Afterword: strategic canonization?

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Abstract

The paper briefly comments on the articles that form the special issue of the journal on the geographical canon. It suggests that most of the authors adopt some kind of ‘strategic canonization’.

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'Cannon to the right of them,/Cannon to the left of them,/Cannon in front of them/Volley’d and thunder’d’

My very worst outings as a university teacher have come whenever I tried to lecture on what I thought was the geographical canon. From 1983 until almost the end of that decade I annually instructed hundreds of first- and second-year students at the University of British Columbia in economic geography, Geography 201, The Geography of Economic Activities. It was the first university class I taught. The course leader was a former Second World War RAF pilot. He was kind and generous, but formal and proper. He expected order. Given my inexperience and his demand for irrefutable organization I thought I had no choice but to teach the ‘correct’ curriculum: the canon. Consequently, students were served up every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning an unflinching diet of economic geographical classics: von Thünen’s bid–rent curves, Weber’s isodapanes, Christaller’s K principles, Lösch’s hexagonal nets, Warntz’s gravity and potential models, and Berry’s retail hierarchy. It was a disaster. The students were bored witless, and so was I. The terrible, suffocating weight of obligation that attended my teaching squeezed out any air, my lectures witless, and so was I. The terrible, suffocating weight of obligation Berry served up every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning an un-

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persuasively demonstrate that the 1949 canonization of Soviet geography was nothing but the reflection of late Stalinism, and the threat of ‘darkness at noon’ for anyone who dissented.

Clearly, then, divesting ourselves of the idea of the canon is difficult even though we know it is epistemologically and sociologically fraught, and sometimes bound up with shady, even violent, behind-the-scenes maneuvers. But as the contributors demonstrate it is also very hard not to believe in a canon. It is as if we can’t help ourselves. It is like essentialism, something we cannot not believe. We are socialized into the discipline from an early age, taught from our first day what is central in geography, drilled by reading lists into knowing who is important, and directed by tutorial and laboratory exercises into learning core skills, methods and practices. Given such experiences, how can we not have at least a lingering belief in some binding disciplinary tradition, a canon, which holds together the field? I am sure it was also one of the reasons why as a newly minted Assistant Professor I tried to present the economic geographical canon even though I did not believe it existed.

For this reason, it seems to me that many of the contributors are trying to walk a knife edge. They want to find a way both to believe and not to believe in the canon. Some are more believers than unbelievers, and others more unbelievers than believers. I think Gayatri Spivak’s idea of ‘strategic essentialism’ is useful here. It is the notion that a given group will essentialize its identity for at least a temporary period in order to realise some particular end. Something similar appears to be in operation here, what I will call ‘strategic canonization’. While there is general recognition by all the contributors that there is no final, definitive canon for the discipline of geography of the kind, say, that Allan Bloom laid down for ‘Western Civilization’, there are at least strategic forms of canonization that allow each of the contributors to hold on to some essentialized version of geography at least for the time being in order to realise a given end.3

Not that I criticize anyone. A completely free-floating discipline not tethered to books, or individuals, or concepts, or sites, is no discipline at all. For any continued conversation, including the one convened in this journal, some anchors must be secured. The authors provide those anchors to a greater or lesser extent, and display a greater or lesser degree of purchase. However, no author goes to the other extreme. The one in which the alternative spelling (and meaning) of cannon applies. That is, the Tennysonian version: the canon which is defended by cannons, by volley and thunder.

I am sure Robert Mayhew is right, and in the past there was a strong belief in the geographical cannon, and which for someone like Richard Hartshorne (Mayhew’s example) thought was justifiably defended by cannon (at least in its verbal form).4 Thankfully none of the new versions of the geographical cannon put forward by the contributors to this special issue are similar Tennysonian. Instead, they are Emersonian. Emerson said, ‘All life is an experiment. The more experiments the better’.5 The different versions of the canonical form suggested by the authors are each an experiment in producing a better life for geography.

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5 Hartshorne’s correspondence is littered with sharply aimed verbal corrections to anyone who disagreed, or even cited approvingly a work that disagreed, with his version of the geographical cannon. Any approving citation of Fred Schaefer’s work especially would be met by verbal fusillade. Even at age 89, two years before he died, he remained unrepentantly combative. See Richard Hartshorne to Fred Lukermann, July 26, 1989, Box 194, Correspondence — Fred Lukermann, File S; and Richard Hartshorne to Derek Gregory, October 19, 1989, Box 195, Correspondence/D-E, File D. Both letters are found in the Papers of Richard Hartshorne, AAG archives, AGS Library, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

6 R.W. Emerson, Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations — 1841–1844, Boston and New York, 1911, 302.