Classics in human geography revisited


Commentary 1

In the late 1960s, as a young Marxist anthropologist, condemned by a cruel twist of fate to earn a living in a department of geography, I remember my horrified incredulity when I discovered what cultural geographers did. Cultures came intact, apparently with covered bridges or religions serving as labels. People drew strange maps of the world, shading in 'culture realms' where the criteria for classification seemed to be the first thing that popped into the classifier's head ('Ah yes, lots of black people live there - "Negro culture"; and lots of Muslims are here - "Islamic culture" ...'). Nice unambiguous lines marked the boundaries between largely meaningless realms, though arrows could plot diffusions and there were contact zones where culture traits could be caught, like measles. (I'm looking at a copy of Broek and Webb, 1968.) It deserved to occupy the lowly status it did in British geography, and I confess that I wasn't much interested why it persisted in America.

Contemplating Duncan's very important article, I am not only looking back but also across - across the Atlantic, across disciplines. It is necessary to remember that the article is about American cultural geography, talking into its relationship with American cultural anthropology. In Britain, where both geography and anthropology were more concerned with the social than the cultural, the effect of Duncan's article was not so much of shock at the attempted demolition of revered figures as of relief that the debris of ruined ideas was finally being swept away, opening the way for a 'new' cultural geography.

Duncan shows how American cultural geography had sought to understand human variation across space by recourse to a notion of culture as a thing in itself, not only temporally prior to society, which was deemed to be its carrier, but also superior to it. (Not religion, but God.) He traces this view back to cultural anthropologists, particularly Kroeber and Lowie, who were concerned to divorce anthropology from both psychology and sociology by claiming that culture should neither be seen as emerging from individuals in themselves nor from relationships between individuals. In the words of White (quoted by Duncan): 'If the behaviour of a people is determined by its culture, what determines the culture?' The answer is that it determines itself. Culture may be regarded as a process *sui generis* (p. 185). Although he does an excellent job of revealing the unworkability of this view, Duncan does not ask why on earth American cultural anthropologists, and then geographers, *wanted* to think like this. In a society famous for its internal diversity, it was almost inevitable that variation would be determined by an external force if one did not want to contemplate politically difficult explanations.

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Duncan only slightly side-steps when he rejects superorganic culture for individuality, shifting from self-constituting culture to self-constituting individuals.

Marxism is glaring in its absence from this essay - a straight choice is given between superorganic culture and a rich humanistic tapestry of individual endeavour. The absence is more surprising for 1980 than it is now, especially since much of the project of humanistic geography was in opposition to social geography's interest in Marxism. In British universities at the time Gramscian cultural studies were well established and sneaking into geographers' thinking. We see cultural studies surfacing in Ley's 1981 progress report for 'Cultural/humanistic geography' (as if the two necessarily had to go together) and in Cosgrove's (1983) Towards a radical cultural geography. Jackson (1983) used culture to articulate the political with the social and economic, drawing upon his training in social anthropology and in his research on race and racism.

In 1987 a conference in London marked the debut of the 'new' cultural geography, drawing upon the 'new' ethnography particularly exemplified by Marcus and Fischer (1986), and in 1991 the New words, new worlds' conference in Edinburgh (Philo, 1991) centred cultural considerations and made a place for poststructuralist interpretations - at neither was there space for 'culture sui generis'. It is hard now to remember that culture was so recently a peripheral interest in British geography.

I suspect that the 'new' cultural geography and the 'cultural turn' in general would have happened in Britain without Duncan's article, but its timing gave added strength to the movement away from thinking about culture as thing to conceiving of it as process. But, unless we are vigilant, processes, too, can be reified.

Strangely, I believe that the article is even more important as a cautionary tale today than it was as an iconoclastic device when it was written. The superorganic view, always strong in ideology, easily slides in when one contemplates people in defence of 'their' culture. For me, the possibility of alienating culture is more dangerous than its simple reification. Don Mitchell's (1995) article There is no such thing as culture starts with The superorganic... and proceeds to argue for abandonment of the concept of culture altogether. But Mitchell (1996) still calls himself a cultural geographer, seeing his task as studying not culture, but the idea of culture, which certainly exists out there. However, with Mitchell, we return to the economy as the prior driving force (which determines itself?)

Bruno Latour (1993) has made fashionable what every good anthropologist always knew, that the isolation of 'modern' societies (where all the constitutive elements, including culture, are separable) from 'premodern' others (where everything is continuous) was a sleight of hand. It is worth contemplating that if culture is neither prior nor a mere outcome, it becomes the device we use for thinking about the integration of everything humans can conceive of. If Duncan had not done such an effective job in undermining the superorganic, it would have been difficult for geographers to join in debates like this.

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References


Commentary 2

Revisits of classic texts, or former field sites for that matter, invite more than simple hermeneutics or complex recollections. They call for stepping into the same stream twice - or perhaps multiple occasions - but usually at quite differing times and entry points. The concept of ‘class’ was originally Roman and referred to social ranking. It was only much later, of course, that it came to denote standards of quality and durability, particularly as applied to cultural productions, e.g., the ‘classics’ of Greek and Roman art and literature. Today, it seems the standards by which classics are measured have shifted toward the realm of consumption. In the case of scholarly books and articles, classic status apparently can be achieved through sheer citation frequency. Oblations to market forces aside, classics can be also identified on the basis of their critical powers and impacts; on their successes in challenging received wisdom and accepted practices. On either of these grounds, James Duncan’s critique and partial re-conceptualisation of the concept of the superorganic in American cultural geography certainly qualifies as a classic in human geography.

The superorganic in American cultural geography has enjoyed an active citation record over the past decade or so. It has usually been the key reference, among several, routinely cited in the numerous critiques of traditional cultural geography advanced by the advocates of a ‘new’ cultural geography. The criticisms that Duncan makes of traditional cultural geographers’ tacit - though in few cases implicit - acceptance of the superorganic concept of culture are now widely accepted, though not universally (Price and Lewis, 1993). As for the remedies Duncan prescribed for countering culture’s reification in the minds and hands of cultural geography’s leading practitioners, some have been followed, others have run a quick course and still others have been largely ignored. If Duncan’s article can be said to have caused a rupture in cultural geography’s placid approach to self-examination, its impact has been largely subsumed in what has followed. It was written as the gathering poststructuralist current began to erode the not-yet-completed foundations for a geographical structuralism, and just moments before the postmodern condition was diagnosed and widely announced.

At this point it might be instructive to revisit older notions of what constitutes a classic, but neoconservative culturalists have cast such a nimbus of banality over the discussion that it is probably best to just step around it. As an aside, however, I will say that this leaves unanswered the question of whether a publication (no matter its import
or impact) primarily devoted to methodological inquiry or programmatic ends should be viewed differently from works of empirical reportage and/or theoretical demonstration? Sauer went on record many times disclaiming the significance of his methodological writings and acclaiming the efforts of those who spent their time in the archives and field. Although not incommensurate, the discourse and designs Duncan deployed in his critique of Berkeley school geography do not fully engage or acknowledge the complexity of Sauer and his associates’ enterprise. I would argue that many Berkeley school studies will stand tests of both time and temperament. Like Humboldt’s essays on Cuba or New Spain, Sauer on the Spanish Main, West on coastal Colombia, Parsons on Antioquia, McBryde on southwestern Guatemala and many others’ monographs and articles, it will be revisited and revalued for as long as geographers take interest in people and their environments in cultural and historical perspective. And at those points, it should be beside the point whether or not these studies were inspired or informed by the notion of the superorganic nature of culture.

At the time Duncan’s critique of traditional cultural geography appeared, I was in coastal Ecuador studying pre-Columbian raised field systems that James Parsons (1969) had discovered a decade or so earlier. Thus, I didn’t read it until I returned some months later. I agreed abstractly with his position(s) and wished (equally abstractly) that I had put a wider ethnographic eye on the here-and-now while I was there, but neither the superorganic nor symbolic interactionism had much to do with the kind of historical cultural ecology I was concerned with. Brookfield’s (1964) criticisms of Berkeley school geography had helped inform a research plan that was largely cultural ecological, but the bedrock affective and intellectual ties remained with Sauer and examples provided by his students. They still do. I had read Kroebner on the superorganic, thought it of historical interest, but certainly didn’t take it either figuratively or literally into the field with me. I suspect that most, if not all, Sauerians proceeded similarly, even Zelinsky who, as Duncan correctly notes, repeatedly argues in his writings for the autonomy and agency of culture. I think that the superorganic has functioned, if at all, in cultural geography as more casual afterthought than causal Uber-thought. I see Duncan’s own tendencies toward reifying the work of the Berkeley school, especially regarding the superorganic concept of culture, as the main flaw in an otherwise well argued, well intended corrective to traditional cultural geographers’ disinterest in theory and unmediated devotion to praxis.

Duncan’s article was abstracted from his 1977 dissertation The superorganic in American cultural geography: a critical commentary. The article argues that cultural geographers (especially Berkeley schooled) imported a reified notion of culture (the superorganic) from anthropology, resulting in research not attentive to individuals’ actions and overly credulous of cultures’ internal homogeneity, the role of habitual behavior and modal personality types. Duncan also raises the larger philosophical issue of holism versus individualism, and indirectly the question of how geography imports and employs concepts from other disciplines. Reading his dissertation, and reflecting on some of Duncan’s other writings derived from it, I am not so sure that the superorganic in cultural geography was, in fact, the primary target. Duncan and Ley’s (1982) ‘Structuralism Marxism and human geography: a critical assessment’ is embedded, though not full-blown, within the dissertation. The seeds are also there for Agnew and Duncan’s (1981) The transfer of ideas into Anglo-American human geography. Both articles made solid and important points and, in the case of the critique of structural Marxism, had a significant impact, though perhaps not as easily measured as Duncan’s
critique of cultural geography. My reading of the dissertation suggests the subtext - a critique of Marxist holism, especially its structuralist strain - to be the main animus rather than Sauerian superorganicism. In the same document Duncan makes a good case for a hybrid of humanist Marxism and American pragmatism, but does not offer much on what a cultural geography so constituted would look like. Nor has he developed this project subsequently, as far as I know. Herein, I see one of cultural geography's missed opportunities. Blaut (1993) is the only geographer I'm aware of who identifies pragmatism, Marxism and a Berkeley school (Kniffen wing) orientation as his groundings. If this is a confluence or combination of no moment now, this is unfortunate. It is a potential alternative course to both traditional and the 'new' cultural geography's trajectories, and it deserves (re)visitation and elaboration.

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References


Author's response

My article on the superorganic was drawn from my doctoral dissertation written in the hothouse atmosphere of geography at Syracuse University in the mid-1970s. I had gone to Syracuse to study cultural geography with the late David Sopher, a student of Carl Sauer. Sopher considered narrow disciplinarity an intolerable intellectual chauvinism and thus he encouraged me to explore anthropology and sociology. I soon fell under the spell of Clifford Geertz, the symbolic interactionist, and Erving Goffman and I found it difficult to reconcile their ideas with what I was reading in cultural geography. In particular I was troubled by the lack of an emphasis on social theory in American cultural geography. Cultural geography appeared to have no concept of individual agency, nor any clearly theorized conception of social organization. Thus my dissertation was a critique of the notion of culture prevailing in American cultural geography at the time and an attempt to open it up to contemporary social theory. While many supervisors would have blocked a line of inquiry that was highly critical of their own intellectual tradition, David Sopher to his credit treated my explorations with sceptical tolerance.
I am grateful to Kent Mathewson and Pam Shurmer-Smith for their critical reflections on my work. I am well aware that the commentary will no doubt fan the flames in America. It is not my intention to add yet more tinder to the fire. Having read, to my surprise, as yet another assault. But alas, an author's intention can never be the final arbiter of the meaning of his or her text.

Mathewson raises some important points I would like to address. I do not deny that I focused upon Sauer's methodological rather than his empirical work. Having surveyed his empirical work, I did not find a marked discrepancy between it and his methodological statements. Scholars sympathetic to the Berkeley project have often suggested that Sauer's empirical work might reveal different theoretical assumptions than his methodological tracts. I have never been persuaded of this. I believe that if someone could have demonstrated from Sauer's empirical work that he rejected the superorganic view of culture, they would have done so at some point over the past 17 years. However, I would agree with Mathewson that there is much of value in Sauer's scholarship regardless of any flaws in his explanatory framework.

Again, Mathewson is absolutely correct when he points out that my real object of criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s was holistic explanation and that my dissertation was a call for a hybrid of humanist Marxism and pragmatism. In this regard my critique of structural Marxism (1982) written with David Ley was a continuation of that project. Contrary to how my work was received, I was hostile to cultural geography nor to Marxism per se, but to the reification of their principal explanatory variables as I found them in geography at the time. I was very much drawn to Marxian analysis and such Marxist concepts as reification and alienation have continued to play a central role in my thinking. In response to Shurmer-Smith's question as to why I did not mention Marxism in my article, I would have to say that I saw it as a strategic omission. The prevailing structural Marxism in geography was as guilty of reification as was the cultural geography I was critiquing. I felt, therefore, that it would be more effective to use Marxian concepts without drawing attention to the fact that these were a product of a less deterministic Marxism, thus diverting attention from the main point of the article.

As I have stated elsewhere (Duncan, 1994) I do not believe the critique of the Berkeley school is a debate worth prolonging. If anything is to be saved from my article on the superorganic I would hope that it would be its argument against holistic explanation. This to me is much more important than the issue of what Sauer and his students really meant by culture. While the latter will perhaps be debated in geographic thought courses, the former raises issues of continuing relevance about how we construct for cultural geography a viable social psychology and a richly complex sense of social organization. In this respect my article was an early salvo in the continuing structure-agency debate.

On reflection I came down too far on the side of agency, a point made by Shurmer-Smith. I suppose this was predictable given that my target at the time was structural determinism. As I saw it, important segments of the field were dominated by holism. Furthermore, I found the individualistic alternatives offered by behavioural geography to be naively mechanistic and humanistic geography naively romantic. Neither, in my opinion, offered a rigorously developed theory of social psychology or social organization. The balance between structure and agency in the field is a moving one, however. I
now find myself worrying that the recent interest in psychoanalysis and the celebration of trivial acts of resistance runs the risk of replaying the reductionism and romanticism of behavioural and humanistic geography. There is a much broader, less human-centred, notion of agency in the field today than there was two decades ago and we may be thankful that social theory is now an integral part of cultural geography. However, I think there is a growing tendency to underestimate the highly structured and severely constrained nature of human agency.

References

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