

Zeitschrift: Geographica Helvetica : schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geographie = Swiss journal of geography = revue suisse de géographie = rivista svizzera di geografia

Herausgeber: Verband Geographie Schweiz ; Geographisch-Ethnographische Gesellschaft Zürich

Band: 26 (1971)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Geography and image regions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-50725>

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Geography and Image Regions

James W. Watson

Although geography is about land, it is derived from people. Therefore, geographers must pay increasing attention to people, and to what men hope and want from the land. A country is the mind of its people made real in the land. As a result, perception and understanding are needed to set it forth. Geography is an imaginative art, as well as an exacting science. Unless that is realized, « a countryside can be buried in its geography books as dead as a doornail », as C. E. Montague warned us. A geographer can be so concerned with the facts of a place, he loses its spirit. This may result from equating reality with the impersonal, whereas reality can be the essence of the personal. A region lives in the mind that is aware of it. Thus one way of getting at a region would be to discover «the highly personal sense of it», expressed through the mental images of those who live with and perceive it and, from their concepts, help to create or preserve it.

Such things have concrete form, they imprint themselves on the landscape, they make their own geography. For instance, comparing Liverpool with Manchester, Montague comes on minor but significant differences in their trading establishments due to their different images of trade. «The characters of brick and stone», he says, «speak the intentions of the minds behind them»: it is the mind that matters (Montague C. E., *The Right Place*. Phoenix edn., London, 1928, pp. 190–192). Thus what a geographer might well concern himself with is the mind behind the scene – that is, with the *image-regions* that make «the delicious differences» behind the world.

Many attempts have been made to depict the geography of North America. The scholarly, interesting, and distinguished geography by Hans Boesch differs appreciably from the one this author has contributed. Why? Not because the facts differ but because the points of view are not the same. Further, if this author were to write another account, it would be different again, because he would now look for the *image that each region has for Americans*, and vest his regions not in rocks and rivers, rainfall and resources but in the minds of men. There was an America in the mind even before the British set foot in America. There was an image of what people wanted of the new world before the *Sarah Constant* or the *Mayflower* ever set sail. And this America of the mind soon came to shape

the land of America: the myth of America was reflected in the American scene.

In New England men wanted the land to be the base for a new society, formed by compact «on just and equal laws for the general good» to which, according to Bradford, «everyone would give due submission and obedience.» Yet this society, agreed on by all, was for the advancement of each, so that every man could work for «his owne perticuler, and . . . in that regard . . . trust to themselves» (Bradford W., *History of Plymouth Plantation*, London, 1650, quoted in Miller P. and Johnson T. H., eds., *The Puritans*, I, 102, 105). There grew up a basic duality, between individual interest and group responsibility, that was to colour the whole geography of New England. The prevailing landscape was that of the «compact, of land arranged into townships, centred in «towns» governed by «town-meetings», that of group movement into the land, the gathering of settlers in group settlements, and of the group organization of duties. However, a sturdy and growing individualism challenged communal control, and led to the rise of separate and often isolated farms, individual businesses, and cities stamped with the individual search after status. Thus it was that the ideals people had for America came to create the American scene. These ideals over time built up a myth about America which, as this author has tried to show elsewhere, then shaped the American reality. The geography of America is rooted at least as much in this myth about the land as in the land itself. (Watson J. W., «Image Geography: the myth of America in the American scene», Presidential address, Geography Section, British Association for the Advancement of Science, Adv. of. Sci., 27, 1970–71). For example, the mental climate has been as important as the physical climate. This is stressed by Cash in his study of the American South where he says: «There have arisen people to tell us that the South . . . is distinguishable from New England or the Middle West only by such matters as the greater heat . . . Nobody, however, has ever taken them seriously. And rightly!» The South is not a condition of land but a state of mind (Cash W. J., *The Mind of the South*, Vintage bks., New York, 1941, p. 1).

Cash is right. It is really impossible for a geographer to define the South in any other way than as an *image-region*, an area whose character and unique

ness rest in the mind alone. The South was never out, like the North, for «a new course of living» (Bradford, *History*): the South did not claim, like the North, to be «the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven» (Johnson B., *Wonder Working Providence*): the South did not want, like the North, «to be a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people upon us» (Winthrop J., *A Model of Christian Charity*). In fact it was, if anything, against cities! Its ideal was the land, was the soil. One of its great sons, Thomas Jefferson, wrote: «We have no towns of any consequence». He said this with a certain satisfaction, if not pride, because he disliked cities and industry. «Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God», he claimed. «The proportion which the other classes of citizens (i. e. non-agricultural) bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff» (Jefferson T., *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Harper); Harper Torchbook edn., New York, 1964, pp. 157–8).

The mind of the South was made by settlers who in Beverly's words «peopled the Colony . . . to increase their Estates» (Beverly R., *History and Present State of Virginia*); or who came, according to Byrd, «as Adventurers out to make a very profitable Voyage» or simply on «the Humor to take a trip to America. This Modish Frenzy being inflamed by the Charming Account given of Virginia made many fond of removeing to such a Paradise» (Byrd W., *The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and Carolina*). The Southern mind was shaped by the patronage of «certain of the nobility, gentry, and merchants» who, as Capt. Smith pointed out, backed the first adventurers in their search for wealth (Smith J., *The General Historie of Virginia*, bk. III). Soon, an American gentry appeared, and the landscape was marked by manor houses and tenant farms. The new gentry were not very different from the old for «none will labor for himself who can make another labor for him», as Jefferson noted. Consequently they used indentured labour from England, people who agreed to work on estates for a number of years in return for a free passage and a home in the new world. Few of these remained on the estates. As soon as they could, they broke away and went inland and cleared a farm of their own out of the forest, where they could live a very independent if a limited existence. The Southern land system enabled people to get warrants for as much as they wanted where they wanted it, and therefore led to a very irregular pattern of settlement, quite different from the North. The biggest difference between the two regions, of course, was in the use

of slavery. When the estate owners could not get enough indentured labourers they turned to the use of African slaves. Thus the South quickly became marked by the bond and the free, unlike the North, which early abolished slavery, and relied on «free» labour. Slavery entrenched the manorial system in the South, and increased the power of the élite. It gave even the «poor white» a sense of superiority. It tended to put off new immigrants from Europe who in the main preferred to live and work in the «free» States of the North or West.

All these things still have their impact on the Southern scene, which is still one of the least citified areas in the United States, which still relies to a considerable extent on primary production, still has its large estates, its tenant farms, its negroes in a relatively subservient position, and its poor whites; the landscape is still irregular in its divisions, roads and settlements, and still is dominated by Anglo-Saxon institutions and ways. These differences between New England and Virginia are not due to northness and southness, to glaciated and unglaciated lands, to a winterstraitened or summer-rich climate, or anything geographers normally look on as «the environment». They result from the images men had of themselves and the way they expressed those images, in the landscape. Attitude counted for more than latitude. And if the North and South still have any validity as regions it is in these attitudes, in these images, these different states of mind.

The opening of the West further influenced the American scene. This was the region of the common man, who broke away from the Southern élite and the Northern establishment, and created a world in which «each person could work for himself». Turner and Webb helped to develop the myth of the West. Here the Americans became a new race. «In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race. English in neither nationality, nor characteristics» (Turner R.J., «The Significance of the Frontier in American History», *Proc. State Hist. Soc. Wisconsin*, 1894, p. 90). The West was the great melting pot, melting down the differences between North and South, between native American and foreign-born, and between the foreign immigrants themselves, to create a society both more egalitarian and libertarian than ever before. The traits of the European past, such as privilege and position, were eradicated in favour of the American future, centred on equal rights and opportunities. As the frontier advanced it «carried with it individualism and democracy». The West eschewed the tenant system, opposed the holding of land by «quit rent», and introduced universal (male) suffrage.

Thus the opening of the West, with a new mental attitude, featured a new American landscape: with it came the section «survey» and the quarter-section

farm, a whole countryside laid out on the principle of the regular and equal sharing out of the land, where each family had to work out its own fortune. Self reliance became the order of the day. This in turn led to a *laissez-faire* expansion of commerce and industry which, through the fiercest competition for land, communications, capital and labour, plated the scene with mushrooming towns: *Western* towns, with broad roads, railways down their centre, false-fronted stores, big plots and family homes, the nodality of station, hotel, and saloon, and real-estate promotion run wild – the «Mainstreet» town of Sinclair Lewis, the «Jungle» of Upton Sinclair. Mechanization and mass-production soon dominated the West and spread across America; and Ford, the genius of standardization, uniformity, and mass organization, came – in André Siegfried's view – to typify America, in the way in which Ulysses, the arch individualist and «patron of ingenuity», represented Europe (Siegfried A., *The Mediterranean*, Cape, London, 1948, p. 30, 217). The combination of individual opportunity and mass organization, by which people worked together in disciplined and standard ways, but had their own cars and homes, their own choice of church and neighbourhood, stimulated both productivity and consumption and made the West an immensely dynamic region which had an impact throughout America. Indeed, it set its stamp on the whole country.

Thus, as Hans Boesch has shown so well in his work, «wherever man starts to occupy the land, a new set of influential factors are introduced», (Boesch H., *A Geography of World Economy*, Van Nostrand, Princeton, 1964, p. 10). The new factors may include such concrete and measurable things as technology and the economy, but they will also embrace immaterial and qualitative realities like myths and images. In the case of America, the European occupation changed virtually the whole landscape (notwithstanding the fact that it has al-

ready been altered by the Indians), and created an American scene which everywhere reflected the image Americans had of themselves and of what they wanted. The image of America as a whole affected all parts in greater or lesser degree; the image of individual sectors created regions within America, each with its own character. Increasingly the landscape became the image.

Thus, instead of approaching a country or region as the combination of given natural forms with developed social functions, the geographer might begin by looking at the mental image of the area and then see how that image has worked itself out in the landscape. Image-geography is a helpful way of understanding a landscape; image-regions are more and more the key to the rich variety of the earth.

Geographie und Geist einer Landschaft

Den Geographen interessiert nicht bloß die Landschaft, das Objekt seiner Studien, an sich, sondern ebenso sehr der Geist, der über ihr steht und die feinen Unterschiede schafft. In einer zeitlich und räumlich vergleichenden Betrachtung der Vereinigten Staaten Nordamerikas weiß der Verfasser besagte Unterschiede eindrucklich hervorzukehren und gleichzeitig zu schildern, wie sich das «Image» Amerikas im großen allmählich herausgebildet hat, sogut, wie es das Bild individueller Regionen von eigenem Charakter hat entstehen lassen. Beim Erfassen einer Gegend als Produkt naturgegebener Formen und entwickelter historischer und sozialer Kräfte sollte man daher den Geist einer Landschaft, der seinerseits auf sie einzuwirken vermag, nicht übersehen. «Image-Geographie», meint der Autor, hilft mit zum Verständnis einer Landschaft, ja sie gewährt gegebenenfalls erst den Schlüssel, die reiche Vielfalt unseres Erdbildes ganz aufzunehmen.