Geography's Origins and Identity
Witold Wilczynski

Table of Contents
Introduction
I. The sense of historical-philosophical research in geography
What is the history of geographical thought?
The history of geographical thought and socio – political context
The history of geographical thought and the development of science
The history of geographical thought and education

II. Problems of the development of research in the field of history and
philosophy of geography in Poland

Philosophical dimension of geography
Geography in the light of the idea of progress
Mental barriers to the development of philosophical-historical research

III. Ideological pedigree of geography

Ancient Geography
Bernhard Varenius
Epistemology of Immanuel Kant

IV. Geography in the light of its key concepts

The meaning of research on terminology
The systematic stream: Land and Nature,"Environment", Man in classical
geography: the concept of civilization
The chorological stream: Development and regression of the classic regional
geography, the study of regions of the Commonwealth of Poland, Landscape,
Space

V. The Identity of contemporary geography and its social relevance

Controversies over the nature of geography
Definition of the subject matter
The social relevance of geography
The use of geography in education

Conclusions
Geography’s Origins and Identity
(Summary)

Image of geography as a field of knowledge seen from the outside contains a contradiction, which probably is not realized by the most of its agents, or the people involved in professional geography. Also, this contradiction is not perceived by many users of geographic knowledge, who remember the school geography and often return to it in different situations and in the face of various needs. Namely, this is an area which, on the one hand, enjoys the unabated and, can say, selfless sympathy of a large part of society. On the other hand however geography experiences almost permanent “methodological difficulties”, as documented in numerous scientific publications.

Although geography is not a profession in demand (to say nothing of geography teachers) and geographical studies do not guarantee lucrative jobs, there is no shortage of people willing to devote years of their young life to this area. You could say that people like geography and for many it is a passion for life irrespectively of occupation, social and economic status. So far, no studies have been conducted aimed at explaining the phenomenon of the people’s exceptional geographical fascination. This fascination is however commonly observed in the everyday behavior and attitudes, as well as in the literary works and in the official statements by public figures. For the ordinary user of geographical knowledge, learning it is a source of joy and satisfaction, which is expressed even in the way of pronunciation the foreign geographical names.

What are then the reasons of this paradoxical contradiction? Why there exists the gap in geography between the common, popular perception of the field, and its scientific form and status? From what you take in all these posts talking about methodological weakness of geography? Is geography snubbed because it involve mainly rote learning rather than critical thinking? Because it seems passé in an era when technology is making the earth a “global village”? Because geographers fail to promote their subject? Or because educators have forgotten how important it is?

Extensive and radical differences in the perception of geography and its position between its practitioners on the one hand, and the users on the other must involve a serious doubt that they all say about the same. Is it possible, that professional geographers writing on the general recession of geography mean the area, which constitutes the most exciting school subject and attracts interest of millions? Seeking the right answer to that question one should not only emphasize the fact, that geography as a science really moved away from everyday geographical knowledge. It turns out that contemporary geography only slightly resembles its classical shape, which, thanks to the popular literature, various TV programs, and partly also because of the educational system, became established in the collective memory of society. The contradiction which originally appeared between the scientific vision of geography and its popular counterpart was transferred in this way into the philosophy and history of geographical thought. It consists in fact in far reaching differences between the philosophical foundations of geography in the classical period of its development, and the dominant contemporary ideas.

Based on comparative analysis of the contents of classical and contemporary academic and school textbooks, as well as the contents and form of geographical works published in the classical period and now, it can be ascertained that the changes that occurred in our area of concern are of three particular kinds. Firstly, classical geography was a field concerning a wide variety of phenomena observed on the Earth surface, both those arising from economic activity as well as existing independently of man. Landscape changes were explained with the
everyday human activities, and social reality was closely connected with properties of the environment. Thanks that geography was the knowledge very close to everyday life. Contemporary geography became much more abstract science. Instead of perceived landscapes and real problems of everyday life it explores the abstract relationships, structures and systems. This correction was to make geography more “scientific” and to improve its scientific status. The second direction of developments in geography during the post-classical period is its reorientation in terms of objectives. Classical geography has placed an emphasis on synthesis while contemporary geography is dominated by analytical, specialized approaches. Reductionism is also the property of those works, whose authors talk about a need of “holism” and “interdisciplinary studies”. The third aspect of developments in geography concerns the means of expression. After meeting certain methodological standards, a former geography was a kind of art oriented on the shaping of social consciousness. Numerous classical geographic works were simultaneously the result of a detailed research, the expressions of the author’s educational vocation, and the evidence of his literary talent. Nowadays in geography the beautiful language is not such respected, a teacher ceased to be a master, and the school handbooks became a kind of the most boring literature.

The above mentioned reorientation in geography concerning the increasing degree of abstraction, the dominance of analytical approaches, and the language formalization, seem to be very deep, reaching the very essence of the field. So, the next question arises: do the two models of geography, classical and modern, provide various approximations of the same field, or perhaps they are two completely different forms of culture, which are defined with the use of the same word mainly due to inertia. This question does not seem unreasonable since many authors officially accepts that geography has ceased to exist, being replaced by the “geographical sciences”. Moreover, there occurred numerous names of new “synthetic environmental sciences” which were to encompass, partially or completely, the traditional scope of geography. Simultaneously, geographers are often seen as the “jacks of all trades and masters of none” and the definition of geography as the science of the Earth surface (germ. eine Wissenschaft der Erdoberfläche) is being replaced by the “superficial science of Earth” (germ. eine oberflächliche Wissenschaft der Erde).

To demonstrate that such anecdotal statements degrading geography and geographers are unjustified, it is necessary to guide the basic principles of classical geography which underpinned its unity and identity. To do that the reconstruction was made of the original philosophy, rooted in Kantian epistemology, which became the foundation of modern geography (Chapter 3). In order to compare these classical concepts with the contemporary ones, there have been presented some key words, with emphasis on changes in the ways of understanding them (Chapter 4). This part of the book is based on the assumption that the change in terminology does reflect the evolution of science which take place in the sphere of philosophy. These two main chapters shall be preceded by general remarks about the importance of research in the philosophy and history of geographical thought (Chapter 1), and about the various obstacles in their development in Poland (Chapter 2). The final section (Chapter 5) contains a proposal for the revival of geography’s identity and formulations concerning its social relevance.