

Contested Identities: Human-Environment Geography and Disciplinary Implications in a Restructuring Academy

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Article Summary

B.L. Turner's article addresses the roots and continuing causes of geography's disciplinary identity crisis. Published in *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in 2002, this piece is fashioned more as a historical compilation and editorial, than a scholarly research report. The author does not attempt to hide his overt bias and his weak attempts at objectivity only add to the numerous contradictions that pepper his arguments.

His over arching point centers how this identity crisis effects Geography's acceptance and ostracism from the academy structure. He outlines this identity crisis as a competition between the spatial-chorological approach and the human-environment subject. Recapping Geography's history through this binary, the author cites examples of how each identity has sought to eradicate the other and continue to be contentious to this day. Ultimately, Turner blames geography's dwindling presence in the academy on an overemphasis of the spatial-chorological identity; an identity lacking direction and research boundaries. His solution is allowing the human-environment identity to dominate, since its specificity and research focus are more applicable to the demands and structure of the academy.

After re-imagining Geography's history in this fashion, Turner briefly outlines the spatial-chorological identity and its roots then quickly elaborates on the human-environment origins, setbacks, recoveries and modes of contemporary study. After such a forgiving setup, he speculates on whether a discipline dominated by the human-environment identity can reinvigorate Geography and carve out a niche for the discipline in the academy.

The article then shifts to a momentary and rather displaced paragraph in support of unity between the two identities (an example of the author's faux objectivity that surfaced as a contradiction). Since much of the article's beginning focused on geography's history, the author had no choice but to point out that attempts to eradicate any tradition in the past only hurt the discipline more. In an attempt to distract from this concession, the author sets forth his suspicion of a 'unified' geography's ability to even produce something more worthwhile to the academy.

Despite championing a human-environment focus for much of the article, the author inconclusively concludes by outlining four positions that the geography identity can take and qualifies each one with a worst case scenario for the discipline should it adopt the identity. The current or "status quo" position faces all the challenges the author spent paragraphs complaining about; the "reversal position" is his obvious favorite since it allows for human-environment dominance, but is likely to be met with a lot of resistance; the "partition position" divides geography up amongst its sub disciplines, leaving human geographers without support to go on (a claim he doesn't fully explain); and the "alternative position" is the compromising position that merges the two identities but will likely succumb to competition from other social sciences during its unification process.

Discussion Summary

During early discussion on how everyone found Turner's points convincing, it was agreed that the author's argument lost direction when his article shifted to a discussion of environmental determinism. The author's tone and focus seemed to become convoluted during this section, leading many to comment about feeling 'lost' while reading this section.

As for how the author's style was received, several were in agreement that the author's overall structure was choppy, which each paragraph making sense in itself, but not connecting well with other paragraphs. The article was conflicting and the author often contradicted his own points.

The discussion became more focused on Turner's claims that geography's history as a discipline has been torn between two opposing identities (spatial-chorological approach and human-environment subject) with the spatial-chorological approach being emphasized for most of that history. Discussion of this point centered on questioning Turner's binary setup itself. In terms of scale, the binary is very one sided. The spatial-chorological approach encompasses many different pursuits in Geography, including GI Sciences, human geography, cultural geography, mapping, and several more, with the human-environment subject focuses specifically on nature society geographers and research areas focusing solely on the relationship between humans and environment. This unequal division of the discipline took away from the author's argument by downplaying his critique of an overemphasis on the spatial-chorological approach and complicating his argument for more human-environmental subject dominance. Finding a consensus on the problematic aspects of Turner's disciplinary binary, discussion moved towards identifying other binaries for the discipline. The most popular binary chosen, of course, was human geography vs. physical geography with the GI Sciences understood to be more than just a technique, but utilized and studied under both identities.

Continuing with the discussion's trend of extrapolating Turner's arguments, it was commented that interdisciplinary identity crises and contests are not unique to Geography, and indeed all social sciences go through similar experiences, albeit a little less intensely than Geography. Although geographers have been marked the dilettantes of the social sciences, all social sciences are grouped under a similarly condescending category according to the natural scientists. There is much to be said about Turner's point about a loss of quantitative skills in Geography and nearly all agreed that adding stronger math skills (as well as a second language) would be a great improvement for our Geography curriculum.

Discussion moved back to one of the most thought provoking points of Turner's article: that no discipline can claim space for its own. Geographers' ability to spatialize the theories and concepts developed in other social sciences is not grounds for a separate discipline and many disciplines can, and do, do this on their own. Noticeable tension surfaced during the discussion of this point and there was hesitancy to completely accept Turner's claim. Tentative agreement was found through the example that GIS programmers, engineers, and mathematicians generally do not correctly interpret the spatial information in GIS and it is up to geographers to link their analytical skills to the environmental reality that they are trying to represent with this technology. Suspiciously, other examples weren't fleshed out to defend geography's claim to space, but no one openly conceded to Turner.

The end of the discussion turned to a recap of the academy system and its German roots as a way of bringing context back to Turner's arguments. The author's points, through ranting at times and frequently contradictory, were presented in light of Geography's relationship with the academy (or higher educational system); and, one of the author's intents was to speculate on how to improve this relationship. An enlightening point was brought up during the discussion of the ancient origins of disciplinary divisions. It could be said that these divisions were based more on administrative conveniences rather than grand, cosmological categories. Which begged the question, why should Geography work so hard cater to an ancient and flimsily structured academy that chastises us for not adapting to modernity while refusing to do so itself? Probably not the most constructive point of the evening, but definitely something to think about.

Right before the criticisms of the academy, the discussion focused on the author's contradictory call for unity in the discipline (after spending paragraphs calling for a human-environment dominance). He calls for a merging of the spatial-chorological approach and human-environment identities so that they are homologous and no traditions are left out of the discipline. Yet, Turner does not speculate on how this can be done, but the compromising nature of this unity finds support amongst the group and especially me. Turner's observation early on in the article that Geography serves a bridging role between the natural and social sciences is an important one and where I believe Geography should remain; and, geographers will find it difficult to act as mediators if they cannot do so internally.

In the proselytizing fashion of Mr. Turner, I have my own call of unification for Geography. The perfect precision of the logical, mathematically theorized world combined with the contradictions and messiness of the human, social world all meet in the very real space that is the environment, the Earth or our home. It is in this space that these collisions materialize and are quite literally inscribed on the environment or landscape. And this space is not a whiteboard that can be erased when we are done debating our understandings of a world we grow less and less connected to. This space changes, influences, decays and grows in response to how we live within it. It is Geography's duty to remain in that space, grounding this grand epistemological divide and reminding all that this space cannot be ignored.