

Regional Geography: A Personal View

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Editor's Note:

Glenn Anderson is a solo-practicing Attorney at Law in Winter Haven. He graduated from the University of Florida School of Law some time ago, and has continued his education ever since, recently acquiring both a Masters Degree in Geography from the University of South Florida and a Masters Degree in History from the University of Central Florida. Throughout his professional career he has been a very strong advocate for the discipline of Geography, having taught the subject at Polk Community College, Florida Southern College, and, quite regularly over recent years, the University of South Florida. His missionary work for Geography also has led him to self-fund an award for promising seventh graders at Grace Lutheran School in Winter Haven, "The Anderson Geography Award", which is intended to spark interest among students at an early part of their academic careers. His zeal has also convinced his brother, Robert L. Anderson, to fund the "Anderson Visiting Lectureship" in Geography at the University of Florida. In short, Mr. Anderson is just the sort of professional/academic advocate the discipline should recognize and covet at all levels of education. I hope that we hear of more such in future editions.

A resurgent regional geography lacks the coherence of bygone days and is peripheral to the concerns and expertise of most geographers. Today the average geographer neither understands this part of geography's triad or really values its contribution to the discipline. Only a public interested in that kind of geographic knowledge and the legions of students convinced of its value force a reluctant and timorous acceptance of regional geography within a discipline currently obsessed with technical skills and scientific expertise.

Geography claims to be the "spatial" discipline. Regional geography analyzes and explains space. Further, regional geography is the fulcrum of the geographic world with its feet firmly planted in every sub-discipline. It unites a fragmented discipline and provides a justification for its existence in the minds of the public. Regional studies are a natural capstone for a discipline eager to earn a place at the table and the ideal forum to display its vaunted skills and knowledge.

Regional geography is neither physical geography nor human geography; it partakes of both, and also of several other academic disciplines. It is not only geography's most inter-disciplinary field, but actually, requires expertise in several non-geographic specialties. That outside expertise must be grounded on graduate level training in fields such as cultural studies, history, and economics. Training in geography alone is simply not enough to achieve true competence.

Renaissance men, not ever more specialized experts in some academic field, are required to teach these courses. Broadly based scholars will reflect a student population notable for the diversity of its interests. Students will be introduced to geography in a setting where international business students, liberal arts majors, and a sprinkling of others pursue interests in real places and real people. It is a canard to claim these courses lack intellectual rigor because they lack specialization. Their focus is simply different.

The variegated nature of student populations in regional geography places heavy demands on potential instructors to possess true competence beyond the confines of traditional geography. Students expect and deserve someone that has a comprehensive knowledge of special places and unique peoples. That knowledge can only be gained by long study, travel, international contacts, and thorough preparation. It is simply not good enough to staff these courses with whoever is available and interested.

Geographic canon formerly defined regional geography as comprised of a checklist of largely physical, economic, and political concerns. Those concerns remain, but today the focus is more cultural. It has acquired "soul." Any topic which informs the student of

how a place or people really functions, of its ambience, or of its character is within the pale. Concomitant with these changes, regional geography has become more nuanced, idiosyncratic, eclectic, and demanding.

Geography has much to lose if it allows regional geography to slip through its fingers. Other disciplines will be only too willing to fill the void created by geographic indifference, prejudice against non-scientific expertise, and inability to acquire the requisite non-geographic skills. Conversely, the blows, sustained by regional geography and to the rich legacy of Sauer, James, Gottmann, Crist, and many others, can be turned to advantage by seizing the opportunity to be bold and innovative and shape a new vision for the vital center of geography. All that is necessary is commitment and preparation.

Once the decision has been made to offer regional courses, an appropriate methodological approach should be selected. Objectives must be established and alternative materials examined. While there is no single way to reach regional geography, some suggestions come to mind.

A Regional Geography: Some Suggestions

A successful course in regional geography must capture the feel, ambience, and essence of a region. There must be no doubt about a region's *raison d'être*. Each region and its connecting linkages are unique. Latin America is defined by anthropological and cultural ties; but European unity has historical, economic, and political foundations.

An honest assessment of an instructor's strengths and weaknesses is important in a sub-discipline which is inherently impressionistic. The course should incorporate his or her areas of expertise. For example, I always use my background in comparative legal systems to highlight that aspect of regional character. Conversely, the text will insure that all areas are covered.

Selecting the right text requires time, but is well worth the effort. It is certainly not good enough to adopt the text everyone uses. An effort should be made to find the right books. The process might

begin with an inquiry to the appropriate person at some distinguished institution, with a review copy, or with an idea suggested by some professional journal. If a text looks promising, then time can be invested to seriously consider it. Finally, never become too comfortable with a particular text and remain open to a new or different treatment.

Visual learning is important in geography and, especially, in regional geography. Films meet this need and should be part of every regional geography course. Integration into the lecture or discussion enhances the value of films and makes the program more coherent. Testing on the course's film content emphasizes its importance and highlights significant points.

Foreign students and well traveled students can be used as resources and to validate course content. Regional classes usually have more than their share of such students. Involvement of these students will make the class more entertaining and topical for everyone.

Literature, history, and social science studies serve as valuable adjuncts to the text. Each student should be assigned a different, individual book. Oral presentations based on the books will benefit the entire class. Essays will develop test writing and analytical skills. Obviously, the instructor should be familiar with all of the assigned books and should make the individual assignments based on class rank and major. Allowing the students to pick their books, ignores the instructor's unique knowledge of the literature and wastes an inordinate amount of time. Properly handled, this part of the course can introduce students to research, public speaking, writing, and facets of the region's culture.

Acquisition of factual knowledge and construction of an intellectual framework are the *sine qua non* of regional studies. If the student leaves without that knowledge or framework, the instructor has failed. Consequently, each student must commit to memory a certain body of carefully selected knowledge based on the text and class lectures or discussions. Work sheets and subsequent testing insure that this task is accomplished. The addition of essay topics to the work sheets and tests adds that element to the core content of the course.

A comprehensive final exam, using multiple choice questions, is easy to grade and tests another set of skills. It should be based on the text and what has been said in the classroom. Answers must not be telegraphed or highlighted in advance of the exam, because it destroys the validity of the exam. It is sufficient to announce that the exam is based on the text and the classroom lecture or discussion. However, it is well to note that I have never had a perfect score and consider anything at eighty per cent or above as superior performance on this particular exercise.

In summary, multiple methodologies and forms of testing produce the best and most valid results. Areas covered have to reflect the nature of the region and the skills of the instructor. Tests on factual knowledge alone cannot produce the best results, and other means of evaluation enhance the overall sophistication and impact of the course. Films, literature, history, and social science studies make a richer, more interesting, and more rewarding course content.

