

PROJECTING GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN CANADA
June 2, 2005, University of Western Ontario

Geography, Business and Industry Session

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I shall begin by noting that it was 41 years this summer that I arrived on this very campus to begin my academic career. Less there be some confusion on the matter I was toiling in the discipline of economics not geography. Why then did Stuart Semple ask me to give this paper? It is true that I was an undergraduate geography major and I am on the Board of Governors of the RCGS, that I have in addition to academia worked in the federal government and in the private sector but you may think that not to be an overwhelming reason to warrant me giving this talk. Certainly he had some reason and you can speculate as to what it was after you have heard what it is that I have to say.

I approached the problem of the interface between business and geography by asking some questions.

1. Does it really matter? Does having knowledge of geography and the basic analytical concepts taken in the widest sense really improve my life and the life of my fellow residents of wherever? And, if it does not then why worry?

Business has use for geography using census data and knowledge of transportation systems etc. to locate manufacturing or distribution/sales outlets. For example, a friend of mine had a chance to put a wine he was importing into twenty of the state run liquor stores in Ontario. Which ones to chose? I was the Director General of the Census at the time and asked him to give me the characteristics of the people whom he thought would drink his wine. The search found where the concentration of those people was greatest, then he located the closest LCBO outlets and his wine set a record in sales. He of course told the world via community newspapers in the markets immediately surrounding those stores that the wine was available.

Notice two points here. The data that were related to a specific place were critical but so was telling the world that the product was available.

That was just one case of business using geography. The question remains does geography really matter to the plumber, the tax assessor, the physician, the lawyer, the economist or the chemistry professor at an institution such as Western or the guy pushing the boom at night in the London Life office downtown?

I think the answer is yes. Very much so. The plumber whether she recognizes it or not uses geography when determining what is the most efficient way to reach the client. And plumbers go to clients not vice versa. That plumber needs to have knowledge of the market place in which she works and the transportation system, most particularly the roads system, in order to function. Current specialized knowledge is of particular importance, for example, knowing where bottlenecks are likely to be found and at what time of the day, where construction may be occurring, where she cannot go with her truck and which streets are one way in the wrong direction.

And while our gal of the Stilson wrench uses geography without really thinking about it, so does virtually everyone else be it planning a vacation, or going from home to the concert hall or out shopping or whatever. And business uses it as well and really without thinking. You don't put a bank branch in the middle of uninhabited fields nor a fine restaurant in the centre of an industrial park unless you want a very small clientele.

The same with me I needed geography to get from the airport to this spot and it had to be this spot not some other room in some other building.

Geography is what I call a foundation social science. By that I ask you to contemplate how we could do without it? How could we orient ourselves? How could we know where others and virtually anything else is and how man interacts with his surroundings?

I conclude that geography is important but if it is important how do we explain the lack respect or attention it is accorded in everyday life? Why is geography so little recognized as being important by the business community? Why are geography majors not sought out with the same intensity as undergraduates in business or economics most especially a tightening labour market such as we are facing?

Go back to the example I gave about selling wine. He found where the potential customers were and then he told them about his product.

We all know where the potential users of geographic knowledge are but geographers have not told a large part of the world about their product. I think it is because geographers have been hiding their talents and their knowledge under bushel baskets.

I spent almost a decade telling the story of one bank to whomever would listen. And this was not any bank but one of the three largest in the world but the 7th largest in Canada which compared to the big four in Canada made us virtually a nobody. And as I continued to tell the story in articles speeches and whatever and the bank pursued an aggressive advertising strategy, the notoriety of the bank increased and so did its business.

I believe the central challenge is to make people, and in particular, the business community, aware of what geography can do for them. There are several ways to do this. The simplest but most costly is to mount a publicity/advertising campaign but I doubt the geography professionals have adequate funding to mount such an effort. But there is another far more cheaper way.

Let me digress for just a moment to set up an argument for what might be done.

While it is true that Canada is overwhelmingly still a drawer of water and hewer of wood which is the poetic way of saying we are a resource based economy, a growing portion of the national wealth is being generated by the service sector which means that the main assets of such firms go in and out of the front door each day. Be it software design or advanced research on fuel cells, improved mapping techniques or provision of business consulting services, the hot thing for any city is to have is knowledge-based industries. They pay the highest wages, generate the least amount of adverse externalities such as noxious gases or polluted water, and because the average education of such workers is relatively high they often serve as leaders in any number of civic activities. And they are highly mobile not just between firms but between cities.

One thing about these knowledge based industries that is starting to register with city and even provincial governments is that the immediate environment of the community in which knowledge based industries are located is of crucial importance to the attraction and retention of such industry.

And when I refer to environment I am not thinking only of air quality and climatic conditions so much as I am thinking about those features which can make urban life interesting if not exciting. A variety of restaurants, interesting neighbourhoods -- all the things that Richard Florida talks about in his writings It includes a diverse and active cultural life from concerts to live entertainment cafes, from good bookstores and news stands to well used public spaces. I can think of Denman street in Vancouver, or the Kensington district in Calgary or Queen street in Toronto, or the Byward market region in Ottawa and of course my favorite la rue St. Denis in Montreal.

In brief a diversified interesting and active social and cultural landscape. An active street-scape that was so praised by Jane Jacobs.

But often it seems as if urban Canadians are striving to obliterate such diversity. The major culprits are, in my mind urban sprawl and zoning. We need to focus more on the necessary and sufficient conditions that allow for the evolution of such interesting urban areas and what are the major barriers to their creation.

Now ask yourselves what knowledge base other than a geographic one could best explain this? Exactly.

Those knowledge based industries are vitally interested in knowing the answer to these questions of urban evolution in order to maintain and grow their business. But they don't know that they don't know how to find the answers without geography.

Bear with me for just a short while longer.

Let me consider in detail one such urban center: Calgary mainly because I lived in the greater Calgary region for a couple of years and in doing so came to regard it with wonder.

Some basic facts. The footprint of the city is equivalent in size to that of the city of New York with only 1/14th the population. This is sprawl at its worst. Driving from the west of the city to the airport which is in the north east quadrant you head north on the Stony Creek Trail and then across the top of the city on the Cross Hills Road and you go through endless kilometers of some of the ugliest and dreariest suburban tracts I have ever seen. Life without a car in these regions is inconceivable. Driving through one of these suburbs on a given day you would think that a Neutron bomb had exploded. There is no street life. No diversity. Any commercial development is relegated to giant malls or an occasional gas station with a convenience store attached. There are no meeting places -- no places where there is interaction save at the mall. And to use Gertrud Stein's remark about Los Angeles "There is no there there."

Now I ask myself: here is a city hell bent on growth yet faced with acute fiscal challenges because of a very limited tax base, does this growth in the physical area of the city make sense? Moreover, Calgary has a growing knowledge based sector that wants the environment of urban life to improve. And this knowledge based sector knowing the importance of a vibrant city to its long-term welfare wants to take a leadership role on this question.

What is it to do? How should voters, for example, approach a proposal for yet further expansion of the city? Does it make sense?

And then I think of geography and what it might tell us. To be exact, how efficient is Calgary compared to other cities? Surely the sprawl must involve higher costs per capita for sewage, street lighting, policing and every other form of urban service. Just how much? In short, what are the true costs in terms of the city budget of sprawl versus some alternatives and what might those alternatives be and how could impact on the quality of life within the urban core? Put another way the land taxes these knowledge based industries are paying are directly impacted by the answers to these questions.

If the populace does not know anything else they will vote for its continuation and business dependent upon an evolving city will go elsewhere and when the gas and oil are all gone what will be left?

Now back to the main theme.

If the desire is to make geography and its analytical framework more relevant in modern day life and in the business world then I would argue that this relevance has to be demonstrated in a clear consistent, effective and rather relentless manner. Geography professionals need to demonstrate in a simple and direct fashion why their discipline is important and how it can help in shaping public policy that relates to urban life which is where more than 80% of Canadians live.

I believe that Geography is not brought to the top of mind by most people and business people in particular is because, unless you are directly involved in either marketing or plant location, there is no need to think about geography in a conscious fashion.

And if businesses get accustomed to using geography in dealing with public issues it will start to use it in business issues as well.

Imagine if you will, that the Geography department at the University Calgary turned out some sort of "geographic inventory" of the city of Calgary and its surrounding region. I am not talking about some rigorous in depth analysis but rather something that the lay person could understand and relate to and a piece that would raise three or four major questions and what the alternative answers this implied to the future of the city and its quality of life.

Think such an inventory would go unnoticed? Think it would not raise interest on the part of intelligent business types particularly those in the knowledge based industries? Think the city administration would be able to ignore it?

Most importantly do you honestly think it would be harmful to the long-term welfare of the department? I doubt it. And I also do not think it would be that much work to produce such a document.

There are, of course, a million excuses why it can't be done. What about the individual research of each of the various members of the faculty? What about those people at the Assistant Professor level struggling to get tenure? Can they afford to take time out for this?

Well sure they can if they and their peers and those who will be judging their acceptability for a tenured appointment say that working on such a project is an important part of their service to the community. Not just the university community but the community of Calgary. In short, make it a part of the decision process and most importantly have the Associates and the full Professors "walk the talk". That is they participate in the project as well and that they, together with the juniors, share rather than hog the limelight once the inventory is made public.

Putting specialized knowledge to work for the direct benefit of the urban centre in which the university is located be it Calgary, Vancouver, Guelph or Wolfville is a way to make geography more relevant to our everyday lives and to get business to start thinking in a geographical framework.

What other academic department could have such a universal impact? Economics? Not really and neither could political science, nor law, nor medicine.

Geography is the holistic social science and the one which most directly touches each and every one of us who has to live geography every day in going to or, at, or coming home from work. It is the one social science that people can touch and see and experience. And yet geographers have managed with great care to keep their work well hidden from public view save for the maps issued by most popular geographic magazines. Geography is more than that.

The world is waiting to discover what geography can contribute but unless geographers tell them this nobody will discover them and their usefulness.

It is your field of dreams. Build it and they will come. I know that I am asking the profession to leave the comfortable confines of academe and get their hands dirty in the real world. But that is the way to get the public notice and respect the discipline deserves.

If you do not blow your own horn who will? And if you do it then we shall all be the better for it.