

Hip Waders, Fancy Vests, and Geographic Traditions

(Rob Dull's Graduation Speech, UC Berkeley Geography Commencement, May 12, 2001)

Of the eight graduate students receiving Ph.D.'s today, four of us came into the department together in 1995. Early in the Fall semester of 1995 our small entering class bonded in a unique way. We not only met weekly for the dog-and-pony Geography 200 seminar, but we also spent time together socially. We hung out together. Throughout our first year we had a number of great parties and as a group we shared the ups and downs of assimilation into the department and the university. By the end of that first year we also had changed quite a bit; we were gradually being socialized into our new academic setting.

We quickly found out that as graduate students in geography it wasn't so easy to explore whatever topics we wanted to take on. This was largely due to the fact that there were only a dozen faculty members in our department, a much smaller number than most leading geography departments in the country. Of the 12 or so faculty members, a couple were somewhat inactive, and the remaining members fell roughly into two groups with very little overlap between them. Although certainly nobody forced us to do it – and not all of us did do it in the end – the path of least resistance for each of us was to choose one of these two groups.

One group was steeped in social theory, and for their seminars they read one and sometimes two horrendously thick books every week. The other group took just as masochistic an approach, but in this case some combination of statistics, chemistry, differential equations, and plant ecology and phylogeny were entailed in the requisite hazing. Even the attire was different – one side wearing hiking boots, hip-waders and lots of dirt and mud, while the other group wore clean white pressed shirts and fancy vests covered with intricate and colorful patterns.

By the end of that first year, most of us figured out whether we were going to be wearing vests or wearing hip-waders.

I chose the hip-waders. For me it was a foregone conclusion, and I certainly knew what I was getting into. For others this was not the case. In our first year our small class lost one student to a cross-country transfer. By our third year two more were gone to other departments on the Berkeley campus. These people wore neither hip-waders nor vests.

But I was always very content in the hip-waders, if not a bit stifled. Our small group of mud-splashed geographers built a tight community. We took classes together, helped each other with fieldwork and plodded through long hours in the lab together, always willing to pitch in if another student needed us. Today our minority contingent of so-called "physical geographers" is stronger than ever, and our interests are quite diverse. Some of us even have interests that fall squarely within the realm of cultural geography.

A year ago the UC Berkeley Department of Geography celebrated our 100th anniversary. The centennial celebration was attended by a large mix of alumni, students and faculty members. So what did we all have in common? What makes us Berkeley Geographers? Can it be that the hip-wader/white shirt and vest dichotomy has always been around? Certainly not.

For the better part of the 20th century, students produced by the Berkeley geography department were identified with a different paradigm - that which is now widely known as the Berkeley School tradition. In his lucid and insightful book "On Geography," our own David Stoddart wrote that, "The Berkeley School has been fundamentally of the historical type, tracing the geographic influence of culture groups on the landscape through time."

I first read about the Berkeley School geography tradition as an undergraduate anthropology major at UC Santa Barbara. When I moved on to graduate studies in Geography at San Francisco State University, one of our assignments in my first graduate seminar in geography was to write a biography on a prominent American geographer. Of course I chose Carl Ortwin Sauer, the larger than life standard-bearer of the Berkeley School

tradition. After all, he was the type of geographer that I aspired to be; someone so insatiably curious about origins and historical processes that he would not give up when library and archival resources were exhausted - where the paper trail ended - but would scour the landscape for physical vestiges of past cultures and environments, any evidence that might enrich his analysis or further his understanding of the subject matter.

Carl Sauer was part historian, part anthropologist, part geologist, and part ecologist. He was all of these things, but most importantly he was a quintessential geographer. I am proud to be Carl Sauer's academic great, great grandson, and as long as I am around the Berkeley School tradition will live on.

I think we all identify with one scholarly tradition or another, but in the end what do we have in common as Berkeley geographers? One thing for sure is that many of us keep a prominent position in our personal intellectual pantheons for a German, born in the 19th Century, and called by the name of Carl. And whether we see ourselves more in the tradition of Karl with a 'K' [Marx] or Carl with a 'C' [Sauer] - or if we consider them both to be just two outdated, uninspiring dead white men - most importantly we need to always be open to "other" scholarly ideas, regardless of methodological approach and theoretical persuasion.

We geographers have long borrowed ideas from other social and physical science disciplines, and we have gained unique insights by synthesizing knowledge from seemingly disparate fields. Indeed we derive much of our strength as a discipline and our legitimacy in the wider academic community from our unique ability to explore **inter**-relationships. Given how wide-ranging geography is, and considering how intellectually diverse geographers are, it is surprising to me how we can sometimes be so dogmatic - seemingly blind and apathetic to what is happening outside of our respective self-important ivory towers.

In basketball they say that it is not good to dribble the ball with your head down. I would say the same to all of you graduating geographers. Get

your heads up, open your eyes and ears, and most importantly open your minds.

Whether we are concerned with the relationships between climate and culture, poverty and disease, population and deforestation, or atmospheric C- O_2 and glacial ablation – whatever our intellectual endeavors – we must respect the humanity and intellectual freedom of “other” scholars working on “other” topics that may fall well outside of our own scope of knowledge, and that may not immediately resonate with our own world views.

Geography has long been a marginalized discipline. Between the 1950s and the early 1990s many prominent universities dropped their geography departments altogether: Harvard, Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, UC Davis. However, the past decade has witnessed a resurgence in geography due primarily to the growing demand for computer applications of geographic information. I believe that this is a positive development for all of us in the field.

The recent growth of geography as a discipline in the United States, largely generated by a demand for GIS and Remote Sensing, should also remind us that our department does not necessarily reflect the discipline as a whole. Obviously Berkeley Geography cannot be all kinds of geography for all kinds of geographers; our department is much too small for that. Nonetheless, geography inherently allows the coverage of an incomparable expanse of intellectual terrain, and we should revel in our ability to traverse as much of it as we possibly can.

It is time to dismantle a useless and socially constructed false dichotomy in favor of a continuum of ideas and scholarly approaches that spans the entire field of geography. We do not have to be either vest-wearing social theorists or mud-splashed physical geographers. We should not settle for bifurcation - black or white, but instead we should demand all the intrinsically valuable shades of gray in between. Our discipline is only as strong as the collective tapestry we weave, and each strand is just as important as the next.

I believe in the class of geographers I entered this department with in 1995. Bob, Kate and Wendy are going out with me, and Jorjan, Sandy and Jim should be following soon. I think we all cherish the times we had in our first year – the shared experiences, the parties, the friendships. I think we are all extremely proud of Wendy and her new job at Chapel Hill, and we will always root for each other as we root for her when she heads off for North Carolina. Naturally our cohort has gradually grown apart over the years, but when you strip back our now well-fitting and comfortable uniforms - the fancy vests and muddy hip-waders - you will find that we all still genuinely respect each other. This gives me great hope.

The University of California at Berkeley geography department has a special place in the history of American geography. It also has a singular significance in each of our lives and intellectual histories. So where do we go from here? I have no doubt that the strong geographic tradition at Berkeley will continue well into the 21st Century. You need to look no further than to people like Ruthie Gilmore and Kurt Cuffey to see that, and Michael Johns is clearly steering the ship in the right direction. These are exciting times for geography as a discipline and especially for geography at Berkeley.

Sometimes I wonder what Mr. Sauer would think to see the department as it is today. Whatever his reaction, I'm sure what he wrote 70 years ago still holds true today. I hope we will always remember his advice. In a letter to the editor of the *Geographical Review* dated March 2, 1932, he wrote:

"Barbed wire fences may be necessary in elementary curricula, but the pursuit of knowledge cannot afford to frustrate itself by building fences about narrow plots of learning."