

The Relative Decline of Interest in Regional Geography as a Geographical Study Methodology Compared With Alternative Methods

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Abstract

The growing concern about the environment and sustainable development reveals the connections between human and physical branches of geography. The functional specialization of geographical enquiry into thematically focused fields reveals the construction of disciplinary knowledge. Such dismemberment of geographical study has resulted in a relative decline of interest in regional geography as a geographical study methodology in favour of alternative methods of enquiry. The discussion will define "region" and "regional geography," and analyze the decline of interest in the regional concept since the mid-nineteenth century and examine the influence of industrial development to regional studies. The study critically examines the weakness of the regional geography concept that resulted in the relative decline of interest. Using secondary data, the research examines the geographical methodologies and approaches that replaced regional geography. The sample, quantitative and systematic studies, in the new geography are investigated. The investigation explores the advantages of regional geography and efforts to revive regional geography, owing to its intellectual vigour. The research concludes that alternative geographical study methodologies are not completely divorced from the regional concept.

Key Words: Regional concept, Geographical methodologies, Sample, Quantitative, Systematic studies, intellectual vigour

Introduction

The regional concept

According to Wooldridge and East (1958) cited in Boardman (1993), a region is a unit area of the earth's surface. Regions can possess intrinsic wholeness and social unit. The regional geography approach starts with the homogeneous area. The area is examined to discover its components and connections. The region is analyzed with respect to the various physical, economic, social and cultural elements that give it character. Walford (1989) believes that regional geography, the skillful

description of areas and places, is the highest form of the geographer's art. Buttimer (2003) adds that a good regional geography can bring an area to life and help us understand and appreciate what it is like, as well as how it came to be. This is supported by Meyer and Turner (1997) who have explained that the underlying purpose in all cases in the study of regional geography is to reach a fuller comprehension of the order of earth space. Taylor (1989) whose conception of the subject weighted it strongly in favour of regional geography, is aware that each region is a product of local circumstances, both social and physical.

The effectiveness of regional geography as a replacement for a classical scheme was observed by Gilchrist (1992) who commented, 'The study of regional geography has awakened from the great slumber from which it had fallen.' Indeed, it is through regional geography that new life has been given to the dead bones of geography. Boardman and Mc Partland (1993) described regional geography as the key stone of the geographical arch, that was the dominant job of geographers that time when many terms that are common today were rarely used, or ever heard; geomorphology, biogeography or climatology on the physical side, and economic, social or urban geography within the human geography.

Adam, Abler and Gould (1971) believe that the advent of the steam engine in 1846, the railways and the coal carrying canals was the first stage in the dissolution of the traditional, rural and local regional pattern of life. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in Europe the leading characteristics of the traditional economy and society crumbled slowly away (Robinson, 1987). As a result, geographical methodology has been obliged to abandon the regional concept of the subject; just as half a century earlier it had to abandon the classical scheme.

Buttimer (2001) suggests that variants of the regional view of geography are at their best when dealing with areas of rural economies. The process started by the industrial revolution has left us dependent upon a network of communications covering the whole globe, hence the frequent reference to the global economy. Advanced communities are no longer localized, no longer fundamentally rural, no longer characterized in their material culture by a host of features, which are not to be seen elsewhere. Therefore, the regional geography concept has been a victim of industrial development. The regional geography concept and methodology has lost its general appeal because the western world has changed so rapidly and its industrial technology has influenced changes in the developing world. With the gradual disappearance of the old local, rural, largely self-sufficient way of life, in both the developed and the developing world, centrality to regional work in

geography has been permanently affected (Meyer and Turner, 1997). At first, one is persuaded to agree that regional geography's lack of intellectual vigour was mainly that regional geography became a victim of industrial development circumstances.

Boardman and Partland (1993) maintain that the concept of a geographical region was too intellectually demanding. Ambrose (1969) hypothesizes that the study of the region and regional life was the peculiar crown and peak of geographical work, that which held the subject together, and that which solved most of the methodological difficulties which had become apparent in classical geography by the turn of the nineteenth century.

Discussion

Dickenson's (1976) research, 'The Inadequacy of the Regional Concept', criticized the concept rightly, as obsolete. He noted that the region is an eighteenth century concept; and the world that fathered it now lies smouldering in the grave. He considered that it was no longer useful in today's conditions that are different from those that prevailed when the concept came into existence. Today unlike in the past, the world is administered on a global economy. Dickenson (1976) regarded the region as an area in which a fundamentally coherent way of life dominates, or an area that is dynamically homogeneous with respect to certain inter-related characteristics in the making of society. The word coherent is not meaningful because no one can tell when an area is, or is not functionally coherent. Coherence is not a measured quantity, and so its presence or absence cannot be confirmed.

Gould (1967) observed the problem of delimiting regional boundaries in regional geography. Regions have no precise boundaries, which makes it difficult to delimit them.

King (1992) has also confirmed that when the regional geographer delimits the regional boundaries, he is trying to put boundaries that do not exist, around areas that do not matter. Clarke (1992) described regions as contents of an arbitrarily defined container. Kirk and Lambert (1984) argue that if there is such a thing as a true region, it must be capable of measurement. They observe that it is no defense to say we are dealing with dynamic boundaries, because it is impossible to tell how dynamic the boundaries are unless a datum line has been drawn. Geographers have questioned the methods used to measure the operations of regions, contours or isotherms (Eyles, 1973).

The region was intellectually sterile since it encouraged a rigid stereotype approach in the acquisition of information in an unchanging sequence. Boardman (1993)

realized the difficulty of selecting appropriate criterion to determine the region. He added that the individual regional geographer must make the choice of criterion according to his subjective judgment. There is no universally valid regional division that does justice to all phenomena. Hartshorne (1954) admits that regions are merely fragments of land whose determination involves a considerable degree of arbitrary judgment. The discussion shows that the regional approach is grossly inadequate, hence the relative decline in interest for regional geography. The contemporary patterns of regional specialization are only intelligible not in terms of one region but whole congeries of interlocked economies (Walford, 1989).

The regional period of geographical methodology, like the classical, has left many traces, some of which will perhaps prove permanent, on the methods used in organizing and presenting geographical material. There has been, however, little if any, retreat from regional geography, if by that one means the study of things in association with areas (Duncan and Ley (1983). The regional geography method remains the means for much geographical work but is no longer its end. Much geography is still regional, but that geography is no longer about regions. Gould (1981) agrees that the regional concept has been overtaken by historical change. One may also argue that what departed with an older type of economic life was only one type of regional geography and that the general significance of the region to geography remains unchanged because geographers have to refer to places and spaces, but the method of study has changed.

The Sample Method And Other Approaches

The emergence of sample studies as a teaching method was in part a response to the problems of the regional geography in the content of geography lessons. The sample study was a detailed study of any small geographical unit. The advocates of a sample study articulated that it was more flexible and an attractive choice for those overwhelmed by regional content (Boardman and Partland, 1993). It could also illustrate simply and vividly respond to the physical environment. As a methodological device the sample study assisted pupils of all ages and abilities to acquire some perception of specific places, frustrated, as many had become by the difficulties of grasping complexities of entire regions. The sample study was grounded in the lives and occupations of real people, in real places. The emphasis of the sample study implied active involvement by the pupils in understanding, analyzing and interpreting geographical data that included maps, tables and photographs as well as narratives. The method reflected sound educational principle, 'from the concrete to the abstract,' (Robertson and Long, 1956). The wide spread adoption of the sample study method assisted to dismantle the regional framework.

The emphasis on the description of large areas was replaced by the study of specific locations.

The sample study method allowed geographers to be more innovative in response to the interdisciplinary nature of their subject. The relative decline in interest in regional geography has resulted in the flexibility of approaches to the study of geography. Owing to geography's interconnectedness, its power to make sense of whole situations by its demonstration of relationships, geography has been enriched by concepts from the social and physical sciences (Gould, 1981). Geographers are no longer imprisoned in small sectors of the subject but are bold to examine traditional content. Geographers are now capable of investigating on any problem within the social and physical sciences.

Geographers have borrowed from the following economists; Von Thunen, Khol, J. G., Alfred Weber, Christaller, Losch and Isard who have supplied the most fruitful ideas which have enabled geographers to tackle the regional ordering and functioning of economy and society in post industrial communities (Meyer and Turner, 1997). Their thinking is systematic in approach, though very flexible for use in special studies. Geography and geographers do not live in intellectual isolation. Robinson's (1987) assessment is that both classical and regional methodologies of geography were closely related to the general intellectual history of their day. In the same way contemporary developments in geographical technique and in ideas about geographical methodology are linked to thought in the social and physical sciences in a wider context. (Dickenson, 1976).

Application of Statistical Concepts

The flexibility of the sample study method allowed the application of statistical concepts and devices to many new geographical areas of study (Kirk, 1963). Statistical methods are now commonly used in dealing with questions like testing of regional boundaries, the spacing, size and areas of influence of settlements location theory, migratory movements, characteristic crop combinations and associations, as well as geomorphologic and hydrological questions. Statistics is an aid to good judgment rather than a substitute for it, but it is a very powerful aid and enables many problems to be explained. As Massino Quaini (1982) has observed, quantitative geography often forgets that it is necessary to reflect in order to measure, not to measure in order to reflect. Geographers continue to be interested in questions that demand knowledge of society and environment. The use of statistical techniques permits

greater precision in these matters and, if properly used, helps in avoiding some pitfalls frequently experienced in the past (Scargill, 1992).

Emergence of Quantitative Techniques in Geography

The sample study was vulnerable to its weaknesses. It was idiographic with an excessive reliance on particular detail. There was the danger of unwarranted generalization. A critical analysis by Robertson and Long (1956) reveals that the material soon became out of date and there was a perennial problem of over use of the material. In spite of these weaknesses, the sample study method was widely used and geography became very popular with pupils at all levels. Graves (1975) believes, 'geography was probably more widely and better taught than at any other time in the history of its existence as a subject'. The hardened success was soon shaken by developments in the study of geography at university level that were beginning to involve the use of theoretical frameworks and quantitative techniques, all of which had a common focus on the spatial dimension of the subject. Chorley and Haggett (1979) observed that there was a shift of emphasis from the study of individual and unique phenomena in different places, towards the search for repeating patterns and process. Correctly, such an approach gave rise to the new geography, and the systems approach. The *Frontiers in Geographical Teaching and Models in Geography* by Haggett and Chorley (1979) contained ideas of baffling obtuseness and exciting novelty in about equal parts. Everson and FitzGerald (1979) inspired the work on the *Role of Models and Quantitative Techniques in Geography*. Geographers had for a long time been using the Davisian cycle of erosion and several urban models, notably those of Burgess, Hoyt and Ullman. Gould (1969) reveals that Coleman's model for land use analysis was introduced and became a geographical study tool.

Whilst the value of spatial models of this kind could readily be appreciated, the use of quantitative techniques, such as the rank correlation, co-efficient and chi-square test was to encounter greater resistance (Robinson, 1987). Some strongly resisted what they considered to be an attempt by ambitious geographers to upset established practice. Others were genuinely concerned that the introduction of theoretical models and quantitative techniques would nullify the attempts of previous several decades to bring reality into the development of geography (Bailey and Binns, 1987). Quaini (1982) advises that statistical techniques are only a tool because they cannot be a methodology in themselves. They cannot supply a general

vision of the subject or give it the sort of unity that the older conceptions, whatever their defects provided. The final test of any intellectual labour is its ability to help men to understand questions in which they are interested.

Decline of Interest in Regional Approach and Revival of the Regional Concept

Ever since the introduction of new geography interest in regional geography has continued to decline (Wheeler, 1982). In human geography, at university level, a great variety of approaches exist. These include the following, radical, positivist, phenomenalist, neo-Marxist and Marxist, etc. Yates (1995) confirms that there is confusion in human geography and geographers have tended to benefit in the probable confusion in human geography. However, it appears that like the regional concept a unifying vision is very comforting, without it there is always a danger of the slowly drifting apart of interests which together make up the subject.

Regional geographers such as Steel (1984) are worried of seeing uncertainties and the break up of something that, in times past was a firm whole. Any discipline and method is both a product and victim of its own success. Regional geography's past success cannot be buried so that it can be forgotten because there is a strong movement for its revival, perhaps with different approaches (Meyer and Turner, 1997).

Walford (1989) also advocates that one of the tasks of the new regional geography is to throw light on the regional framework within which social forces operate. Champions of the new geography like Haggett (1979) have supported this view by stressing, 'One can do little with unique except contemplate its uniqueness'. He adds that regional geography must become the laboratory side of an essentially theoretical framework. Regional geography has become the basis for sampling frames. Despite the above emphasis on the importance of regional geography, Kirby and Lambert (1984) agree that regions may exist in some observable form but they are of little interest on their own right.

It can be argued that regional geography helps to restore human beings to their own worlds. Robinson (1987) points out that it is capable of suggesting the importance of our individuality, the potential effectiveness and possibilities for action to create a decent human geography in which to lead our daily lives. The challenge to regional geography is being met by development of studies in regional development closely allied to regional economics and the economics of development

(Yates, 1995). Much of the work is of a theoretical nature. If generalities of models can be married to the geographical uniqueness of places through a hybrid of vigour, there may emerge a new relevant, concerned and applied problem oriented regional geography.

Steel (1984) questions if 'we lost something during the revolution,' because pupils do not seem to find the subject as interesting as was the case when regional geography was taught in the past. Some universities have added and emphasize the environmental science component to invigorate interest among learners. Steel (1984) believes that interest has been lost because the specialist of the new geography has been narrow and ignorant of other parts of the world, except case studies. Steel (1984) further encourages the revival of regional geography because, 'Good regional geography has never consisted of caps and bays, long list of mountains, rivers, products and towns. It has always been problem oriented, though that particular term is relatively new.' Dickenson and Clark (1972) question why systematic branches of geography have developed at the expense of regional geography.

Lee (1984) believes that regional geography is a highly exacting task, calling for much scientific knowledge and cartographic skill and even more literal art. Steel (1984) advocates that more attention be given to the framework of regional geography as a basis and a background to many of our geographical studies to make sense out of the globe, which is one of the geographer's tasks. Newby (1984), a quantitative geographer, has observed, 'Unless our pupils have a reasonable background of regional geography of the right type, of regional information, relations and problems, how can we expect them to have an intelligent understanding of news items that they read or hear about?'. Regional geography should be of the right type and it needs not be rigidly conceived or uniformly presented (Wild, 1992). The rejection of regional geography not only damages geography as a whole and reduces its educational significance but also severely limits the possibilities of a sensitive and critical approach to education in a multi-cultural, international and unequal society.

Findings

As can be learnt from the discussion it is appropriate to note that questions of methods in geography in the future as in the past, will be decided by the quality of the work by geographers of different methodological persuasions. Haggett (1979)

observed that the best sign of health is the production of good research work rather than the manufacture of general methodologies. As interest in regional geography declines, the new geography has welcomed a variety of geographical approaches in human geography, referred to as 'confusion' by Yates (1995) which geographers must welcome provided it assists us to understand the geographical problems and to work out solutions in order to produce good research. The major disadvantage as seen by Boardman (1995) is to observe 'uncertainties and the break up of a firm whole, and originally unifying vision' which may be very uncomfortable. Geographers should realize that intellectual development is a continuing process of modification, rejection, addition and replacement of conceptual tools (Wilson, 1972). Geographical study methodologies are provisional because in future they will be replaced by others which meet contemporary needs better. However, there are signs that instead of regional geography being completely rejected, a modified new regional geography that is problem oriented, with **a more intellectual vigour** and revised approach may be encouraged to emerge. Haggett (1979) one of the champions of new geography stoutly defends regional geography, 'The region is as important to geography as the period is to history'.

Conclusion

The new geography has promoted specialization at an early age. Scholars are arriving at geography by various routes. Geographers should appreciate that while there has been a relative decline of interest in regional geography that should not be attributed to lack of intellectual vigour. The regional methodology assists geography to be a healthy science that is engaged in discovery, verification, comparison and generalizations. Geography as a subject needs some conception of identity because interest in new geography has also waned.

Economists will undoubtedly continue to retain a strong influence on the nature of geographic enquiry in terms of context, theory and methodology. Many problems that human geographers find interesting or for which they are called upon to provide solutions have at least some spatial economic dimension. In order to achieve a comprehensive intellectual analysis of the spatial dimensions, economists are willing to share the problems with geographers. For a subject to fulfill its role of helping to think, it must have some theme, which is offered by regional geography. This is why a modified new regional geography, that is problem oriented with more intellectual vigour and revised approach can be identified in some of our human geography, which is not completely divorced from the regional concept.

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