


Where is Geography?

The year of 2007 was marked by a growing number of violent landscapes throughout the world: Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Darfur, are just some of the most broadcasted. At the same time concerns about Climate Change, the International Year of Planet Earth (2007-2009), coupled with various catastrophes - floods in Mozambique in February and in the UK in July, 46 degrees registered in Bulgaria in the same month and a devastating hurricane in Bangladesh in November - have brought various disaster places into our living rooms. In the world economy, the growing power and influence of China and India, the unpredictable action of Moscow and the new geometry of power in Washington, all present critical challenging topics for consideration and research within Geography. Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names (UNICEF 1998). Despite various national and regional efforts, international programmes and the action of many agencies, poverty continues to be a striking feature in Africa and elsewhere - today, 800 million people suffer from hunger and malnutrition. In Europe, the continuing instability in Kosovo, the growing pressure of African migrants on the continent's southern borders, and the tense political relations with Turkey and the Middle East present persistent challenges that require geographical scrutiny (see Gregory 2004, Gregory & Pred 2006 and Smith 2004).

This brief, and obviously incomplete, world panorama provides a rough perspective of what some of the geographies we make should be about. However, whilst I wouldn't

go as far as Hamnett (2003), in his provocative editorial for *Geoforum*, even a brief look at international Geography Journals illustrates that the discipline is somehow absent from the enquiry of many of the dramatic spaces and stories mentioned above. Despite many voices claiming the need for a more engaging geography that connects deeply with the political nature, the exclusions and the inequalities of society and space, the discipline is clearly slow at tackling and responding to contemporary problems (see Blunt & Rose 2004, Gough, Eisenschitz & McCulloch 2006, Smith 2004, UNICEF 2005). With very few exceptions, this condition is even more conspicuous if we look at the types of geography being produced in Portugal.

Just like in many other European countries, academic geography is going through convoluted times in Portugal. Various factors explain this; let me just mention six. Firstly, the recent application of the Bologna Process has led to a re-structuring of first, second and in some cases third level degrees, resulting in an enormous administrative and bureaucratic effort by universities and academic staff; secondly, the declining number of candidates has produced a significant effort in marketing geography university degrees and in organising attractive events in secondary schools; thirdly, the severe financial cuts in public funds for social sciences degrees have led to the internal re-structuring of departments; fourthly, the meagre job market for professional geographers has put an extra pressure to invest on GIS courses, equipment and laboratories, neglecting other 'traditional'



fields of geography; fifthly, the rapid (some will say rushed) restructuring of geography research centres throughout the country may be understood as a lost opportunity to organise the research in the academic discipline of Geography nationwide; finally, the uncertain future institutional architecture of universities, some turning into Foundations, is producing very doubtful prospects in academia for geographers and an increasingly predatory institutional environment. All of these factors combined have contributed to an unstable landscape of scientific production. The Geography Department and the Geography and Planning Research Centre have felt deeply the random blending of these events, which explain, to a certain degree, the changes in the composition of the Associate Editors, the Editors and to a lesser extent, the International Advisory Editorial Board.

Despite this unstable environment, in 2007, four Geography PhDs were concluded at the University of Minho. António Bento Gonçalves completed a significant research on Forest Fires and Spatial Planning in the Northwest of Portugal. Ana Francisca de Azevedo finished an innovative thesis on the geographies of landscape in cinema, developing and advancing an alternative understanding of the Geographies of Portugal. Flávio Nunes completed a thesis on the spatial impacts of Teleworking in Portugal. Finally, Elza Carvalho, who unfortunately is no longer at the University of Minho, completed a meticulous and rigorous work on the historical rural development of the Lima region in Northwest Portugal. Furthermore, José Ramiro Pimenta, another geographer, completed a PhD at the History Department the University of Minho, on the Cultural Geography of the History of Archaeology. This is an outstanding piece of work, which

demonstrates where Geography, History and Archaeology meet at the very heart of the History of Science.

On a sad note I would like to remember Allan Richard Pred (1936-2007), who passed away in early 2007, at the age of 70. Pred was an extraordinary American intellectual (though half Swedish by heart) and formidable thinker, who, in a wide range of areas including behavioural geography, urban growth, historical social and spatial transformation in the US and Sweden, modernity, racism, developed the idea of montage as a transgressive textual strategy for both authors and readers. Here are some words from his academic site at Berkely:

'I am totally unconcerned with the disciplinary limits of geography, but fully concerned with geography as an ontological condition, as an inescapable existential reality. Everybody has a body, nobody can escape from their body, and consequently all human activity - every form of individual and collective practice - is a situated practice and thereby geographical. I regard the invisible geographies of power relations and meaning/discourse as every bit as "real" as the visible geographies of the built landscape and actual human activity. Whether exploring the historical geography of past and present urban modernities, or the production of gendered and "racial" difference, I am always preoccupied with the complex and multi-scaled processes through which visible and invisible geographies emerge out of one another.'

Aurora Geography Journal has established a strong Atlantic bridge with Brazil, in particular with its cultural geography community. This is

evident in the 2007 issue, which is composed solely of human geography papers. Roberto Lobato Corrêa, from the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, continues his outstanding work in Cultural geography, and discusses the changing meanings of symbolic forms in space. Denis Linehan, from University College Cork, Ireland, analyses the recent transformation of Nairobi city centre and explores the ways in which the spatiality of the city is being shaped by the processes of neo-liberalism. André Novaes, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, carefully examines the cartography of the illegal drugs in Brazilian newspapers, while Christian Oliveira, from the Federal University of Ceará, provides a theoretical discussion of the educational value of tourism. João Sarmiento, from the University

of Minho, Portugal, attempts to travel through various perspectives of car geographies, arguing for a different geographical approach to automobility. Finally, as a result of the partnership of *Aurora Geography Journal* with the 2nd Iberian Conference on Information Systems and Technologies (which took place between 21-23 June 2007 in Oporto, Portugal), Xosé Carlos Macía Arce, from the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain, winner of the 'Best paper on GIS or Information Society' at the Conference, presents an analysis of the developments of the Information Society in Ireland, examining three case-studies.

João Sarmiento
Editor

References

- Blunt, A & Rose, G (Eds.) 1994 *Writing Woman and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. The Guilford Press, New York.
- Gough, J Eisenschitz, A & McCulloch, A 2006 *Spaces of Social Exclusion*. Routledge, Oxford.
- Gregory, Derek 2004 *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Gregory, Derek & Pred, Allan (Eds) 2006 *Violent Geographies. Fear Terror and Political Violence*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Hamnett, C 2003 Contemporary Human Geography: fiddling while Rome burns? *Geoforum*, 34, pp.1-3.
- UNICEF 1998 *The State of the world's children: Education*. Unicef, New York.
- UNICEF 2005 *The State of the world's children: Invisible and Excluded*. Unicef, New York.
- Smith, N 2004 *The endgame of Globalisation*. Routledge, New York.