

2005

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Blaut's Early Natural/Social Theorization, Cultural Ecology, and Political Ecology

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When James Blaut was a graduate student at the Louisiana State University (LSU) during the 1950s, Hill Memorial Library housed the general stacks rather than special collections like the 22 linear feet of boxes labeled “Kniffen (Fred B) Papers”.¹ Half a century later, the letters and other materials that Kniffen saved help bring to life the process through which one of his doctoral students, namely Blaut, produced a dissertation. At the end of that process of research and writing, in 1958, Blaut had worked out a natural/social theory that would remain central to his thinking throughout the subsequent 42 years of his career. Moreover, because Kniffen was Carl Sauer’s third doctoral student and a key figure in the so-called Berkeley School, Blaut’s natural/social theory must relate in some way to the emergence of geographical cultural and political ecology, the two approaches to research on nature and society that Sauer’s academic progeny championed in the decades following 1958.

While anything more than a tentative understanding of how Blaut’s early natural/social theorization relates to the subsequent trajectories of cultural and political ecology remains too ambitious a task relative to the brevity of this forum, some provisional conclusions become possible on the basis of two fundamental tasks. The first must be a description of the dissertation, with an emphasis on natural/social theorization. The second task must be, because the interactions between doctoral student and major professor are central to the genesis of any dissertation, an analysis of the relationship between Blaut and Kniffen.

Blaut’s Dissertation

In 1950, just as the Cold War was heating up the Korean Peninsula, Blaut arrived at Kniffen’s office door with an already impressive

substantive, methodological, and theoretical background as well as the determination to combine them in a study of tropical agriculture as it related to development policy (Blaut 1958a:401–402; Mathewson and Stea 2003:215–217). Blaut had earned an undergraduate degree in geography at the University of Chicago, where Robert Platt had convinced him of the value of microgeographic research on tropical farming. He had also spent a year studying the earthier side of that topic at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, where he experienced first hand what social scientists would soon be calling the Third World. He thus arrived at LSU so well prepared for graduate work that a year after beginning the program he had a position as an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Malaya in Singapore and was conducting field research in the surrounding farmlands of that insular English colony. He would split the next seven years between Singapore, LSU, service in the US Army, Yale University, and Jamaica before filing his dissertation the same year LSU won its first national football championship. Completion of the dissertation—Chinese market-gardening in Singapore: A study in functional microgeography (Blaut 1958a)—culminated nearly a decade of research on tropical agriculture, earned him the PhD, and terminated his formal relationship with Kniffen.

That dissertation realized as much as, although probably not the same as, what Blaut must have promised Kniffen when he left for Singapore in 1951. He had spent eight years producing a dissertation of more than 400 pages that, in addition to the introduction, has 21 chapters distributed among five parts. The six chapters on theory and method amount to 69 pages, some 17% of the total, and attest an early start to Blaut's capacity to grapple with abstract ideas. Much of the rest of the dissertation displays his ability to collect and analyze a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative data. Unfortunately, Blaut never published most of the dissertation beyond some articles and abstracts that provide only partial and/or early accounts, written in Singapore while concluding fieldwork and during his second year in residence at LSU (Blaut 1953, 1954a, 1954b, 1955, 1957). The remainder of this section thus makes a summation of his dissertation available to a larger and broader audience than ever before.

As he states in Chapter 1, "Research goals", Blaut intended his dissertation to contribute to development policy, specifically to increasing food production in the tropics. Most immediately, he wanted to explain how to increase Singapore's production of food while simultaneously reducing its cost to urban consumers and increasing the incomes of farm families. He therefore focused his efforts on explaining the functioning of a horticultural system that he believed represented the "realizable maxima in yields under tropical conditions": the intensively cultivated, high-yield vegetable farms

of the Kallang Plain in the environs of Singapore (Blaut 1958a:12). He intended that planners would be able to use his explanation to predict how particular policies would affect the functioning of that horticultural system and, moreover, would be able to generalize those results to the broader tropics. But given his perception of a lack of precedent for such research at that time, at least among North American geographers, his initial concerns were theoretical and methodological. As he put it, the dissertation had to begin by theorizing a means for geographers to conduct research on "the processes involved in resource use—ie, in man–environment relations" (Blaut 1958a:18–19). Chapters 2–4 record that effort at natural/social theorization.

Chapter 2, "Conceptual underpinnings", begins with a critique of Richard Hartshorne's definition of geography in order to establish that geographers should do research focused on the relationship between nature and society. Given Platt's status as a prolific Latin Americanist regional geographer, Blaut's undergraduate education at Chicago must certainly have included endless maps of the areal differentiation of population, annual precipitation, agricultural production, and so on. And there he read Hartshorne's (1939) "The nature of geography", the theoretical justification for geography as the regionally organized description of the areal differentiation of phenomenon on the earth's surface (Blaut 1993a:346–347). That descriptive paradigm had dominated North American geography since the early-twentieth-century demise of the environmental determinist theory of the relationship between nature and society (Sluyter 2002:222–227). But Platt must also have communicated his qualms about the discipline's preoccupation with description over explanation, as expressed in the epilogue to one of "a long series of case studies in the regional geography of Latin America" that he wrote in response to John Leighly's criticism that regional geography offered nothing more than a "vision of the whole surface of the earth plastered with topographic descriptions—like the baggage of a round-the-world tourist with hotel stickers" (Leighly 1937:127; Platt 1938:13).

Blaut argues—without herein dwelling on the details, since others have argued much the same both before and after—that Hartshorne's definition of geography cannot provide an adequate basis for a scientific discipline because the areal differentiation of phenomena merely represents a property of those phenomena. Scientific disciplines, he continues, achieve definition according to their specific phenomenon of interest rather than according to a property of a broad range of phenomena. And they measure their maturity by their success in explaining the processes involved in their phenomenon of interest. Geographers, therefore, continues Blaut, might indeed concern themselves with the areal differentiation of phenomena—or spatial

structure, as he termed it—but only in relation to a specific phenomenon of interest and only if spatial structure proved significant to the explanation of the processes involved in that phenomenon. That argument followed from Blaut's reading of pragmatist philosophers and the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (Blaut 1993a:346; Whitehead 1929). It also diametrically opposed Hartshorne's view that geographers should limit concern with process to interpreting the spatial structure of many phenomena rather than conduct research on process *per se* in relation to a single phenomenon.

That single phenomenon, for Blaut, had to be “man–environment relations”, a view that drew him to LSU (Blaut 1958a:18–19). There Sauer, mentor to both Leighly and Kniffen, figured large on the required reading list, providing plenty of support for Blaut's interests in nature and society (KP 15, 1–5). In Blaut's view, Sauer and his students focused on a phenomenon, namely the relationship between nature and society, rather than on spatial structure, and sought to explain the processes through which that relationship changed. Their research on “man's role in changing the face of the earth” and, more specifically, such intellectual problems as the emergence of agriculture, caused Blaut to conclude that “it is a short step from Sauer's view to the more inclusive ecological view” of geography (Blaut 1958a:33–34; Sauer 1952, 1956).

Yet to propose a processual geography with the relationship between nature and society as the phenomenon of interest required Blaut to confront the specter of environmental determinism (Sluyter 2002:224–226). The fear that explanatory research on “man–land relations” necessarily involves environmental determinism had forced geographers to retreat into regional description in the first place and had left the vast territory where nature and society come into being not only *terra incognita* but *terra inconcessa*. Yet Blaut well realized that environmental determinism, like racism, derives from categorical thinking, both being rooted in the assumption that a correlation between categories demonstrates a causal relationship. Having appreciated Whitehead, Blaut also realized that categories of phenomena such as nature, society, and the relationship between them have no meaning apart from the processes through which they continuously come into being and that, therefore, a focus on process avoids determinism: “Everything is process” (Blaut 1993a:348).

As he had for the definition of geography as the study of “man–environment relations”, Blaut found plenty of support for processual research in Sauer. In particular, Blaut considered Sauer's 1941 “Foreword to historical geography”, first delivered as a presidential address before the members of the AAG gathered in LSU's Highland Hall in 1940, to be “the fullest expression of the genetic viewpoint” (Blaut 1958a:32; Sauer 1941). Soon after Blaut returned to LSU in

fall 1953 to finish coursework, he wrote a short piece for the *Professional Geographer* that argued, that geographers “must, as Sauer observes, ‘think in terms of process,’ thus approach an understanding of ‘why’ and achieve a basis for prediction” in order not “to disqualify geography as a science” (Blaut 1954a:9; Sauer 1941:9). Nonetheless, Blaut thought that Sauer at mid century contained a residue of the same preoccupation with spatial structure that he had expressed in his 1925 “The morphology of landscape”, actively evident in the 1941 “Foreword to historical geography” as a promotion of “terrestrial localization”, passively evident as a “lack of attention to short-term, functional processes of interaction among elements” (Blaut 1958a:32; Sauer 1925, 1941:6).

So Blaut turned to Kniffen and Platt, respectively his graduate and undergraduate mentors, as the proximate sources for his own natural/social theory. Kniffen provided a more systematic approach to formulating such theory than Sauer, carrying “the argument for processual geography several full steps beyond where Sauer (1941) had left it” (Blaut 1958a:36). Blaut had been aware, since when he had been an undergraduate at Chicago and read Hartshorne’s critique of the Berkeley School, of Kniffen’s research (Blaut 1993a:346–348; Hartshorne 1939). But “Whither cultural geography?”, the paper Kniffen presented at the 1954 AAG meeting, became particularly important to Blaut’s thinking because of its clear emphasis on culture as a key variable in the processes involved in “man–land relations” and its programmatic call for explanation, generalization, and prediction (Kniffen 1954:222–223). Kniffen might have emphasized manifestations of processes that seemed relatively stable over the long term, such as houses. Blaut might have been more interested in manifestations as short-term as a single farmer’s actions over the course of a cropping season. But those differences in emphasis did not negate the overall agreement that geographers who researched the processes involved in “man–land relations” needed to become more systematic in their efforts to explain those processes (Blaut 1993a:353).

Blaut therefore systematically formulated a processual nature/society theory suited to his research on Singaporean horticulture, as recorded in Chapter 3, “Process analysis, functional and historical”. First he defines three classes of processes involved in resource utilization: orientational, behavioral, and material (Blaut 1958a:39–41). He admits borrowing the term orientational from Talcott Parsons (1951) but carefully points out that he rejects Parsonian structural functionalism and uses the concept of function without implying teleology or purpose (Blaut 1958a:39, 43–44). He characterizes orientational processes as internal to the resource user and as having three aspects that predispose particular behaviors: subjective understanding of a

resource, values toward that resource, and technical knowledge or ability to use that resource. Behavioral processes, in turn, involve resource users' kinds and intensities of action. And, lastly, material processes involve both the instrumental agricultural tools and the goal-satisfying agricultural product. By thus focusing on process, Blaut avoids the problematic need to categorize some elements of the horticultural system as social and others as natural (Blaut 1958a:41).

All three classes of processes become integrated in what Blaut terms the field. He uses the concept of field in preference to region to try to avoid the problem of space–time boundary definition involved in regional geography. In processual geography, some processes might well occur in a single region, such as Singapore Island, but in completely different fields while, at the same time, processes external to the region might impinge on the field (Blaut 1958a:43).

Blaut then defines two types of fields, functional and historical, each with an associated mode of analysis:

Over the short term, the transient system of organized processes may be termed the functional field, studied by methods of functional analysis. The long-term developmental changes which take place in and on a functional field and alter it through time will be called the historical process field, studied by methods of historical process analysis . . . The expression “historical process” is used here in preference simply to “historical” to make clear the fact that we are dealing in spatio-temporal terms, not the structural terms associated with the concept of simple sequence (Blaut 1958a:43–44).

The last point clearly distinguishes, as Sauer and Kniffen did, between temporal sequence and historical process, between the teleological sequent occupance studies that were cultural geography's analog to biology's vegetation succession studies and the study of process in “actual time which may not be explained by schemes of successive stages”, “real, non-duplicated time”, “changing in tempo and usually non-recurrent as to mode” (Sauer 1952:1–2).

Blaut continues his systematic development of a natural/social theory by formulating the analytic stages involved in functional analysis. Stage 1 involves “the identification and definition of functional resource-using fields”, which in his dissertation research were Singapore's two dominant farming systems (Blaut 1958a:44–45). Stage 2 requires “the enumeration of the individual process elements making up and impinging on a functional field” according to their class: orientational, behavioral, and material. The third stage abstracts each process element from its field to determine its intensity and effect on other elements and on the field as a whole. Stage 4 involves synthesis that reintegrates the key process elements into a functional

model used to predict the effects on the field of changing the intensity of one or more of the process elements. Such functional models thus identify what Blaut terms “‘tension points,’ or ‘key process transactions,’ in each of the farming systems” (Blaut 1958a:45).

Blaut (1958a:45–46) gives the stages involved in historical process analysis much less attention. Nonetheless, the first stage seems to involve delineation of the historical process field through identification of the time and place in which the functional fields of interest, namely Singapore's two dominant farming systems, first occurred with an identity recognizably similar to the present. The second stage requires reconstruction of the changes each such field underwent during its diffusion and/or its local development. In other words, historical process analysis involves the sort of analysis that characterizes cultural-historical geography.

In Chapter 4, “Some implications and applications”, Blaut relates his theorization efforts to broader social theory (Blaut 1958a:50). He positions his theory as “of the middle range”, a reference to the sociologist Robert Merton (1949). Merton, in general, criticized theorization that attempts to encompass all aspects of society and thereby becomes so abstract as to lose all grounding in concrete social situations. And he, in particular, criticized Parsonian structural functionalism because of its equilibrium and teleological assumptions. With so-called middle-range theory, Merton attempted to strike a pragmatic balance between such grand theory and eschewing all theory. Likewise, Blaut hoped his own theory would bridge between “general sociocultural theory” and “verifiable hypotheses” concerning “the individual's relationship to physical objects, and only secondarily with his relationship to other actors” (Blaut 1958a:40, 50–53). That focus on the individual seemingly derived from his belief that he needed to emphasize the individual farmer in order to formulate theory “at a level which can lead to meaningful analysis in actual field research, the level, after all, of individual resource-users” (Blaut 1958a:52–54). Nowhere does he suggest that individuals' relations to resources take processual precedence over social relations or culture.

Clearly, while Kniffen might have provided the basis for a systematic approach to processual natural/social theorization, Platt's microgeography would need to provide the method to operationalize a theory oriented toward process manifestations as ephemeral as an individual farmer's actions over the course of a single cropping season. A Hartshornian regional geographer in many ways, Platt also appreciated the Berkeley School and became a proponent of so-called microgeography (Platt 1939:125). In one example, he focuses a regional geography of British Guiana on two coastal plantations that comprise “less than 1/10 of 1% of the area of the colony” (Platt

1939:105). Only after understanding the functioning of those plantations by studying their microgeography does he attempt to explain the regional areal differentiation of plantations in British Guiana and, vice versa, explain the plantations' microgeography in terms of regional areal differentiation (Platt 1939:116). To negotiate between those contrasting scales of analysis, Platt uses what Blaut terms historical process analysis. To Blaut, then, Platt demonstrated how geographers could operationalize analysis of functional fields and relate that analysis to that of historical process fields, an understanding of each being necessary to understanding the other.

The second half of Part I of the dissertation shifts to a consideration of the methods Blaut used to operationalize functional and historical process analyses in Singapore. Chapter 5, "The micro-regional survey", concerns a survey of about 375 farms in which students from the University of Malaya collected data that pertained to orientational, behavioral, and material processes: for example, family size, ethnicity, crop yields, input costs, land tenure, and attitudes toward soil quality (Blaut 1958a:62–65, 393–400). In an effort to generalize the results of that survey, Blaut also conducted an agricultural census that covered all of Singapore Island, as discussed in Chapter 6, "The reconnaissance farm survey". That census, though in principle "island wide", did not achieve full coverage and emphasized observation over interview and, thus, material and behavioral processes over orientational processes (Blaut 1958a:77–79). And in an effort to collect more detailed data than with the survey, Blaut also conducted a case study of a single farm, working out the methodology involved in Chapter 7, "The case study". With that functional analysis of a single farm, he intended to generate hypotheses to test with the data derived from the survey and the census. Throughout the discussion of methods, Blaut emphasizes functional analysis to the exclusion of historical process analysis. Moreover, logistical problems overwhelmed the integration of even the three aspects of functional analysis. For example, the census followed the survey, so the latter could not be based on a stratified random sample and Blaut could not generalize its data to the entire island. For that reason, the substantive chapters that follow emphasize the survey results for a single district, the Lower Kallang Plain, and the case study of a single farm in that district.

After introducing selected aspects of Singapore Island's geography and history in Part II, Part III presents the substantive results of the historical process analysis. On the basis of selected functional characteristics of Singapore's two dominant farming systems, Blaut first identifies their historical process fields and then explains the processes involved in the diffusion and local establishment of each system. His data derive from published eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts, and the analysis recalls the judicious piecing

together of such fragmentary data characteristic of Sauer's research. One of the farming systems, which he designates the leaf-stem system, involves rapidly maturing vegetables on irrigated farms that rarely exceed half an acre and are situated on bottomland with heavy soils. That system seems to have originated in China's Guandong province and diffused to Singapore with Cantonese immigrants with no significant alteration of the functional field. The other farming system, which he terms the fruit-earth system, involves fruit and root crops mixed with pig production on rain-fed farms that are several acres and situated on bottomlands with lighter soils and on hill lands. That system seems to have originated in Singapore through transformation of a system for growing pepper that became unprofitable in the late 1800s. Blaut, then, on the basis of much better data, reconstructs the nineteenth- and twentieth-century expansions and contractions of the two farming systems, especially relative to the boom and bust of rubber plantations. In terms of his three classes of process involved in resource utilization, the data that pertain to the historical process analysis dictate an emphasis on material processes, similar to Kniffen's research on material culture elements such as houses.

The eight chapters of Part IV present the substantive results of the first three stages of the functional analysis. Blaut first identifies and defines the functional fields of the two farming systems by presenting the survey and census data for all of Singapore Island, including a dot map of the areal differentiation of farm systems. But he quickly focuses on the leaf-stem farms of the Lower Kallang Plain because that district had the highest concentration of such farms and, on the basis of the survey and census data, was the most representative of Singaporean leaf-stem farming in general. In turn, for the case study, he chose a single farm that was representative of the Lower Kallang Plain in general. Each chapter then implements the second and third analytic stages of functional analysis by presenting results and discussion related to clusters of process elements involved in material, behavioral, and orientational processes.

The concluding part of the dissertation synthesizes Blaut's results in the form of what he calls a functional model of the leaf-stem farming field, thus realizing the fourth stage of his functional analysis. In that model, "qualitative attributes, or patterns, consist of the individual process elements and their modes of interaction; [and] quantitative attributes consist of the intensity of process activity and process transactions, measured on an economic scale" (Blaut 1958a:340). But his conception of the complexity of the functional field far exceeded the capacity of his data to model it, prodigious as those data are in terms of kinds of material process elements (eg soil, microclimate, crops, implements) and behavioral process elements

(eg tilling, watering, planting, marketing). The near total commercialization of the farming system and market orientation of the farmers did suggest to him the use of monetary units as a common proxy for the intensity of process elements, reflecting the minor in agricultural economics he earned for his 1954 MS from LSU. But he realized that the “use of family labor earnings as a means of arriving at labor value undervalues those aspects of the system which depend on labor rather than purchased materials—eg watering and tillage—since family labor earnings represent a residual *after* all expenses have been subtracted from receipts, and comes out rather low in terms of returns to labor and therefore value of labor-derived process elements” (Blaut 1958a:343, italics in original). As for orientational process elements such as economic and non-economic values, he did not collect even good qualitative data. Just as problematically, beyond the process elements that were wholly internal to the field, others were largely external but impinged on the field in critical ways—eg material processes such as precipitation, behavioral ones such as pesticide purchases, and orientational ones such as perception of trends in the market price of vegetables. And his data on those key external process elements were extremely poor.

Nonetheless, by constraining the model to a single farm, a single crop, and one crop cycle, all average in terms of the survey data, and excluding complexities such as flooding and market fluctuations, Blaut was able to construct a vastly simplified functional model. That model allowed him to draw some conclusions about key process transactions, his so-called tension points. For example, because hand-watering took up roughly a third of available productive time, one of the most intensive of the behavioral process elements, Blaut concluded that labor rather than land shortage explained the small size of the leaf-stem farms. Nowhere in that modeling effort, however, did he attempt to integrate systematically that functional analysis with historical process analysis.

Despite the project not fully realizing all of his goals, Blaut took well-deserved pride in the substantive knowledge he had produced about Singaporean horticulture and the degree to which he had been able to test his theory. The failings, he concluded, were operational rather than conceptual. He had, after all, developed the theory after returning from Singapore with the data. At the very least he had determined that processual research on resource use demanded “highly intensive data collection, much of it dealing with topics—such as resource apperception, values, costs and returns—which require a high level of rapport between the investigator and the farmer, a level not always attained in this study” (Blaut 1958a:370). He remained convinced that microgeographical fieldwork would yield macro conceptual results but determined in future to focus a multidisciplinary team of investigators on a more restricted functional field.

Blaut's Relationship with Kniffen

The relationship between major professor and graduate student is as significant a variable in the genesis of a dissertation as that significance becomes difficult to assess after the passing of half a century and the two principals. The terse acknowledgement Blaut (1958a:iii) accords Kniffen in the dissertation implies that the student felt little intellectual debt or personal regard for the mentor. Yet, the dissertation also makes clear that Kniffen, especially his 1954 AAG paper, "Whither cultural geography?", influenced Blaut's theorization and that his choice of major professor did not merely reflect convenience. Still, Blaut already knew Kniffen's work as an undergraduate at Chicago, so if Blaut had remained there for graduate work under Platt's supervision, would the theoretical component of the dissertation have ended up being much different? The correspondence preserved in the Kniffen Papers, published statements such as Blaut's chapter in a 1993 Kniffen Festschrift, and his 1975 interview in the Geographers on Film series together provide a fuller perspective on how significantly the relationship between the two influenced the dissertation's genesis (Blaut 1975a, 1993a).

The relationship began in 1950, when Kniffen was 50 and Blaut 22, a considerable absolute and relative difference in age, experience, and intellectual maturity. Over the 1960s—as opposition to the Vietnam War mounted, the New Left grew more vocal, and the influence of the House Un-American Activities Committee declined—Blaut began to write about the communist revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam as "cures" for Western imperialism in a journal of radical geography, this one, that he helped to found (Blaut 1970b:65). Meanwhile, Kniffen had applied to work for the Central Intelligence Agency (KP 6, 2, 19 March 1970, R S Wattles to Kniffen). Throughout, though, the intellectual and personal bond ensured that Kniffen kept supporting Blaut with letters of recommendation (KP 5, 12, 20 September 1961 and 18 January 1962, Kniffen to John Fraser Hart; 6, 3, 14 December 1970, Kniffen to C E Tiedmann).

More germane to this analysis, Kniffen kept reading Blaut's manuscripts and offering him feedback. The Kniffen Reprint Collection of the LSU Department of Geography and Anthropology preserves several such manuscripts, among them part of a 1960 book manuscript with the working title "Ecological cultural geography", that attest Kniffen's "valuable suggestions and criticisms" (Blaut 1958b:1; 1960a; 1961b). By 1976, a decade and a half before publishing *Fourteen Ninety-Two*, Blaut was sharing his initial efforts on *The Colonizer's Model of the World* with Kniffen (KP 6, 8, 4 February 1976, Blaut to Kniffen; 6, 9, 9 February 1977, Blaut to Kniffen; 6, 10, 18 July 1977, Blaut to Kniffen; Blaut, 1992, 1993b).

Blaut (1975a) fully acknowledged that intellectual debt in his Geographers on Film interview. In response to a question about Kniffen's intellectual influence on the dissertation, Blaut answered that while his mentor did not know much about tropical agriculture, he "gave me the base for my own work and said, 'Go ahead and do it in terms of this basic framework of non-ethnocentrism, of a historical perspective.' That's what really formed me" (Blaut 1975a). Regarding the issue of "a historical perspective", in a Festschrift chapter published the year Kniffen passed away, Blaut avows that he had not even considered historical process analysis for the dissertation until after he returned to LSU from Singapore and Kniffen asked him, "what have you found out about the historical evolution of this farming system?" (Blaut 1993a:353). Only then, apparently, did Blaut go to work in the library to reconstruct the agricultural origins and dispersals of the leaf-stem and fruit-earth systems.

Kniffen's role as Blaut's major professor, then, was critical to his intellectual development. Kniffen directly influenced the dissertation and continued to have an influence on Blaut's long-term intellectual evolution. Kniffen emphasized manifestations of processes that seemed relatively stable over the long term, such as houses. Blaut initially emphasized manifestations as short term as an individual farmer's actions over the course of a cropping season, but that focus began to change during the 1960s. By *The Colonizer's Model of the World* (1993b), he came to emphasize some unfortunately all too stable manifestations of process. Yet, throughout, the processual natural/social theory he developed in the dissertation remained his intellectual core. And, as he wrote in the Festschrift about his time at LSU, "my interests as a whole were vastly different from Kniffen's. Yet he guided me nonetheless. He educated me. And his view of cultural geography became my own" (Blaut 1993a:351).

Blaut's Cultural and Political Ecologies

To categorize geographical cultural and political ecology in order to analyze Blaut's relationship with those subdisciplines would ignore his lifelong position that "everything is *process*" (Blaut 1961a:2, italics in original). While categorization has utility and some have provided useful definitions of geographical cultural and political ecology, no one has yet provided a detailed historical process analysis of the two subdisciplines, let alone factors that impinge from allied fields such as agricultural economics, biological ecology, and so on (but see Zimmerer 1996). Continuing with Blaut's terminology, such an analysis would reveal the "creative tension points" involved in disciplinary genesis rather than dwelling on some putative essence.

Zimmerer's (1996) insightful history of the use of ecological concepts in human geography remains the best such account available, but its two dozen pages can provide no more than a sketch. Discounting earlier, sporadic uses of the term cultural ecology, the anthropologist Julian Steward began to promote a well defined cultural ecological approach in the 1950s that had begun filtering into geography by the 1960s (Steward 1955). It offered a processual alternative to human ecology, then associated with the categorical thinking of environmental determinism. Political ecology originated with the anthropologist Eric Wolf in the 1970s and by the 1980s had begun to influence geographers. Rooted in critical social theory, it offered a sociological alternative to cultural ecology and a processual alternative to human ecology (by then associated in geography with the categorical thinking of the Hazards School) and ecosystemic hybrids between the two such as the energetics approach. Many of the actors in that, using Blaut's term, historical process field have been among Sauer's academic progeny, including Blaut himself. In fact, he embodied the shifting tension points in that process field, even while the processual natural/social theory he developed in the dissertation remained his intellectual core.

He was among the first geographers to use the term cultural ecology, doing so approvingly albeit relatively peripherally in his dissertation, citing Steward's 1955 *Theory of Culture Change* (Blaut 1958a:39; Steward 1955). And Blaut did not abandon that interest in cultural ecology when he filed the dissertation. His conference paper "Objects and relationships" differs substantially from the version eventually published as "Object and relationship" (Blaut 1961b, 1962). In the published version, Blaut does not even mention cultural ecology; in the conference paper he concludes that "the subject matter of cultural geography ... looks suspiciously like the subject matter of some future science of cultural ecology" (Blaut 1961b:13). He was at that time, in fact, increasingly relating his work to the emerging literature in geographical and anthropological cultural ecology (Blaut 1961c). The climax of that effort seems to have been the partial book manuscript, never published, on "Ecological cultural geography" in which he aspired to develop a "non-environmentalistic, predictive, socioculturally oriented cultural ecology within geography" (Blaut 1960a:i).

At the same time that he was developing that theoretical program focused on cultural ecology, he was addressing some of the empirical deficiencies of his dissertation. He joined forces with anthropologists to explain erosion "so serious as virtually to have eliminated topsoil from all cultivated areas" in a part of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica (Blaut et al 1959:405). In many ways that study resembled the dissertation project but explicitly attempted to collect more data on

orientational processes, a large gap in the Singapore data, and more thoroughly to consider social relations. That shift in emphasis became possible in part because of the topically more restricted functional field involved in a single phenomenon, soil erosion, in a single community and in part because of multidisciplinary teamwork that included anthropologists. They lived in the community, achieved rapport with the farm families, and were able to collect data relevant to orientational processes such as perception of soil erosion. Among other conclusions related to social relations, Blaut and his collaborators concluded that gender relations affected resource access and, consequently, cropping patterns and soil erosion (Blaut et al 1959:418–419). But they also concluded that orientational processes best explained soil erosion: “most farmers have yet to give up their traditional beliefs regarding soil erosion or the lack thereof, particularly in view of the elements of resistance to ‘government men’” (Blaut et al 1959:417, 420). That conclusion, however, seems to contradict a parallel conclusion regarding material processes. Despite the near total lack of topsoil, extremely deep weathering of subsoil, and steep slopes, the community was able to achieve “a low but reasonably sustained yield” (Blaut et al 1959:416). The locals, in fact, seem to have been farming by continuously exposing rapidly weathering “subsoil which is neither too hard for roots to penetrate nor too coarse-grained to release its nutrients” (Blaut et al 1959:416). As Kniffen might have admonished, and Sauer certainly did, “it is our current faith that the ways of the West are the ways that are best for the rest of the world . . . Our programs of agricultural aid pay little attention to native ways and products. Instead of going out to learn what their experiences and preferences are, we go forth to introduce our ways and consider backward what is not our pattern” (Sauer 1956:68).

As radicalism flourished during the 1960s, undermining the cultural foundations of the West, Blaut began to appreciate better the non-ethnocentric, “uniformitarian” perspective that Sauer and Kniffen promoted. Regarding the Jamaica study, for example, Blaut (1961c:65) came to suspect that the “‘use’ of erosion seems to assist [farmers] in parts of the Blue Mountains”. He later reflected that he and his collaborators “thought we needed to know what peasant farmers do, and why they do it, before we, as scientists, could prescribe remedies for their poverty”, but that he eventually realized that “giving them technical advice was like teaching arithmetic to Einstein” (Blaut 1979:163).

Also during the 1960s, Blaut began “writing from a Marxist perspective”, a key aspect of the political ecology that entered geography in the early 1980s as a critical, sociological alternative to cultural ecology (Blaut 1970b, 1979:160–161; KP 6, 10, 18 July 1977, Blaut to Kniffen). Marxism was certainly commensurable with Blaut’s

commitment to processual science but shifted his perspective to a critical one that included a broader suit of processes. He began to realize that to understand the problems of small farmers, he needed to emphasize, as Sauer and Kniffen did not, the social processes involved in phenomena like soil erosion, such as those involved in class relations (Blaut 1967:218–219; 1977:345–346). By his own account, years later, “the radical movement affected [his] interests in two important ways: it changed the values underlying the research, and thus its purpose; and it exposed errors previously hidden behind conformal assumptions and models ... as [he] became aware of previously unnoticed variables (like capital accumulation and class conflict)” (Blaut 1979:162). During the 1960s, then, he abandoned the book on geographical cultural ecology” (Blaut 1960a). And, by 1980, he had published an article in *Antipode* that criticized cultural ecologists for a lack of emphasis on class relations, both within the social groups they studied and between those groups and state elites (Blaut 1980:26–27).

Yet he also continued to identify with cultural ecologists, at least with those who, following Sauer, emphasized culture and historical process over functionalism and deterministic teleology: “For cultural geographers the status quo is an abstraction from process. ... In a word, we think historically, processually” (Blaut 1980:29). Even as late as the early 1990s, he was referring to himself as a cultural ecologist in order to emphasize the importance of cultural-historical as well as political and economic processes (Blaut 1993a:352).

That continued commitment to cultural-historical geography probably relates to a second shift in Blaut's research. Parallel to inclusion of a broader suit of processes and a critical activist agenda, Blaut turned from a, in his terms, micro-functional to a global-historical scale of analysis, particularly to the processes involved in, to quote Sauer (1956:68), the misguided “faith that the ways of the West are the ways that are best for the rest of the world”. Not only did Blaut begin “writing from a Marxist perspective”; then, during the late 1970s he began to emphasize global imperialism and Eurocentrism over local field study of tropical farming (KP 6, 10, 18 July 1977, Blaut to Kniffen). Perhaps his interactions with and opposition to cultural ecologists who espoused environmental determinism and Eurocentrism—most notably the anthropologist Betty Meggers, who proposed that tropical environments strictly limited social accomplishment in the Third World relative to temperate European environments—stimulated his interest in Eurocentrism (Blaut 1960b:197–198; Meggers 1954). From early publications that sketched *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, he developed a masterful critique of Eurocentric explanations of development (Blaut 1970b, 1975b, 1976, 1987, 1993b). And that critique included Marxist theorists who

lapsed into deterministic, structural thinking to categorically assert *sui generis* origins for capitalism and nationalism in Europe (Blaut 1975b:9, 1976, 1987:40–41; KP 6, 10, 18 July 1977, Blaut to Kniffen).

Back to the Future

Jim Blaut's and Fred Kniffen's own words best conclude any reflection on the meaning of an intellectual and activist career that spanned half a century and made such an impact on the discipline and beyond. In his *Geographers on Film* interview, Blaut reflected on the shifts in emphasis that took him from the micro-functional processual analysis of his dissertation, the chapters on historical process analysis produced mainly as an afterthought in deference to Kniffen, to the emphasis on macro-historical process that would become the acclaimed, but sadly unfinished, trilogy on Eurocentrism.

I had the idea, which was really a value, that if you could understand peasant agriculture (actually relate to people close up) it would change the world. Now I've changed my mind about that The more you look at the problems in a village in Jamaica or Singapore, the more you have to ask yourself where the source of the problem is. It's not in the minds of the people. A Jamaican farmer is as good a geographer as I am. He is intelligent. He does the best he knows how. The problem is at a higher level, the problems of society. Then the next step beyond that is to say that the problem is at the level of the world. This is what really turned me towards concern with colonialism and neo-colonialism. It seemed to me that with the peasant farmer, the thing you need to understand his problems is you have to understand multi-national corporations, colonialists (all that kind of stuff) historically (Blaut 1975a).

Kniffen, of course, had offered Blaut exactly that advice in 1955, when commenting on a draft of the dissertation: "You mention tension points that are intimately close. Aren't there others, more remote, but of great potential importance to the workability of this local system?" (KP 5, 11, 23 May 1955, Kniffen to Blaut).

Acknowledgments

Although the views expressed in this essay do not necessarily reflect those of the people acknowledged, I thank Ben Wisner and Kent Mathewson for organizing this appreciation, Wes Dow for his foresight in conceiving the *Geographers on Film* project, Carina Giusti for assistance with archival research, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

Endnote

¹ Cited as "KP, box number, folder number, date of letter, names of correspondents" (Fred B Kniffen Papers, Mss 3488, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA).

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