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Editorial

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Location and Learning

As a humanist and as an historian of Chinese intellectual traditions, a humanities subject that would seem to have little connection to the geographic, I welcome the launch of *GeoHumanities*. We are in debt to the editors, for launching a new journal is never easy, and to the Association of American Geographers, its successive presidents and its executive director, Douglas Richardson. For the last decade Doug, whose own history is in geospatial technology, has been untiring in his efforts to encourage historians and humanists to engage with geography, and geographers to engage with the humanities. I think it may still be true that there are more humanistic geographers than geographic humanists, but a “spatial turn” has been taking place in history and the humanities. The establishment of *GeoHumanities*, this new journal, will add further impetus to the trend.

I had the good fortune to become involved with geography as the founding director of the Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis, and to have worked with a professional staff that has succeeded in reestablishing the geographic in my immediate academic environment. The story of how sixty-five years ago Harvard closed its geography department (in fact it closed the geography wing of a department shared with geology) is a bitter moment in the history of geography as a discipline in the United States, one all too well known to geographers. When Harvard’s President Conant pronounced that geography was not an academic subject, and thus would no longer have a place in his university, a number of private research universities followed suit. The fact that Harvard backtracked and, unsuccessfully, offered a professorship in History to a leading historical geographer is not, given the outcome, particularly relevant.

It would be fitting here to offer an apology, but I do not think we should assume that Harvard was of such influence that other universities thoughtlessly imitated it. Moreover, the fact that the professor in charge was gay, and that the then president of the AAG was upset by this fact, as Neil Smith has pointed out, was apparently a local matter and thus was

unlikely to have been adequate reason for other universities to close their departments. Something else must have been going on.

It seems to me that the larger context was usefulness and interdisciplinarity. Private research universities are nervous about teaching the practical and useful, the how-to course rather than the intellectual foundation. Perhaps in the years after WWII, when usefulness had been the order of the day, this was more acutely felt although it lingers on today. What is certain is that those years saw increasing emphasis on disciplinarity in the social sciences and humanities. Geography, a field that actually was and is useful, had been located in the sciences at Harvard yet was taking up issues of human geography and finding followers in regional studies who were not interested in the scientific training associated with physical geography. A field that lent itself so well to interdisciplinarity and did not insist on being narrowly scientific, was in trouble for reasons that may seem strange today when we value interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary learning.

The fact that at Harvard we have been successful in the last decade in bringing the geographic back into local academic life, across the disciplines and professional schools, has everything to do with the fact that Geography brings something that no other discipline offers yet can add value to so many disciplines; it has everything to do with its inherent interdisciplinarity.

What is it that Geography uniquely offers? This is a question those of us at universities without Geography departments must answer in our effort to explain its importance to deans, faculty and students. The answer that has given me the most to reflect upon came from Rickie Sanders of Temple University at the AAG's first meeting of humanists and geographers, from which came the volume *Geohumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place* (Routledge, 2011). Professor Sanders did have an answer to the question of what she would want students to learn from the single course in Geography they might ever take. This reduction to the question of minimal learning outcomes led me to ask what it was that other humanities disciplines were unique in offering. How could I argue that a university should make a place for the study of history, or literature, or art, or

philosophy if it did not already have it? Different disciplines do different things. Speaking only about history as a discipline, and its basic approach to understanding human events, it seemed to me that at a methodological level historians teach something that is not taught by geography, philosophy, literature or art, namely that when things happen and how things change matters, and that the job of historians begins with defining the chronology of events in order to pose the question of how we can best account for changes in the order of things. We do not demand that other humanities disciplines share this concern. Historians claim responsibility for the basic tool chronology, but – and herein lies our claim to being interdisciplinary as well – assert also that human experience is fundamentally historical: that it takes place in time, that it has a past as well as a present.

The learning outcome Professor Sanders proposed was just as simple and in practice just as complex: that we need to learn that location and distance matter. The map serves as a basic tool for representing location and distance; variation through space is no less important than change over time and the challenges of accounting for changes through time and space is an effort that in practice involves many disciplines. My interest in geographic information systems stems from a belief that seeing large amounts of historical data spatially offers insights into the questions I am most interested in.

I have titled this contribution “Location and Learning” because I am persuaded that location really does matter, in past and in present -- even in a wired world and even in intellectual life. The question is what we will do with the spatial and locational information we find. Some argue that that the historical trend is toward one international language – English of course— that will be shared by (and thus define) the educated classes, thus erasing the intellectual distance created by language and making location irrelevant. There is some evidence for this. The number of spoken languages is declining. It was under the aegis of nationalism that modern nation states largely succeeded if not in erasing dialects within their borders then at least teaching their subjects a common language. And is

the advent of the web not evidence for English as the shared global language of the educated?

Over the last two years there have been over fifteen million registrants in massive open online courses, seventy *per cent* of whom reside abroad. And yet, the response to this has been a proliferation of courses in national languages and an ever-increasing effort, largely crowd-sourced, to translate English language courses into other languages. Finally, as computer scientists recognized early on, the internet succeeds when it is local. The 400 million Chinese on the web are in a Chinese language world.

Nevertheless, learning (in history, biology, law, or computer science) does transcend language. Ideas translate. So although languages, the bedrock of culture, differ through space and time learning can be shared across languages. So perhaps location and distance do not matter after all?

Leaving the present for China 800 years ago, about which I actually know something, I want to consider ways in which even intellectual historians will gain by paying attention to location and distance. Each of the four elements that defined the political, social and cultural world in 1200 had a vital spatial aspect, some more obvious than others.

First, the North China plain, traditional home to the bulk of the population was lost to foreign invasion from the northeast, beyond the borders of the Song state. The capital moved to Hangzhou (Marco Polo's "Quinsai") where it was now located in the heart of the southeast region which had, thanks to a well-maintained water system that reduced transportation costs, become the economic heart of the realm, as it remains today. Second, the civil service examination system, which had been instituted as a means of recruiting educated men for service as civil officials, continued to draw increasing numbers of applicants, ninety-nine *per cent* of whom failed but all of whom could claim status as members of the literati elite by virtue of their participation. This was a national system with a national curriculum, yet the spatial distribution of those who did pass shows that this was by no means a system of proportional representation. Applicants were clustered in: the southeast (southern Jiangsu, northern Zhejiang), the coastal cities of

Zhejiang and of Fujian farther south, and the inland water routes of West and East Jiangnan (southern Anhui and Jiangxi). There was evidently a rather direct correlation between the prosperity of an area and the number of candidates it could produce. This implies further that the study of intellectual history is, whether we are aware of it or not, the study of certain areas where intellectuals were congregated. Third, intellectual trends in these areas largely rejected the effort during the fifty years before the loss of north to expand the role of government and create institutions that would play a larger role in education, the provision of rural credit, the circulation of goods and the organization of community in local society. Instead they shifted attention away from the capital and national policy to the role of local elites and local government. We often suppose that societies that see an increase in the government's role in society marks a shift away from the localism of traditional agrarian societies to the nation state combined with some degree of nationalistic rhetoric, but in this case the movement was in the opposite direction. Fourth, the two intellectual groups that were most outspoken in rejecting the statist policies of the previous century and focused their attentions on local society were differed both ideologically and spatially, although both found their followers in the areas with the greatest numbers of examination candidates. The networks of the leading statecraft scholars of the day were centered on the great commercial centers and called for greater government investment in infrastructure, maintaining the money supply so vital to commerce, and reducing military expenditures. The networks of the leading moral philosophers, however, were predominantly in prosperous agrarian regions, less subject to the velocity of commerce, with well-established literati families concerned with social stability. They called for a turn to individual moral cultivation and saw the solution to local problems in the voluntarism of literati morally committed to the common good.

Whether or not this analysis will in the end be found adequate, it would not have been possible in the first without taking location and distance seriously and having the technical means of geospatial analysis to locate many thousands of individuals in the landscape and to see their networks in spatial terms. In the end, human life takes place in time and in space. My

hope for GeoHumanities is that it will provide a home for all those who have seen the possibilities of bringing geography into the disciplines of the humanities.

Peter K. Bol