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Organon 14, 163-165

1978

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

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THE ROLE OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL SCHOOLS OF GEOGRAPHY

There seems to be a need, elusive though the quest may be, to broaden and deepen research and writing on the history of geographical thought by weaving it more thoroughly into the living national and international historical fabric, as well as the general intellectual climate of the day. That this has rarely been explicitly attempted so far is surprising, considering the natural relevance of geography to the understanding of regional, national and world problems and its susceptibility to applications for the betterment of the human condition. Most studies of the history of geographical thought have, understandably, concentrated on the intrinsic ideas and personalities of prominent geographers, tracing influences of one on the other, with logical, textual and semantic analysis, and inventories of work done.

While granting the pre-eminent role of individuals, particularly in the formative years, and by no means wishing to discourage such studies. I often find myself wishing to see this body of thought related more closely to the general climate of opinion and preoccupations of the day, recurrent crises, imperial or national rivalries and educational reform, as well as public perceptions of their natural and national environments. It is hard to believe that the distinctive emphases of particular national schools of geography were not conditioned by such things and yet the possible relationships have so far largely gone unexamined. Inferences along these lines are admittedly difficult to make with conviction, but it is the aim of this contribution to suggest that they are worth exploring and are the kinds of questions which may be profitably asked.

Particularly important in this context is the formative period of a particular national school — in most cases the few decades before the First World War—because it has a disproportionate influence on subsequent institutional and intellectual progress and public acceptance of the subject. For instance, it is quite possible that the somewhat insecure image of American geography today has something to do with the fact that the two dominant concepts developed before 1920 — “cycle” geomorphology and a frequently crude form of environmental determinism—were subsequently

disowned by most of the profession. By contrast, the dominant thought-structure and preoccupations of the pre-Soviet Russian School have proved resilient enough eventually to survive the severe stresses of the Stalin era and to provide a vital and inspiring tradition for contemporary Soviet geographers. Many questions of a comparative nature come to mind; for instance, why did the pre-Soviet Russian geographers, in a social climate where fatalism was endemic and where several historians were tinged with environmental determinism, eschew the latter position and focus instead on man's impact on nature; whereas in America, with similar natural environments and frontier history, the philosophical stance turned out initially to be so different? What was there in the institutional, educational and political history, philosophy and world-wide situation of Britain, for instance, which may help to explain why no recognizably coherent and closely knit School of geography emerged, in sharp contrast to the case of France?

At this point I should like to mention a pioneering study, unfortunately unpublished as yet, of my friend and former student Vincent Berdoulay on the emergence of the French School of geography in the few decades preceding the First World War. In it he traces the roots of this phenomenon to such national preoccupations as the many-sided challenge from Germany after 1870, the Colonial movement, arguments over educational reform and the search for a republican philosophy. The Vidalian School is presented as a sensitive and broad-ranging response to the needs, societal and philosophical, of a set of particular contemporary national preoccupations and predicaments.

I wish now to take a rather impressionistic comparative view in this context of the crystallizing of geography as a discipline in Russia and Britain in the formative few decades before the First World War. On the face of it these two nations were polar opposites—the epitome of continentality and insularity respectively, of land-power and sea-power, rural and urban, autocracy and democracy, of the wild limitless “frontier” and the “tight little island” etc. Further, the distinctive character and place of each tradition in geography has been much less clear to the outside world than those of Germany, France or the United States and have still not been accorded their due. My education and brief participation in British geography, coupled with the fact that I have been attempting, over the last decade or two, to interpret Russian and Soviet geography to the West, leads me to speculate in a tentative manner about the ways which these Schools may have been partly conditioned by their particular national contexts in those formative decades before 1914.

To repeat, it would clearly be foolish to underestimate the importance of dominant personalities in any attempt to understand the reasons for the distinctive evolution of national Schools. However it also seems likely that the “call” for approaches to geography which seem to relate to pressing national needs, preoccupations or traditions would be difficult and even pointless to resist. In the 1880s university geography was being established in both countries on a continuous basis after a good deal of delay and uncertainty, lagging behind Germany, which had presented a model and a challenge for some time. Both had well established Geographical Societies but they were subtly different from each other in spirit. From its position at the heart

of a world-wide sea Empire and a broad ranging tradition of scientific exploration as well as far-flung adventurous travel, it seemed natural that accounts of these journeys, coupled with a concern for promoting geographical education, should dominate the British Society's activities. The Russian Society exercised a more pervading and vital influence on the intellectual life of the country and was generally recognized as the most successful, democratic and popular—in the best sense—of the learned societies there. In addition to promoting scientific expeditions many of its members were deeply concerned with social and economic reforms and specifically with improvement of the life of the peasants. It had many active branches all over the country and promoted a wide range of studies from ethnography to meteorology as well as basic exploration.

The emphases in academic geography around 1900 in Britain and Russia were significantly different and derived in part from distinctive national preoccupations and conditions. The world leadership in the establishment of soil science and concern with the principles of natural zonation and heat and water balance studies in Russia may be related to the still heavily rural character of the country and the dominant role played by broad vegetation zones in its history. On the other hand, the greater emphasis on political and "commercial" geography and an international world view associated with such people as Mackinder and Chisholm, reflect the much greater concern with international trade, travel, politics and education in Britain than in Russia. In spite of a much more advanced state of urbanization and industrialization in Britain, geography was curiously more "Marxist" in spirit in pre-Soviet Russia and this has incidentally made for a degree of real continuity with today's Soviet geography and made it possible to talk of a Russian School spanning the various regimes.

Contacts between the two national groups of geographers were considerably thinner than those of each of them with the Germans and French, owing no doubt to deep divisions of language and traditions as well as suspicions and rivalry in Asian empire-building. However the periodical literatures of each country did contain reports of activities—particularly exploration—from the other. Kropotkin during his exile in Britain throughout the formative period of both Russian and British geography, managed to find time for some sensitive mutual interpretation of the two cultures and geographies among his many other activities.

In conclusion it is postulated that the differing character and emphasis of British and Russian geography in their formative decades before the First World War derives in considerable part not only from divergent traditions and ways of thought but also from their different natural environments, scale, stage of development, national preoccupations and place in the world. This kind of inquiry is necessarily speculative and inferential but concerned, as it aims to be, with the total milieu or context within which geographers reflected and wrote about their world, it seems worth more conscious investigation than it has hitherto received in the history of geographical thought.