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## THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW'S HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS AND RECENTISM\*

ANDREW SLUYTER

The *Geographical Review* possesses many long-standing strengths that are well worth celebrating in this centennial volume. This essay complements the series of forthcoming essays, with a focus on the *Geographical Review's* commitment to the historical dimension and the resulting insights into present-day issues often lacking elsewhere. For example, content analysis has revealed that since 1980 the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers*, and *Progress in Human Geography* have shifted toward an overwhelming emphasis on the present and recent past (Jones 2004). Some have even coined terms such as “recentism” and “temporal parochialism” to describe what seems to be a general tendency for “scholarship on social topics [to focus] increasingly on later periods at the expense of earlier ones” (Smith 2009, 114; see also Sluyter 2005b). Those critics argue that, ironically, an exclusive focus on high modernity and the present actually hinders understanding those periods because some of their most salient characteristics emerged out of the immense disjuncture between premodern and early modern times. As Carl Sauer wrote in this journal many decades ago, “We may yet best delineate the basic traits of this land and its peoples from its prehistoric geography and from its geography of the sixteenth century” (1941, 354).

Many readers may believe that the *Geographical Review* is immune to recentism. Yet even geography periodicals that inherently focus on the past, such as the *Journal of Historical Geography*, have come to emphasize research on high modernity, with the majority of articles on the early 1800s through the mid-1900s (Jones 2004). Others have noted a similar trend in *Environmental History* as well as urban geography and history journals (Sluyter 2005b; Smith 2009). The possible institutional reasons for recentism, its relationships to broader intellectual movements, and other such issues beg extended discussion, but they would pertain to the *Geographical Review* as much as to other academic journals. The mandated brevity of this essay allows for much more limited goals: first, determination of whether the *Geographical Review* has also succumbed to recentism; and second, illustration of the merits of resisting it.

To test whether the *Geographical Review* has succumbed to recentism since 1980 I drew a random sample of fifty issues published between January 1916 and October

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\*Thanks to the past editors of the *Geographical Review* for providing inspiration ever since I was an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia, where various faculty members encouraged me to read its engaging articles. Thanks also to the current editor, Craig Colten, for conceiving this series of essays as well as to Rhys Jones and Alf Siemens for providing feedback on a draft.

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TABLE I—RECENTISM IN A SAMPLE OF *GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW* ARTICLES AND NOTES  
( $n = 50$ )<sup>a</sup>

PERIOD OF PUBLICATION	NUMBER OF YEARS	RECENTISM INDEX				STANDARD DEVIATION
		Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Median	
1916–2008	93	1.00	0.25	0.77	0.78	0.19
1916–1979	64	1.00	0.25	0.74	0.71	0.20
1980–2008	29	1.00	0.71	0.86	0.86	0.10

<sup>a</sup>All statistics were generated using Microsoft Office Excel 2007.

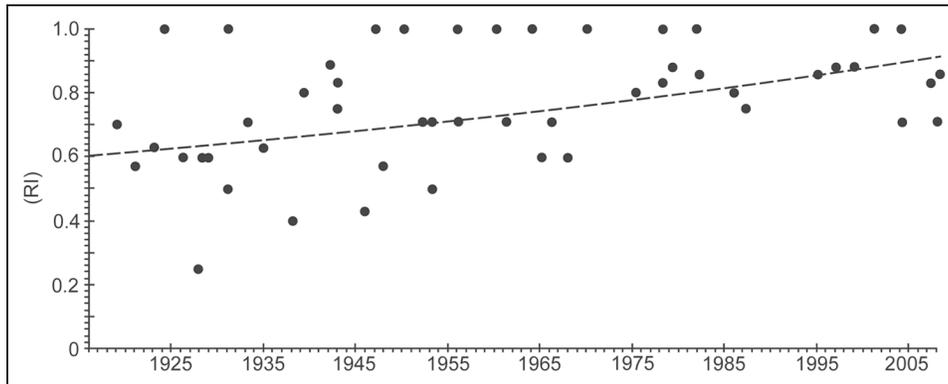


FIG. 1—The *Geographical Review*'s Recentism Index, 1916–2008 ( $n = 50$ ; graph and exponential trendline generated with Microsoft Office Excel 2007). (Graph by the author)

2008.<sup>1</sup> Content analysis of those issues involved perusal of all their human geography research articles, “Geographical Record” notes, and “Geographical Field Notes,” including methodological items oriented toward human geography. The analysis excluded book reviews, conference reports, editorials, correspondence, award announcements, obituaries, and articles dealing with purely mathematical cartography or biophysical phenomena, whether reporting on substantive research or on methodological research. I then categorized each item according to the presence or absence of analytic engagement with data predating 1800, the year that nominally signals the emergence of high modernity (Sluyter 2005b). For each issue, division of the number of items lacking pre-1800 analysis by the total number of items established its Recentism Index (RI). Theoretically, the RI can range from 0.00 up to 1.00, the latter indicating perfect recentism. The sample’s actual RI, however, ranges from a low of 0.25 ( $n = 1$ ) to a high of 1.00 ( $n = 12$ ).

Table I and Figure 1 demonstrate that the *Geographical Review*, like other leading geography journals, has been affected by recentism. Comparing the period before 1980 to the subsequent period, the mean RI increases from 0.74 to 0.86, the minimum RI increases from 0.25 to 0.71, and the standard deviation decreases from 0.20 to 0.10. As those summary statistics and the graph both make clear, since 1980 fewer articles in the average issue deal with the past beyond 1800, and fewer issues

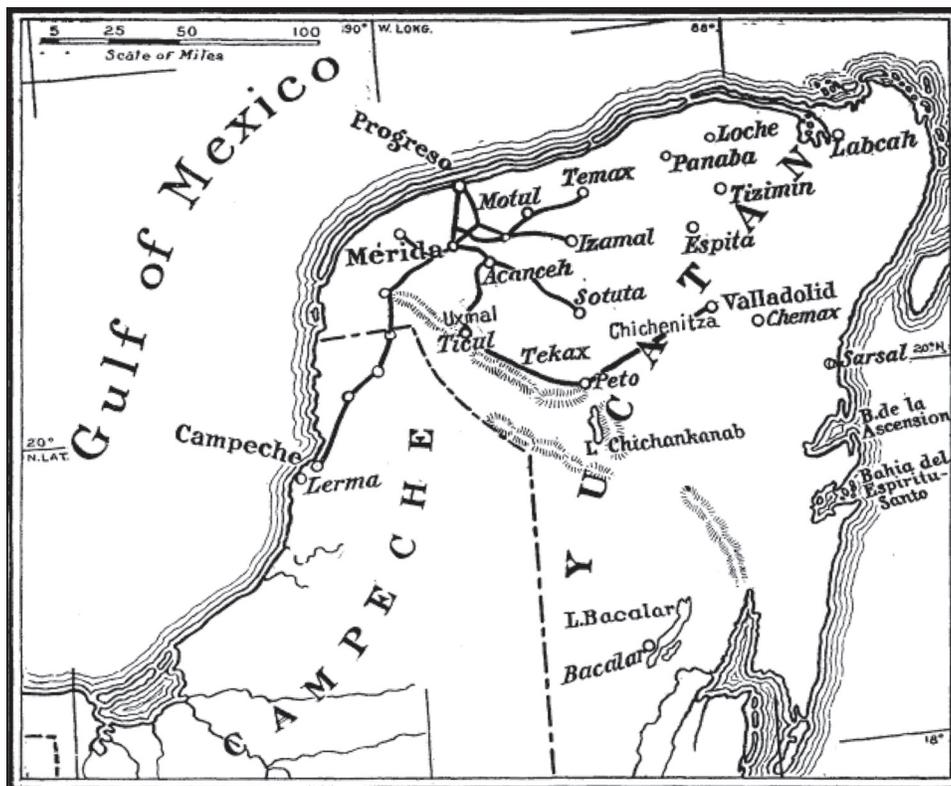


FIG. 2—This map of the Yucatán, published nearly a century ago by Ellsworth Huntington in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, illustrates how that region has long featured in research by high-profile scholars and the AGS. Source: Huntington 1912, 802. (Reproduced by permission of the American Geographical Society)

deviate far from the average. The no-more-than-minimal concave curvature of the trendline indicates a nearly linear, centennial trend toward recentism.

Not all research topics should necessarily involve pre-1800 data, of course, and thus no individual article ever deserves the label “recentist.” Yet the general decline of a long-term perspective in the discipline does merit that term and concern over the intellectual costs. Illustration with examples makes the best case for the value of maintaining a long-term perspective, although length constraints allow but one.<sup>2</sup>

The *Geographical Review* has published a long run of articles on nature/society processes in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize (Figure 2). Some of the authors are among the discipline’s best known researchers, the others thus in famous company.<sup>3</sup> All in some way engage the abiding pair of questions Edward Higbee posed more than half a century ago in “Agriculture in the Maya Homeland”: “What made that region so eminently suitable for the development of the Old Mayan Empire? Why has modern man avoided it to this day?” (1948, 458–459).

Higbee was building on previous contributions to the *Geographical Review* and its forerunner, the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*. Two decades previously, in “The Population of Ancient America,” Herbert Spinden had used what was then known of the precolonial settlement pattern to estimate that Maya population had peaked at a minimum of 8 million toward the end of the Classic period (200–900 C.E.) and that the Yucatán of that time had been “one of the most densely peopled parts of the world” (1928, 651). In doing so, Spinden concluded that the racially and environmentally determinist work of Ellsworth Huntington did not “seem to meet the known facts” (p. 649). Among the more than two dozen articles that Huntington published in the *Geographical Review* and its forerunner, an article on “The Peninsula of Yucatan” had argued that “the degree of energy and initiative is almost directly in proportion to the amount of Spanish blood. The pure Indian is a quiet, slow being, inoffensive and retiring unless abused. He never seems to work unless compelled. . . . Possibly the heat has something to do with it, but there seems ground for believing that it is the uniformity of the temperature quite as much as its degree” (1912, 812–813).

Research on the vestiges of ancient agricultural fields, however, eventually revealed that the Maya had been industrious enough to convert the Yucatán into highly productive, densely settled landscapes during the Classic period. In 1976 Billie Lee Turner II reported in the *Geographical Review* on his discovery and analysis of terraced fields and elaborated on their implications for understanding nature/society processes in the Yucatán; in 1983 Alfred Siemens did the same for intensive wetland agriculture. Recognition that the Maya had used such intensive cultivation systems rather than relying exclusively on extensive shifting cultivation partially answered the question Higbee posed in 1948 and supported Spinden’s seemingly high estimate of more than 8 million people in what became a sparsely settled tropical lowland.

That research on the distant past has great consequences for understanding the nature/society processes of the present and recent past. Juanita Sundberg’s 1998 “NGO Landscapes in the Maya Biosphere Reserve” reported on a discourse that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) employ to disempower local communities who want to grow food in that reserve. The discourse rests on the putatively scientific fact that the soil of the reserve is not arable and that agricultural clearance will therefore result in “severe environmental degradation in very short periods of time” (p. 396). The Yucatán, argue the NGOs, therefore remains suitable only for the support of extractive production such as the selective logging of mahogany and the gathering of allspice. Analysis of that current moment as a manifestation of long-term processes, however, reveals that the soil knowledge the NGOs purvey has more to do with maintaining their power over local communities than with any natural characteristic of the forest soils. After all, the research of Siemens, Turner, and others has demonstrated that the landscapes of the Yucatán have been natural/social hybrids for many centuries, their vegetation, topography, and hydrology as much products of the labor and knowledge of generations of densely settled Maya agriculturalists as of the limestone bedrock and changing climate.

James Blaut's 1999 article on "Environmentalism and Eurocentrism" generalized the lesson (Sluyter 2005a). Western colonizers have long employed racial and environmental determinism masquerading as objective science to categorize native peoples as unproductive and their lands as undeveloped, best used to produce exportable commodities rather than food for locals. Such colonialist practices first emerged during the disjunctures of early modern times but persist among the (post)colonial NGOs of the Yucatán as well as among Huntington's academic scions (Sluyter 1999, 2003, forthcoming).

Recentism diminishes understanding of those and other long-term historical processes that still so profoundly impact the present. Examples range from geopolitics to global environmental change. Some geographers have certainly applied a long-term perspective to such topics (Turner and others 1990; Jones and Phillips 2005). Yet the trend line in Figure 1 remains disturbing, and the current generation of *Geographical Review* contributors will hopefully help to reverse it through application of their considerable creativity and intellectual industry.

#### NOTES

1. I used the random-number-generator function of Microsoft Office Excel 2007 to draw the 13.44 percent sample from 372 issues, normalized from the actual total of 402 issues in order to avoid bias toward the greater number of issues published annually before 1921: 12 per year from 1916 through 1919; 10 in 1920.
2. For a broader range of examples of the value of a long-term perspective as well as discussion of the institutional and intellectual processes underlying recentism, see Jones 2004; Sluyter 2005a; Smith 2009.
3. This brief discussion necessarily omits some items the *Geographical Review* has published on this topic as well as the many more relevant items published elsewhere.

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