

HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND MAPS: TEACHING WORLD HISTORY

Dennis Reinhartz
and

Judy Reinhartz
University of Texas at Arlington

*As Geography without History seemeth as carkasse without motion, so
History without Geography wandereth as vagrant without certain
habitation.*

—attributed to Captain John Smith

History is geography over time.

—Andrei Lvovich Botvinnik
in *A WALK IN THE WOODS* (1988)
by Lee Blessing

*History . . . is exceedingly difficult to follow without maps . . . and, it may
be whispered, geography untouched by the human element is dull to an
extraordinary degree, duller even than mapless history, and that, the Dodo
said, was the driest thing that it knew.*

—Sir Charles Arden-Close

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

History and geography are inseparable. The first two statements above, one ascribed to an early seventeenth-century North American explorer and the other spoken by a Soviet diplomat in a recent play (most eloquently by Sir Alec Guinness in its London performance) dealing with arms negotiations, clearly point to this fact. Historians have known its truth and substantiated it with their study, writing, and teaching since Herodotus.

Geography is a major causative factor in history, and of all the subject areas in the school curriculum, the two are among the most closely related. Classically, history has been defined as the study of humanity's past and has asked the questions "When?" and, more importantly, "Why?" Geography has been defined as the study of humanity's interaction with the physical environment and has asked the questions "Where?" and, also more importantly, "Why?" The two actually merge in historical geography, the geography of the past, a legitimate area of study for both.¹ And as the third statement above by a former director general of the Royal Geographical Society indicates, history and geography also come together in their reliance on maps for the investigation and presentation of data.²

Consequently, it is almost impossible to study or teach history without considering the geographic dimension. This is true especially with regard to the teaching of history where the infusion of relevant geography into the process

¹ See Dennis Reinhartz and Judy Reinhartz, *Geography Across the Curriculum* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1990).

² See Dennis Reinhartz, "Teaching History with Maps: A Graphic Dimension," in *Essays on Walter Prescott Webb and the Teaching of History*, ed. Dennis Reinhartz and Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 79-98.

facilitates and enhances it; a geographic dimension provides greater insight into the course of human events. And teaching geography as part of history also may be one way to address the well-publicized issue of students' geographic illiteracy to better prepare them for the coming age of global civilization. History coupled with geography provides a context of time and space essential for students to understand the past.

If we grant the reasonableness of integrating geography into the teaching of history, then, for teachers of history and social studies, some important questions yet need to be considered: What kind of geographic information, and how much of it? To what ends? And perhaps most importantly, just simply "how?" In the following pages, we shall seek to offer some answers to these questions.

In the process of confronting the problem of the geographic illiteracy of students, the Association of American Geographers and the National Council for Geographic Education have identified five fundamental themes in geography for geographic education in the schools to focus on:

1. *Location*--position on the earth's surface.
2. *Place*--physical and human characteristics.
3. *Relationships within places*--humans and environments.
4. *Movement*--humans interacting on the earth.
5. *Regions*--how they form and change.³

And implied in each of these five themes is a sixth, *time*. These themes can serve as a framework for teachers to incorporate the geographic dimension into history courses.

Location describes where people and places are positioned on the earth, specifically and in relation to each other. Comprehending location is the beginning of geographic understanding which is essential to discerning historical development. Before students can learn about the achievements of the Bronze Age in a world history course, they must know where the various civilizations of this era first arose. Knowing that Chinese Civilization developed in a great river system in East Asia or that Minoan Civilization developed on an island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea at the crossroads of three continents helps to explain why civilizations began in those specific locations and to explain the nature of the accomplishments of each civilization. Knowing the precise positions of the civilizations of the Bronze Age also provides students with a basis for understanding cultural transfer and/or cultural uniqueness. By pointing out their positions on a map of the world, the impact of Mesopotamia's agricultural discoveries on the growth of Egypt is readily visualizable, as is the isolated evolution of Olmec Civilization in Mesoamerica that produced its characteristic sculpture, for example, uninfluenced by any other civilization.

From these examples from the Bronze Age, it is clear that site is a major determining factor in the situation of a civilization. Situation is *place* and is defined by its physical and human qualities. Climate, landforms, water bodies, soils, and

³ *Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers and National Council for Geographic Education, 1984), 3-8.

flora and fauna create a place while human conceptions and activities form its individual character. Thus, it was the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and the Sea of Marmara, waterways connecting the Black and Mediterranean seas, that convinced Greeks from Megara to plant a trading colony, Byzantium, in the area in 667 B.C. After centuries of human habitation (Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim), Byzantium was transformed into the great city of Constantinople/Istanbul. The situations of many other cities, for example medieval Cologne or modern New York, likewise played a significant role in their influencing the spread of civilization. The process of radiating out from urban centers exemplifies what can be called "place building."

In contrast to place building, there is "place annihilation." Such destruction can be naturally caused or initiated by humanity. In a recent article in *Geographical*, the monthly magazine of the British Royal Geographical Society, an example of "place annihilation" in history is cited. The author analyzes the effects of the German "Big Blitz" of 1940-1941 on London. In the telling conclusion, contrasting natural acts of "place annihilation" (e.g. earthquakes) to those wrought by humanity, the author states:

The blitzes came to be strategies of "place annihilation" more than warfare. They sought to lay waste the historic places of settlement, physically by bomb damage, socially by uprooting, and exterminating residents that made them living spaces the Big Blitz influenced the future The Allied air forces learned from it, and felt justified in outdoing it [Cologne, Dresden, Hiroshima, etc.] in their turn These developments led to strategic air power and the nuclear threat that emerged after the war. They provided the military impetus and moral environment for dozens of campaigns against human settlements

. . . .⁴

This passage also clearly demonstrates how the geographic theme of place provides added insight to historical events.

Having a grasp of the physical and human qualities of places helps students understand the *relationships within places* over time. Changing human-environment relationships in history are both common and important. Such relationships force students to deal with the physical features of the land while simultaneously learning about humanity's role in influencing it over time. Classic case studies can be found in the study of the transformation of the earth's vast grasslands, be it the steppes of Eurasia or the Great Plains of North America.⁵ Accordingly, the change from fluid nomadic frontiers sparsely populated by Cossacks or Comanches to settled modernizing agricultural heartlands often proclaims the rise of major states like the Russian Empire or the United States. A similar phenomenon of more current significance is the destruction of tropical rainforests in the historical contexts of the emergence of the third world countries of Africa, Asia, and South America on the

⁴ Kenneth Hewitt, "Our Cities Bombed," *Geographical* (May 1990), 13.

⁵ For example, see William H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), and Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1931).

one hand and the emergence of a global civilization in the late twentieth century on the other. In all these instances, geography can supply students with a valuable backdrop for and a greater understanding of the complexities of modernization.

Movement, the relationships between and among places,⁶ is fundamental to history; in effect, the movement of people, ideas, and goods and services helped to write world history. One major example of movement has come to be known as the "Columbian exchange."⁷ The "Columbian exchange" is the massive transfer of populations, ideas, diseases, plants, and animals between the Old World and New initiated by Columbus's discoveries, and it continues into the present. Hence, when considering disease vectors as part of this spatial interaction, it becomes apparent that the unwitting introduction of European germs like smallpox and measles into the Amerindian populations decimated them and thereby facilitated the Spanish conquests of the sixteenth century and after. This decimation also contributed to a labor shortage that eventually necessitated the importation of human power that was more disease resistant (e.g. African slaves) to work New World Spanish estates. In turn, the introduction of more virulent New World strains of venereal diseases proved to be yet another major plague for the Old World. Similar interaction case studies can be found, for instance, in the Middle Ages, concerning the transfer between Europe and Asia via the silk and tea roads or between the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean seas via the Eastern European river systems.

Ideas and literary forms also were part of the transfer process. Thus, Scandinavian and German concepts of political and military organization moving down these river system from the north in the ninth century played a role in the formation of the first Polish and Russian states. And in the two hundred years that followed, Byzantine church literature moving up the rivers from the south became an important foundation for modern Russian literature and especially the world of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the nineteenth century.

Regions are essential units of study in geography as well as history. A region can be defined as any area delineated by some physical and/or human uniformity. The Greater Southwest and Central Asia are two parallel, yet distinct examples. Aridity is the physical common denominator of both regions, but the human common denominators are quite different. The extent of Hispanic culture forms the basis for the human definition of the Greater Southwest, whereas Islamic culture and the Mongol heritage form the basis for Central Asia. In both cases, the delineations are physical and cultural, and they ignore current political boundaries like those between the United States and Mexico or the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. In this way, comprehension of regions, their histories, and their current problems and importance is often enhanced.

While regions are fundamental geography and history, it is the study of *regional effect*, the impact of geography on history, that is at the core of historical geography.⁸ So, for example students can be taught that early Spanish explorers of

⁶ *Guidelines for Geographic Education*, 6-7.

⁷ For example, see Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972).

⁸ 8. For example, see W. Gordon East, *The Geography Behind History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965).

the Greater Southwest like Cabeza de Vaca or Coronado were not really trailblazers, but actually followed already well established natural routes pioneered by Indians before them, and that today railroads and modern interstate highways still follow many of these same routes. And in Central Asia, cities like Tashkent, Bokhara, and Samarkand, first brought to prominence as centers of commerce and/or religion by the Mongols eight centuries ago, still function in similar capacities today, regardless of the fact that they are now part of the Soviet Union.

THE ROLE OF MAPS

In a world history course, maps play a key role. Using maps is one of the most efficient ways for teachers to interpret the five fundamental geographic themes--location, place, relationships within places, movement, and region--and to illustrate them as well as the related historical information. Maps are invaluable to the study and teaching of history and geography; they "comprise a powerful, widely used, complex, and little understood form of communication that is as old as language itself. Humanity achieved 'graphicacy' even before it achieved literacy. We learned to draw before we learned to write, and we also probably mapped before we wrote."⁹ When maps are used in the classroom, the emphasis is on visual education and visual perception, thereby heightening students' graphicacy. "Graphicacy" is nonverbal, nonliterary, and nonnumerical communication; it is simply a realization of the old adage that a picture (or a map) is worth a thousand words.¹⁰ As Thomas Jefferson, himself a mapmaker, once pointed out, "A map can give a better idea of a region than any description in writing."¹¹

When considering the awesome universal tapestry of world history, maps make it easier for students, for example, to locate the global address where the battle of Tours in Western Europe in 732 occurred, a city like Timbuktu in West Africa arose, or a civilization like that of the Indus River Valley of South Asia developed. Beyond simple location, if maps depicting the physical environment like landforms and rivers are used, place (e.g. Australia) also is readily demonstrable. And more sophisticated thematic maps (that is, those showing the spatial distribution or variation of a geographic and/or historical phenomenon), usually of a comparative nature, will allow teachers to discuss the relationships within places like those between resource availability and centers of production in the early English industrial revolution, movement like the spread of Islam, and the physical (e.g. equatorial rainforests) and human boundaries (e.g. Bantu languages) of regions like Central Africa as well as regional effect such as that on Israel in the Middle East since 1948 to name but a few examples.

Maps do more than merely illustrate history; they are the very "stuff" of history. Maps are texts and artifacts, landmarks of human achievement, that can be

⁹ Reinhartz, "Teaching History with Maps," 79.

¹⁰ See Edmond T. Parker and Michael P. Conzen, "Using Maps as Evidence: Lessons in American Social and Economic History" (Bethesda, MD: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 125 935, 1975), and Reinhartz and Reinhartz, *Geography Across the Curriculum*.

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 5.

used to let students reconstruct the past.¹² Maps summarize the scientific, technological, intellectual vigor of an era, and they document the political, economic, social, and aesthetic and artistic values of the times in which they were created. A Baroque map for example like the representation of "The Territory of Frankfort" in the *NOVUS ATLAS* (1640) by the Dutch cartographer Willem Janz Blaeu mirrors the values of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Age of the Baroque as well as those of the vigorous bourgeois Dutch who dominated much of European worldwide trade and exploration at the time. In this way, maps have been instrumental both in the recording and the writing of history,¹³ and as such, for students especially they "can kindle the imagination, sustain trips through time and space, make real the milieu of . . . history."¹⁴

Using originals or readily available facsimiles of older maps descriptively encourages deductive reasoning among students, and using maps to teach the critical evaluation of historical evidence stimulates inductive reasoning. In addition, using older maps of historic value depicting the geography of the past like a copy of the famous "Vinland Map" (c. 1440) forgery also is conducive to "hands-on" education and will encourage students to participate in the learning process and to develop their research skills.¹⁵

SUMMARY

As stressed throughout this article, studying history with a geographic dimension provides an interdisciplinary context for addressing the philosophical, political, economic, social, and artistic issues and/or events of the past. Such a context promotes the development of analytical skills, comparative perspectives, and critical decisions. These competencies develop when focusing on broad themes and questions rather than on a fact-driven curricular program.

In addition, this broader focus provides students with numerous opportunities to use these skills and historical knowledge and concepts when dealing with the five geographic themes of place, location, relationships within places, movements, and regions. When studying place, location, and relationships within places, unique questions are posed: "What is this place like, how and in the past?" "Why is this place like it is?" And "How and why does it differ from, or resemble, other places?" To be effective, a physician conducting research to eradicate a disease (e.g. AIDS) must know not only where the disease is thriving, but also where it has thrived (e.g. equatorial Africa) to discover a cure. It is here that maps are helpful. When considering these relationships, students analyze how people respond to their changing physical and cultural environments. They are trying "to make connections

¹² J. B. Harley, "Texts and Contexts in the Interpretation of Early Maps," in *From Sea Charts to Satellite Images: Interpreting North American History Through Maps*, ed. David Buisseret (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3-15.

¹³ Reinhartz, "Teaching History with Maps," 82.

¹⁴ Michael and Susan Southworth, *Maps: A Visual Survey and Design Guide* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 12.

¹⁵ Reinhartz, "Teaching History with Maps," 91-94.

between cause and effect on the earth and to view events in their proper continuum rather than isolation.¹⁶

In connection with the themes of movement and regions, yet other questions come into play: "In what ways is this place connected with other places?" "How is this place changing, and why?" And "What would it feel like to be in this place?"¹⁷ In answering these questions, comparisons readily can be made between places and also between what a place was like in the past and is like in the present. In the process, students are asked to respond to the environments of the past and present by making decisions and judgments about these places. In total, these themes encourage students to think about people and historical events in a different way.

It is our belief that if history is given a geographic perspective in the classroom, students better comprehend the "combined power [of history and geography] to explain the past and the current human condition, and future possibilities."¹⁸ Together, history and geography are more powerful than if taught separately. History conveys the essential knowledge while geography provides a bridge for understanding these facts, concepts, theories, etc. History and geography are the "twin disciplines" around which to organize the social studies curriculum.¹⁹

We hope that we have provided a convincing argument for integrating geography into the teaching of world history. Using such an approach "gives us unique perspectives about places and their relationships to teach over time."²⁰ These unique perspectives will help students to deal with change in their current environment as well as the changes they will face as they assume their adult roles in society. To be effective problem solvers, students must understand and be connected to their world. It is through this comprehension of and connectedness with the past and present that a pattern of unity begins to emerge.

¹⁶ See Reinhartz and Reinhartz, *Geography Across the Curriculum*, and Richard Daugherty (ed.), *Geography in the National Curriculum* (London: The Geographical Association, 1989), 5-6.

¹⁷ *Geography in the National Curriculum*, 6.

¹⁸ *Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, 1989), x.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Guidelines for Geographic Education*, "Preface."