first irrigation systems to the Space Age the evolution of civilizations and their relationship to nature has been a function of tools. The history of technology might even be called the “third dimension” that rounds out our picture of the past. Geography, the first dimension, describes terrestrial space. History, the second, describes change over time. Technology, the third, describes how human conceptions of space and time have evolved. But just as algebra students cannot handle solid geometry until they have mastered plane geometry, so history students are not ready to question human conventions of space and time until they know the “lay of the land” and know how to “tell time” historically.

One Dream to Realize

I have the pleasure of lunching one day a week with Harvey Sicherman, the president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and catching up on world affairs. As an experienced expert and former speechwriter for three secretaries of state, he is a ready source of inside information and insights that only later, or never, appear in the newspapers. Above all, Sicherman is a master of the geographical factors in war and diplomacy, and he amazed me several years ago by predicting exactly, and weeks before time, the internal boundaries that would define the settlement in Bosnia. "I've done the map," he announced, and proceeded to trace it out on a napkin. Since then I make it a habit when we are discussing the latest crisis to ask if he's "done the map."

My dream is that every teacher and student of history and geography, at the end of every block of instruction, can say proudly and knowledgeably, "I've done the map." Because that means they know who they are, where they are, and how to get where they want to go. That means they have had true education.

FPRI's [History Institute](#), directed by Walter A. McDougall, is a research and education program that relates the teaching of history to the question of Western identity. Each year the History Academy sponsors a weekend-long History Institute for high school teachers and junior college faculty from all over the country, featuring seminars led by the nation's leading scholars. History Institutes have covered a variety of themes:

[Multiculturalism in World History](#) (keynoted by William McNeill); [The Cold War Revisited](#) (keynoted by John Lewis Gaddis); Two Hundred Years of American Foreign Policy (keynoted by Walter McDougall); Teaching History: How and Why (keynoted by Gordon Wood); America and the Idea of the West (keynoted by William McNeill); and [Teaching the Vietnam War](#) (keynoted by George Herring). Next year's History Institute will focus on "[Teaching World Religions.](#)"

A Partial Listing of Publications Based on the History Institutes

["The Merits and Perils of Teaching about Other Cultures"](#) by Walter McDougall

"What We Mean by the West" by William H. McNeill

"The Drama of Modern Western Identity" by David Gress

["Teaching the Vietnam War"](#) by Walter McDougall

["Vietnam: A Pop Quiz"](#) by Adam Garfinkle

["The New Cold War History"](#) by John Lewis Gaddis

"Multiculturalism as Ideology and Fact" by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

"The Three Reasons We Teach History" by Walter McDougall

"Multiculturalism in Ancient Times" by David Gress