Chapter 4

The geographical mind

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Before beginning this discussion of what it might mean to 'think geographically', consider your response to the following questions:

- Do local people have rights to, or over, their localities?
- Should we open all borders and live without boundaries on a planet which belongs to us all?

A moment of discussion

Questions such as those above are often approached through particular cases, so let us eavesdrop on a discussion about one such. The subject is Amazonia and in what is already an unusual twist the focus is on the peoples rather than (or as well as) the forest itself. Both are precarious, under attack from outside forces. The discussion is lively and the tenor of the emerging consensus lies with the local people of Amazonia against the monied interests of loggers and ranchers and even against the invasion of other poor people (but from 'outside') who are also in search of somewhere to live. So far, probably, so predictable. I too am inclined to support the idea of some kind of rights to land and territory for the remaining ancient societies of Amazonia.

But on what grounds? Perhaps the argument is made on the grounds that these are local people and, in consequence of that, they have rights to this locality in the face of global forces. For this argument to be truly valid it must be a principle which is applicable in other situations too. And if that is really the way in which we want to argue the case then what is being proposed is a particular geographical imagination of the planet: as a world which is essentially divided into localities, or territories, within each of which dwell local people with local rights. (It proposes, of course, a lot more besides – notions of indigeneity being chief among them.)

When confronted with that background geographical imagination, defending the local people of Amazonia *on the grounds that they are local* begins to look less convincing. That is, after all, precisely the imagination which is mobilised in Europe, say, to justify strict controls against immigration, or in California against the people escaping

north from the poverties and repressions of Latin America. These too, after all, are cases of local people defending their space against the pressure of global flows. These, though, are the localisms of the powerful. And it is remarkable how many of those who would argue for local rights in Amazonia will argue the opposite case when it comes to a question of immigrants and asylum seekers looking for entry to Europe. Here, the rights of immigrants are treated more sympathetically. *Another* set of principles is brought into play – about the right of movement perhaps, or about how this planet, after all, belongs to all of us. And behind those other principles lies another, very different, equally particular, geographical imagination – this time of a world which is, essentially, without borders.

There is a lot going on in this very simple example.

First it points to both the inevitability and the power of our geographical imaginations. They may be implicit but they are present and deeply implicated each time we argue about rights to migration, for instance, or have recourse (as we all do) to phrases like 'local people'. We all operate, all the time, all of us – students, teachers, all of us in our roles as member of the public or citizen – with background imaginations of how the world is organised, or might be organised in a better future. (And it is important to note immediately how these imaginations extend beyond the human world – the decision to cull certain animals in order to defend 'indigenous'(?) species is a case in point.) A first move for the enquiring geographer, therefore, is to make those geographical imaginations explicit, and to ask where they come from.

Second, and in part precisely because they are not usually examined explicitly, we often function in fact with a bundle of quite contradictory geographical imaginations – as individual people, as social groups, or as, for instance, political tendencies. The contradictory imaginations of 'local people', in Amazonia and Fortress Europe, in the foregoing paragraphs, are likely to be held by more 'progressive' tendencies. More 'conservative' groups are likely to defend Fortress Europe ('local people have rights to what they have built, you know') at the same time as advocating free trade ('the new world is

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one without boundaries; protectionism is to be avoided'). One of the most effective ways of disrupting the taken-for-grantedness of much received wisdom is to point to the contradictions between the geographical imaginations on which they are founded.

Third that crucial aim of education – to question rather than to accept without further thought – is particularly powerful when what is at issue is the nature of our geographical imaginations. The point of exposing the contradictions in the geographical imaginations mobilised in debates over local people/immigration/free trade is that neither 'local' nor 'global' is in *itself* good, whatever position one takes on the political spectrum. It is necessary to distinguish between the localism of the powerless and the localism of the powerful, and likewise with globalism (which may be that of trans-national corporations or military powers, but equally may be the new internationalisms of indigenous groups or trade unions). The argument is not that geography is not the answer but that in order to think geographically we must necessarily take account of (differential) power: the geographies (the power geometries) through which the world is constructed and, maybe, the more egalitarian power geometries through which it might be reconstructed. Taking seriously the geography underlying some of the major questions of our time both takes us to the heart of the issues and forces us to think geography more critically.

Fourth, this kind of example is one among many which point towards the specific intellectual contribution which can be made by geography as a discipline. One of the wonderful things about geography is certainly its breadth, the way it enables us to cross boundaries which hem other disciplines in; but that breadth should not obscure the fact that geography also has its own particular intellectual integrity, its own particular avenues to explore and propositions to present. The contribution which geography brings to the discussions just cited is a persistent rigour in the way in which we conceptualise two of the central concepts of modern life: space and place. Many others could be cited but I want for a moment to take further an exploration of these two particular concepts in pursuit of these notions of the geographical imagination and the geographical mind.

The geographical imagination

It is probably now well accepted, though it is still important to argue, that a lot of our 'geography' is in the mind. That is to say, we carry around with us mental images, of the world, of the country in which we live (all those images of the North/South divide), of the street next door. The New Yorker's mental map of the USA, Ronald Reagan's imagination of the world, became popular posters. All of us carry such images; they may sometimes be in conflict or even be the cause of conflict, and digging these things up and talking about them is one good way in to beginning to examine what it means to think 'geographically'. We can also examine how such imaginations are produced, whether that be through the nexus of powerful international media conglomerates or the persistent imagery deployed in local conversations ('that's not a very nice road, not as respectable as ours …'). And we can explore, too, how such imaginations have powerful effects upon our attitudes towards the world and upon our behaviour. One of our (many) abilities as geography teachers is to unearth these taken-for-granted imaginations and subject them to questioning.

However, I would contend that what is at issue in debates over the rights of local people, or immigration, or the rights and wrongs of free trade, is an even deeper layer of geographical imagination. And it is one which, again, it is important to unearth and examine. To argue for the rights of Amazonian society *on the grounds that it is local* is to imagine space, implicitly, as a space of places, of territories. To argue for 'free trade' on the grounds that, in this age of globalisation *of course boundaries and borders must fall*, is to imagine space as, first and foremost, a space of flows. My argument above was that neither of these imaginations provides us with a principle, that each is likely to run into

contradictions, and that one can only consider particular cases in relation to the power relations in which they are embedded. What we need is an imagination of space which incorporates the geometries of power which construct this highly unequal world. What is at issue is how, at quite a fundamental level, we think about the planet; indeed how we think about geographical space itself.

Let me take another example. One most important area of geography teaching is that which explores issues of 'development', whether the focus be on inequalities between first and third worlds (the terminology here is always inadequate) or within a country. There are many issues here of powerful geographical imaginations and both geographers and some aid agencies have fought to counter images of the third world as hapless victim, for instance. That is the layer of geographical imagination which focuses on images of places. Below that, however, is yet another imagination, which is that such places are somehow 'behind' the 'advanced' countries in their levels of development.

The very language which is used powerfully projects this imagination – terms such as advanced and backward (and while 'backward' is probably less in vogue, because of its pejorative implications, deploying the term 'advanced' has exactly the same effect – advanced as opposed to what?!). The terminology of development can have the same implications. Upgrading under-developed to the more optimistic 'developing' still places the developing country *behind* those which are already 'developed'. Moreover, exactly the same implicit positioning of some parts of the world as behind and others as in front is entailed in all the narratives of a singular 'modernisation' or a single path of 'progress'. There is a very important manoeuvre going on here, which again concerns how we imagine the planet, and how we conceive of geographical space itself.

The criticism most often made of such tales of development (or modernisation, or progress) is that they presume that such development can basically only take one form. Others must follow the path along which the West has led. This is a very important point in itself for it assumes that there can be only one kind of history. It is a global version of the infamous dictum that there is no alternative. But I would argue that to say there is only one history is to imply that there is no geography. To imagine places in terms of how far they are along this one-and-only path of development (or modernisation, or progress) is to imagine the differences between them only in terms of history. It is to turn geographical differences (real, coexisting differences) merely into places in the historical queue. It refuses to countenance the possibility that there are lots of histories *going on at the same time*; that other places have their own particular trajectories and, of even more political significance perhaps, the potential for their own particular futures. This is certainly a geographical imagination; it is clearly a way of imagining geographical space. But ironically its effect is almost to abolish that space; to turn it into time.

This is an imagination which has been quite characteristic of Western modernity, with its grand narratives of progress and change. And as with other geographical imaginations it is perpetually reproduced through political and popular discourses. As Chris Durbin argues in Chapter 19, the ability to diagnose such imaginations is an important, and *specifically geographical*, element of media literacy.

The geographical mind

That last geographical imagination, where geography is turned into history, is particularly interesting. When discourses of development and suchlike perform this operation, one of the crucial things they are doing is to undervalue difference. For the purposes of this argument, consider this very crude example: when we in our mind's eye place Chad, Brazil, and the United States of America in a historical sequence (under-developed, developing, developed) we are resisting a full recognition of the differences (historical, actual, and potential) which exist between them. The fact that these places might have distinct

trajectories is obscured. It is only when we recognise that in fact these three countries do not form a historical sequence that we can investigate the full extent of their individual distinctiveness and, indeed, their interdependence. But that means recognising that they co-exist; that Chad is fully contemporary with the United States of America. And to do that, in turn, we must recognise that these differences are organised not historically but spatially. One of the implications of 'taking space (or geography) seriously', is the full recognition of the contemporaneous coexistence of different others. (To break into philosophy for a moment: if time is the dimension of sequence and change, space is the dimension of coexisting multiplicity.)

A real spatial awareness, on this argument, implies an outwardlookingness, a willingness to give full recognition to the existence of autonomous others. It has been called a recognition of 'coevalness'. Perhaps this is an aspect of a really 'geographical mind'.

Moreover, it has further implications. As hinted above, it is only with the recognition of contemporaneous coexistence that it is possible to begin to examine the many power-filled relations and interdependencies which bind these places together, and influence their evolving characters and trajectories. If we recognise (again using very crude examples) that Chad and the United States each has its own history, then the politics, and the big questions of their so-called under-development and development, lie also in the terms of their interdependence. Or again, and to come at things this time from the opposite direction, it is often argued that an emphasis on 'difference' (at personal, or group, or ethnic level, for instance) gets in the way of collectivity or solidarity. I would argue the contrary: that difference has to be acknowledged and negotiated before any meaningful solidarity or collectivity – or even that thing called 'society' – can be built. And a genuine recognition of difference requires a fully spatial, a geographical, turn of mind.

An example might help to illustrate the argument and to demonstrate its potential significance. The previous references have been at the global level so let us now focus in at a more local scale; for if the various cultures and societies of the world can be seen as having their own histories, and if the geographies we must explore are the power geometries of their interactions and interdependencies, the same is also true at the level of the local place. We have in geography done much work to undermine the rather romantic notion of places as simply coherent entities with singular, unproblematic, and often seemingly 'eternal', characteristics. We have, in various ways, argued that it is more helpful to understand places as complex, as internally differentiated, as 'meeting places'.

This replicates the wider argument. Places are meeting places of different people, different groups, different ethnicities. In human terms they are the entanglement, the meeting-up, of different histories, many of them without any previous connection to others. I live in a second-floor flat; there are two flats below mine. The occupants of these three dwelling-spaces arrived here, in this building now, from very different directions. But here we are, and now we must manage to live together, to get along. The area of the city in which I live replicates this on a larger scale, and one way of imagining whole cities is indeed as massively complex meeting-places of difference. (This difference does not have to be dramatic or ethnically-defined, for instance. We are each of us different.) The point is that 'places', from a house of flats to a whole city, in consequence require negotiation. On a daily basis, and in a hundred unremarkable ways, we manage to live together, to negotiate our difference. Or sometimes we do; sometimes there are chasms of inequality and/or incomprehension; there may be violence and confrontation.

The point is that there must be negotiation. And before there can be negotiation there must be recognition of and respect for difference. Now, this throws a spanner in the works of all those all-too-easy rhetorics of 'local community' which find their way into so many policy documents attempting to address, for instance, places of urban

deprivation. What the analysis here means is that 'community', in the sense of unproblematical coherence that is usually implied, does not simply exist; rather it always has to be negotiated. And given that the internal power geometries of the space of local places can sometimes be almost as complex as those at global level, this negotiation will be difficult and ongoing. Indeed, since negotiation will never end, it is arguable not only that the static, romantic notion of local community is unachievable but also that a recognition of the internal power relations and negotiations is more politically healthy than a longing for a pacified conformity. A healthy democracy requires not the suppression of difference but an openness to it and a willingness to negotiate.

And my contention here is that 'a geographical mind' implies precisely an outwardlooking attitude which, by recognising difference, also necessarily enquires about the terms of negotiation. And one of the things a geographical *discipline*, as an intellectual exercise, can bring to that is a rigour in the way in which we imagine (and analyse the imaginations of) those essential geographical notions: space and place.

Reference

The ideas in this chapter are developed more fully in: Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.

Implications for practice

(a) Geography can help young people to explore the contested nature of our world.

Geography as a discipline is in the school curriculum because of the value it offers to a young person's education. Thinking geographically can support students in understanding and interpreting their own reactions to people and places, and in reflecting on others' perspectives which may be different from their own. To enable students to 'think geographically' we must ensure that geographical enquiry necessarily takes account of (differential) power. This would lead to a consideration of the geographies (power geometries) through which the world is constructed and perhaps more egalitarian power geometries through which it might be reconstructed.

(b) Much of our 'geography' is in the mind – in the mental images we carry of the world.

Geographical enquiry should make students' 'geographical imaginations' explicit, and explore where they come from. It should also expose contradictions in the geographical imaginations on which much of the 'received wisdom' about many geographical issues is founded. Geography can thus fulfil that crucial aim of education – to question rather than to accept without further thought.

(c) Geography should help students to explore how places are complex and diverse.

It should do this through a variety of perspectives and give sufficient credence to students' own views. It is more helpful to think of places as complex, internally differentiated 'meeting places' of different people, different groups and different ethnicities. Difference has to be acknowledged and negotiated before any meaningful sense of community, or even of society, can be developed. By denying difference we can deny students opportunities to develop the higher-order thinking skills needed to produce deeper explanations of geographical phenomena.