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The Degeneration of Tropical Geography

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Abstract

How did colonial and tropical geography as practiced in the aftermath of World War II become development geography by the 1970s? We excavate the genealogy of development geography, relating it to geopolitical, economic, and social traumas of decolonization. We examine how revolutionary pressures and insurgencies, coupled with the eclipse of formal colonialism, led to the degeneration and displacement of a particular way of writing geographical difference of “the tropics.” A key objective here is to complicate and enrich understandings of paradigmatic shifts and epistemological transitions, and to elaborate archaeologies of development knowledges and their association with geography. While interested in such a big picture, we also approach this story in part through engagements with the works of a series of geographers whose scholarship and teaching took them to the tropics, among them Keith Buchanan, a pioneering radical geographer trained at the School of Geography of the University of Birmingham, England, who later worked in South Africa, Nigeria, London, Singapore (as an external examiner), and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Audrey Kobayashi and the anonymous referees for their many helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. The article has also been reformulated through presentations and subsequent discussions. The first presentation of the article was a paper given at the second meeting of the East Asian Regional conference on Alternative Geography (December 2001) in Hong Kong, China. The paper was also presented at a session on “Putting Philosophies of Geography into Practice” at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers in Belfast in January 2002. A reworked version of the paper was then presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Los Angeles in March 2002. In July 2003, the paper was also presented to an audience including former colleagues, students, family, and friends of Keith Buchanan at the Victoria University of Wellington as the first Asia Pacific Viewpoint Annual Lecture. Although neither of the authors ever met Keith Buchanan, this event in Wellington and responses to the presentation gave us a deeper sense of his personal and professional impacts. The seminar program of the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, provided another opportunity to present and refine the paper. In addition to the comments and information provided by many colleagues, students, or contemporaries of Keith Buchanan recorded in the text, we are very grateful for the comments of Reginald Cline-Cole, Felix Driver, Lisa Law, David Livingstone, Claire Mercer, Warwick Murray, Prem Kumar Rajaram, David Simon, and Ray Watters. We, of course, remain responsible for any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations. Marcus Power acknowledges the support of an Isaac Manasseh Meyer Fellowship, which enabled travels to Singapore in 2002–2003.

Notes

[Steel \(1984\)](#) later wrote a history of the first fifty years of the Institute of British Geographers (founded in 1933), but this volume says virtually nothing about tropical or development geographies.

2. We have in mind [Gregory's \(1994\)](#) consideration of the distinction between the discourses of geography and the (narrower) discipline. For [Gregory \(1994, 11\)](#), “‘Geography,’ in the former sense, is not confined to any one discipline, or even to the specialized vocabularies of the academy; it travels instead through social practices at large and is implicated in myriad topographies of power and knowledge.... ‘popular geographies’ are as important to the conduct of social life as are our understandings of (say) biography and history.”

While we acknowledge the potential of geography defined thus as an expansive discourse, for this paper we shall leap back into the academic discipline.

3. The journal was published as the Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography (1953–1977), then the Journal of Tropical Geography (1958–1979), and subsequently the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography (1980–present). For a retrospective on the journal, see the papers in the 40th anniversary issue (December 1993, vol. 14, no. 2), especially [Raguraman and Huang \(1993\)](#) as well as [Savage's \(2003\)](#) retrospective on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

4. At least not in terms of substantial research. In pedagogic terms, however, descriptive geographies of the empire were very widely taught. This was epitomized by the numerous subsequent editions of [Chisholm's \(1889\)](#) Handbook of Commercial Geography, which provided source material for many school and introductory university texts. Chisholm's codification of economic geography and the centrality of imperial production and trade networks therein also suggest another way in which colonialism and the tropics entered geography. It might therefore be argued that there is no geography wholly outside tropical geography. We must leave this promising path aside here, but [Barnes \(2000\)](#) offers a primer.

5. Carl Sauer's cultural geography—with its sharper sense of cultures and landscapes as places of synthesis and contest—had little impact in the U.K., perhaps because the question of a national/regional cultural space was not in the air in the same way as in a still westward-bound U.S. For, in the aftermath of the partial resolution of the “Irish question” via partition (a resolution that endured until the more turbulent times of the late 1960s), Welsh and Scottish nationalism and English regionalisms were quiescent.

Instead, regional questions were posed as economic questions, regional surveys (see [Linehan 2003](#)), or through liberal (and some socialist) visions of provinces and local character that lent themselves (under the influence of Vidal de la Blache) to debates about the unity of natural regions and of their supposed rightful place as components of the nation.

6. We are grateful to Reginald Cline-Cole [e-mail, 23 May, 2002] for this information and wider observations on the career and life of Pierre Gourou. Gourou's life almost spanned the 20th century (he was born in Tunis in 1900 and died in Brussels in 1999). [Bowd and Clayton's \(2003, 164\)](#) account of Gourou is revealing of the influences upon him and how his appreciation of difference and constraints “was over-determined by the prevailing ideas and assumptions of his day about the legitimacy of colonialism and the backwardness and exoticism of the tropical landscapes that he studied and appreciated because of their difference.” Commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, Ray Watters [comments on “The Degeneration of Tropical Geography,” written correspondence via Warwick Murray, 16 December, 2003] also reminds us that “notwithstanding his [Gourou's] blindness to political trends and dynamic power relations, he fully understood the great physical factors that continue to underpin life in the hot wet tropics such as the Monsoon cycle, the nature of tropical soils outside the great river valleys, the clearing of large areas of tropical rain forest (at a time before we were conscious of “greenhouse gases” and “global warming”), the prevalence of major tropical diseases (including malaria)...His cautionary analysis, while perhaps a little too pessimistic as Farmer notes...has been vindicated by much bitter experience.”

7. Although we will later consider geographical readings of and contributions to dependencia (dependency) theories, we must leave aside the wider evolution and trajectory of dependency theory here. See [Blomstrom and Hettne \(1984\)](#) for a comprehensive account and [Slater \(1993\)](#) for an interpretation by a geographer who had engaged with dependency writings at their height of influence in the 1970s ([Slater 1975, 1977](#)). The Brazilian geographer [Milton Santos \(e.g., 1974\)](#) was also an agent through whom dependency ideas and geography were articulated, but the points of contact and circulation were complex.

8. We are grateful to Michael Wise [14 March, 2002, e-mail correspondence to the authors] for his recollections of and information on Buchanan and the curriculum at Birmingham in the late 1930s.

9. The continued attachment to fieldwork in geography signified, as in area studies, “doubts about the universality of experience upon which positivist accounts of the other are ordered” ([Philpott 2000](#), 31). A commitment to fieldwork in tropical geography is one way in which it maintained links to wider geographical method and debates. While Sauer was rarely influential in tropical geography, [Blaut \(1953, 37\)](#) draws on him in the first issue of *The Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography* and develops a “micro-geography...particularly applicable in situations in which the geographer cannot obtain adequate background data on the economic, cultural or environmental characteristics of a region.”
10. We are grateful for Professors Mabogunje and Udo [21 April, 2002, e-mail correspondence to the authors] for sharing their recollections of the Department of Geography and Keith Buchanan at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s.
11. See [Watters \(1998\)](#) for a complete list of Buchanan's publications.
12. We are grateful to Richard Peet [personal discussions with the authors] and Terry McGee [personal discussions with the authors] for their recollections of Buchanan's radicalism and its sources. Buchanan's renditions of Maoism's achievements have not stood the test of time, in the context of the exposé of the devastating impacts of Maoist politics on China's environment ([Shapiro 2001](#)). Ron [Hill \(1998\)](#) briefly reflects on this in his supplement to [Ray Watters's \(1998\)](#) appreciation. Although he sang the praises of China, Buchanan's own politics might best be described as utopian socialist. The utopian claims of Mao's China clearly appealed to this man, whom Watters (in [Johnston et al. 1999](#), 254) describes as a “‘radical humanist’ but freely admit[s] it doesn't fully do justice to the range of his work.”
13. Although other work was conducted outside this genre, such as Paul Wheatley's *Historical Geography of South-East Asia* ([Berry and Dahmann 2001](#)) most teaching and research at Singapore was informed by tropical geography. Hence the novelty of Buchanan's approach.
14. It appears that [Buchanan's \(1963a\)](#) paper, especially its argument that the working classes of the first world had been beneficiaries of colonialism, set off a fierce ideological debate within the editorial board of *New Left Review* ([Newman 2002](#), 113–15).
15. See note 7.

16. It should be added here that *Antipode* began publication in the United States (at Clark University) and was an embodiment of radical critiques of America's Vietnam war and the emergence of a counterculture and New Left in the United States amid the rediscovery by academia of poverty and racism in the country. It is interesting to reflect that *Economic Geography* also began at Clark in 1925 and might also be understood—in the light of the comments in note 4—in part as representing a different (in this case uncritical) register of networks of (colonial and quasi-colonial) trade and commodity production.

17. On geography, history, and (auto)biography, see [Billinge, Gregory and Martin \(1984\)](#) and more recently, [Gould and Pitts \(2002\)](#), [Lorimer \(2003\)](#), [Moss \(2001\)](#), and Yi-Fu [Tuan \(1999\)](#).

18. We will note, too, that the map was reprinted in distance learning material produced by the Open University in Britain in the early 1980s and would have had a wide circulation among students studying for degrees in the Open University program. The Open University then had (and still has) the largest number of undergraduate students of any British University.

19. [Lorimer and Spedding \(2002\)](#) and [Withers \(2002\)](#) point to some of the ways that other documents, artefacts, and agents constitute the complex networks within which geography is reproduced.

Related Research Data

[GEOGRAPHY AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT - 1](#)

Source: *Antipode*

[Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World.](#)

Source: *Population and Development Review*

[FORTY YEARS OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY IN THE JOURNAL](#)

Source: *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*

[The "Coloured" Community in the Union of South Africa](#)

Source: *Geographical Review*

[Fieldwork and Tropicality in French Indochina: Reflections on Pierre Gourou's *Les Paysans Du Delta Tonkinois*, 1936](#)

Source: *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*

[Regional survey and the economic geographies of Britain 1930–1939](#)

Source: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers

L'Indochine Francaise.

Source: Pacific Affairs

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