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# COMMENTARY

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## Geography's Strategies\*

**Rob Kitchin**

*National University of Ireland, Maynooth*

**James D. Sidaway**

*Loughborough University, United Kingdom*

In the context of debates about policy relevance, geotechnologies, and the status of and prospects for geography, we present the case for a promotional strategy based on foregrounding the impact, diversity, and wealth of geographic scholarship. **Key Words:** *geography, relevance, use, value.*

Geographers at the AAG's centennial are challenged with exceptional opportunities to create a more central place for geography in society and in the university. Realizing these opportunities requires identifying and leveraging key emerging trends in the formation and uses of geographic knowledge. Better integration of geography's profound technological innovations with its core traditions also is necessary to strengthen the discipline's research capacity, and to more effectively engage with and contribute to the needs of society.

—(Richardson and Solis 2004, 4)

Over the past twenty to thirty years there has been a widespread restructuring of higher education across the world, more or less driven by the discourses and practices of neoliberalism. These practices combine, in Peck and Tickell's (2002, 381) words:

a commitment to the extension of markets and logics of competitiveness with a profound antipathy to all kinds of Keynesian and/or collectivist strategies. The constitution and extension of competitive forces is married with aggressive forms of state downsizing, austerity financing, and public-service "reform."

As Peck and Tickell go on to describe, the extent, mode, effects, and roles of the market and state transformation vary, and it has thus become commonplace to talk of neoliberalisms

in the plural and as an evolving set of practices, pressures, and opportunities. In general, however, what it has meant for universities are shifts in terms of roles, funding arrangements, structures, and expectations. The shifts are complex, but they include the development of a more explicit corporate and competitive campus aligned to serve the interests of state and commerce (Readings 1996). Of course, universities have long had instrumental roles, and within them, geography at various times and places has served state, empire, and industry. That said, the neoliberal imperative has been accompanied by a marked corporatization of universities, with the adoption of an ethos and management practices from businesses. In parallel, there has been a drive to make universities more accountable with the implementation of methods of corporate accountancy, wherein educational activities and outputs are quantified, counted, evaluated, and ranked with respect to measures of excellence (Castree and Sparke 2000).

The broad aim has been to provide enhanced teaching and research productivity, efficiency, and quality, and more "useful" and "valuable" research, at the same time providing better value for money with respect to public funding, through the twin (and sometimes contradictory) stimuli of competitiveness and accountability. In other words there has been a move toward

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a more entrepreneurial University, underpinned by a particular form of academic capitalism. Here, the educational landscape is increasingly one in which a variety of products are offered (e.g., courses, skilled staff), so that universities compete for customers (e.g., students, public and private research monies) and starred faculty, while seeking ways to demonstrate their excellence (awards, ranking of departments, publications, research income) and generate their own income (e.g., patents, campus companies, consultancy, endowed chairs) in order to grow their business.

The extent and effects of this are uneven. There is a world of difference between a large university with endowments, an elite college able to charge high fees, and a small public college dependent on community or state funding. And institutional cultures are highly variable in terms of how universities are internally organized and operate; especially in terms of career trajectories, student experiences, and faculty work loads. In general, however, academics and universities, and therefore disciplines, are under pressure to embrace the new opportunities that restructuring brings by becoming more productive, entrepreneurial, competitive, innovative, and "useful." Debates in newsletters of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), articles in *The Professional Geographer* (such as that by Richardson and Solis 2004), and the rhetoric in AAG conference plenaries reflect and seek to respond creatively to these pressures. This intervention aims to widen these debates.

Institutions such as the AAG (and its equivalents overseas, such as the Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers in the United Kingdom) have long used an instrumentalist strategy to try and reposition and enhance geography as a discipline. Indeed, modern European geography as a university discipline was largely founded on its practical value for imperialism and/or in fostering national consciousness (Capel 1984; Godlewska and Smith 1994; Driver 2001). However, given the ethos of the present drive for wider disciplinary recognition (which echoes that which accompanied the quantitative revolution, particularly with its emphasis on scientific and policy respectability), we believe the present form of this strategy deserves closer scrutiny and wider debate. Our argument is not for a rejection of some instru-

mental tactics for geography,<sup>1</sup> but rather a plea for a wide, critical conception of what is seen as useful and valuable in contemporary geographical inquiry. We are aware that some similar concerns about relevance, policy, and geography have been in the air in Anglophone geography for decades<sup>2</sup> (indeed arguably for a century, given Keltie 1908) from, for example, Chisholm (1971), Eyles (1973), through Harvey (1974) and Zelinsky (1975), to many more recent interventions such as those of Markusen (1999), Pacione (1999), Peck (1999), Castree (2000), Henry, Pollard, and Sidaway (2001), Martin (2001), Massey (2001, 2002), Dorling and Shaw (2002), James et al. (2004), Johnston and Plummer (2005), Ward (2005), the Centennial Forum recently published in the *Annals* (December 2004, Vol. 94, No. 4), and a forum on the roles of geography in public debate in *Progress in Human Geography* (2005, Vol. 29, No. 2). Yet they clearly bear revisiting and reworking in the light of contemporary trends and circumstances with a view to geography's *strategies*. We claim no great originality then in resurrecting them here, but seek (from our position as members of the AAG who reside and work outside the United States) to stimulate further critical reflection.

### **"Useful" and "Valuable" Geographies**

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With some important exceptions, geographers . . . have chosen not to wade into policy debates or to focus their research efforts on developing integrative, methodologically sound, and well-articulated policy prescriptions. The result has led to narrow and increasingly specialized research stovepipes that often fail to provide policy makers with . . . practical, multisector guidance. . . . Geographers . . . need to engage more aggressively with the scientific, policy-making and practitioner communities.

—(Wood 2004, 53, 54)

There is now heightened pressure on universities and academics to produce students and conduct research that is seen as useful (serves a specified practical purpose) and valuable (the extent to which that purpose generates value) to state, society, and corporations. Use and value can be defined in contradictory ways. In contemporary universities there is strong tendency for use and value to be defined as the cost-effective production of graduates with commer-

cially transferable (marketable) skills or as research with direct *practical* policy or commercial applications. Here, *use* is often reduced to mean the solving of practical social and economic problems, and *value* to mean capital generation and accumulation. Nevertheless, as Graham (2002) argues, it remains vital to transmit and demonstrate the benefits of wider intellectual capacity, creativity, critical thinking, the value of knowing and appreciating, and indeed of enjoying the benefits of wealth (and as he reminds us, such a debate has long been running in relation to the use and value of the Arts). This becomes especially important where use and value are being defined and mobilized through the market and systems of audit, with universities competing for domestic and international students (as a way of generating income) and for research and other educational grants, where the funds are selectively targeted at world-class institutions and for particular types of research whose impacts are being measured and quantified. In this context, like other disciplines, geography needs to be innovative, productive, and marketable to state and commerce as a useable *toolkit*. Yet this risks a selective and unduly narrow view of the utility of geographical enquiry that centers on an ability to generate income, serve the state, and serve commerce. It seems to us that the present push to reposition geography vis-à-vis the academy and wider society would be enhanced by foregrounding alternative views of the utility and value of geography (see too Fuller and Kitchin 2004 and Ward 2005).

### *Dollarship Equals Scholarship?*

As noted by geographers such as Katharyne Mitchell (1999), there is a trend within universities to view worthy scholarship as dollarship—that is, “valuable” research is measured by the amount of income it generates. This trend risks marginalizing some vibrant and challenging work. This is especially the case when research funding priorities are changing, with research agencies promoting and funding research that can be presented as useful and relevant but in a narrowly defined way. Yet, geographies that seek to foreground social injustices, cast light on strategies of state power or oppression, or examine cultural, historical, or philosophical issues may hardly register in terms of direct monetary value or grants earned.

Significant scholarship is not reflected by dollars earned. Promising and challenging intellectual ideas do not necessarily hold monetary value through patents, grants, or the ability to generate consultancy income. The corporatization of universities generates pressures to respond to certain *indicators* of research, rather than to the research itself (Hoggart 1999). Thus, we are routinely creating situations where academic achievement and goals are couched foremost as a desire and ability to obtain large programmatic grants. Space needs to be maintained for scholarship within the discipline that is not dollar dependent. This means valuing and supporting such work within departments and disciplinary organizations and persuading funding agencies and those who manage universities of their intrinsic value, rather than accepting dollarship and the types of research deemed lucrative as primary measures of value.

Of course, geography should seek to capitalize on new funding lines for research. But we need to work hard to widen these lines considerably beyond pragmatic programs so that they include funding and recognition for blue-sky, fundamental, and intellectual projects that might seem, at first glance, to have limited practical or policy application, or do not confirm to what the state and business would like to hear.

Moreover, for most geographers it is self-evident that geography has much to say about the world that policymakers should be listening and reacting to—much governmental thinking needs to be more informed geographically. However, our view is that policy work should have a critical edge and be defined in broad and imaginative terms. It should challenge rather than simply serve; it should not be afraid to diverge from popular opinion or to say things that politicians and bureaucrats may not particularly want to hear. And sometimes it will be about things that policymakers and politicians are not directly interested in. Rather than simply court and step into line with the state, funding agencies, and industry, there is a need to question their strategy and vision and sometimes to think, research, write, and teach beyond their parameters.

### **Promoting the Discipline**

Especially in the United States, geography is a relatively small discipline, without a high public

profile. Notwithstanding recent growth in AAG membership and meeting attendance, and the efforts of the Association to foster geographic education, the discipline remains relatively marginalized in the U.S. context, has been under threat in many universities, and almost everywhere has to fight its corner. Yet the worldwide influence of the U.S. academy means that the vitality, direction, and status of American geography have global consequences. Although the wide variety of the American academic system (from the Ivy League to small community colleges) produces varied experiences and requires diverse strategies, neoliberal transformation of the education sector undoubtedly places many geography departments and geographers in awkward and contradictory positions. Indeed, in writing this commentary, we are acutely aware of our own contradictory positions of seeking to “play the system” and gain resources for our own research and institutional locations, while often being uneasy with and sometimes resisting the more corporate aspects of the system and seeking to protect marginal resources.

And this is the crux of the issue. How do we promote geography within a neoliberal educational sector at the same time that we try to modify and transform such a system? Of course, the answers will depend on context. In the United Kingdom, for example, national funding and regulation (in the form of a periodic national audit of research excellence and impacts which determines resource allocation) produce common pressures, but very different responses and outcomes for geography in different institutions. In another Anglophone context (that of Australia), geography has fared relatively badly in a context of radical reforms where, according to Marginson (2004, 221):

universities were not always focused on the core business of teaching and research; and the medium in which they made that contribution, the academic disciplines, was to some extent destabilized and displaced. . . . Unless they could gain autonomous resources by selling themselves, individual disciplines began to lose purchase on their own agendas.

Within American geography, which is faced with similar challenges, one strategy of choice at present seems to be to push the merits of geotechnology. Geotechnologies, it is argued, provide a means to recruit students, gain research

contracts, provide services to state and commerce, and create a profile vis-à-vis other disciplines, and all of these will place geography departments in the good books of university administrators. Here, there are echoes of the claims of geographers of the so-called quantitative revolution that spatial science would reposition the discipline within the academy by making geography scientifically respectable and would change the status of the discipline with respect to government and industry. We believe, however, that there are a number of reasons to question the emphasis being placed on what is after all just one aspect of a heterodox discipline, a discipline that Warf (2004, 44) justifiably celebrates for its “unprecedented [intellectual] vitality and diversity.”<sup>3</sup>

Geotechnologies do provide one means to promote the discipline. Indeed, many departments will be using the recent *Mapping Opportunities* report in *Nature* (Gewin 2004) for student recruitment and to argue their case in their own universities. Geotechnologies, however, need to be recognized for what they are and should form one tactic among many. They should not come to dominate the instrumental agenda.

Targeting any particular geographic technique as the savior of the discipline and building programs around it is an unduly limited and limiting strategy that puts the cart before the horse. Most geographers are geographers because they find geographic methodologies and theories useful in understanding the world. They promote geography on that basis. They are not geographers for the sake of promoting geography, with the theory and methodology incidental, using whichever techniques will make the discipline seem more relevant or useful, be these qualitative, quantitative, interpretive, intensive, extensive, or some combination of these. To start from the point of trying to identify how to make geography more relevant and useful in the eyes of others and then molding the discipline to that solution ought not to be the key strategy.

Moreover, the risk is that in the rush to promote geotechnologies—to make them popular and bring them center stage—we sideline the impacts of other critically informed, geographical thinking; we say what policymakers (or university presidents) want to hear about immediate income streams, or we simply provide

techniques, tools, and methods, downplaying critical interpretation. Although this tactic provides short-term visibility, in the long term it relegates geographers to being highly skilled technicians.

Geotechnologies, be they geographic information systems (GIS) or programs for processing qualitative data, are tools that re-present data. They are full of potential applications. However, these technologies are not in themselves sufficient to understand processes (this has been debated for nearly two decades, and many of the critical interventions in the recent *Annals* Centennial Forum reconsider it, especially Don Mitchell 2004 and Eric Sheppard 2004). What this means is that geotechnologies push the boundaries of methodological techniques, but they put less weight against intellectual boundaries. Much of the recent impact of the discipline, through the so-called spatial turn in the social sciences, has come through advances in the theorizing space and society. To neglect such advances would be to loosen much interdisciplinary bridge building, significant intellectual work, and potential.

## Conclusions

... since people's purposes differ, there is no such thing as "usefulness" in the abstract; everything must be useful *for* something.

—(Graham 2002, 25)

The debate about relevance in geography was not really about relevance (whoever heard of irrelevant human activity?), but about whom our research was relevant to.

—(Harvey 1974, 23)

There is a need to think more about how to promote and nurture the discipline by drawing on its intellectual strengths. This is the challenge that faces us. Although there are no simple answers, it will be more fruitful for the discipline to employ a wide and heterodox (and therefore often critical) idea of what useful and relevant geographies amount to. As Said (1996), Nelson and Watt (1999), and Shapiro (2005) argue in general terms and, as Hanson (1999) and Ward (2005) have reminded us with specific reference to geography, there are many views of relevance. For example, it might be argued that without the critical work of the past few decades, geo-

graphy could still be reproducing the racist and sexist narratives that dominated parts of the curriculum earlier in the twentieth century. In other words, geography, like other disciplines, has a wealth of ways to be relevant. And in being mindful of these, geography might just enhance its place in the university and society.

In this short commentary, we have sought to invigorate (and broaden) debates on the strategy of professional organizations, departments, and individual geographers to promote what, in the United States at least (and in very many other national contexts), is a relatively small and often seen as a marginal discipline. We welcome the possibility to extend horizons, foster linkages, reconsider our public relevance, and draw new communities and people into the academy and to geography. Geography's strength lies in its ability to raise a plethora of questions through its diverse methodologies, critical frameworks, and intellectual promise. Our core strategy should not be one of transforming the discipline to what others desire or to simply take advantage of technical opportunities, rather it should be to promote and deepen the impact, diversity, and intellectual wealth of geographic scholarship. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Like Don Mitchell (2004, 766), we believe keenly that: "The struggle for ideas, as it intersects with the struggle for power and resources, is something we, as a discipline, simply cannot afford to be dispassionate about." And we both acknowledge that the university should play an instrumental (as well as a critical and educational) role in society. One of us is the director of a national research institute that undertakes a wide range of policy work for a range of state and semi-state organizations and has written on the need for geographers to make a difference beyond the academy (e.g., Fuller and Kitchin 2004). Until mid-2005, the other worked at a relatively recently constituted National University in Asia intent on consolidating its role as a key Asia-Pacific node in natural and social science research frontiers, but where various local service and applied roles are particularly valued along with scholarship and teaching (Kong 1999). That said, we both hold a critical/radical conception of instrumental research and also recognize that much research is not well suited to instrumental ends, but that this does not strip it of its usefulness or value.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 9 of Johnston and Sidaway (2004) for a summary of the debates. We should note that specific subdisciplines within geography have their own

renditions of these wider debates. They are particularly evident in economic geography, in part as a consequence of the institutional power of economics and its relative disregard for work by geographers. While some geographers have thus been working to expand economic geography's vision of "the economic" (Gibson-Graham 1996; Amin and Thrift 2000), others have been more intent on opening dialogue with economists (see Duranton and Rodríguez-Pose 2005).

<sup>3</sup> We want to make it clear that we are keen on technology and spatial-analytical approaches and share some of the sense of their developing role in geography expressed by Sheppard (2001), Plummer and Sheppard (2001), and Johnston et al. (2003). In particular, Sheppard (2001) points out how much advocacy of qualitative method/approach at the expense of quantitative ones rests on the kind of dualism that many advocates of qualitative approaches have elsewhere sought to deconstruct! We are therefore sympathetic to Kwan's (2004, 757) call for hybrid geographies, where "social-cultural and spatial-analytical geographies ... enrich each other." Pickles (2000, 16) similarly celebrates the opportunities offered by digital information and mapping systems, while paraphrasing "the question posed to us in 1974 by David Harvey [which] remains ... especially pertinent today: What kind of digital transition (he said public policy), by whom, and for whom?" Moreover, one of us has a Master's of Science degree in GIS, was schooled in the spatial science tradition, recently co-wrote a successful bid for a National Centre of Geocomputation, and sits on a government integrated spatial data infrastructure working group. Our joint concern is for the emphasis placed on geotechnologies and their instrumental worth, and the pressure to develop and concentrate effort in their development because of their income generating potential per se.

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ROB KITCHIN is Director of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland. E-mail: Rob.Kitchin@nuim.ie. His research interests focus on social geography and the embedding of software into everyday life.

JAMES D. SIDAWAY at the time of writing was Reader in Globalization in the Department of Geography at Loughborough University, United Kingdom. He is currently Professor of Human Geography in the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA, United Kingdom. E-mail: james.sidaway@plymouth.ac.uk. He previously taught in the Department of Geography and European Studies Program at the National University of Singapore. His research interests include geopolitics, geographies of development, and the history and philosophy of geographic thought.