

# Regional Ecology and Middle America: Teaching Geography in a Major Latin American Program

William E. Doolittle  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of Texas*  
*Austin, TX 78712*

## ABSTRACT

Geography is often considered an integrative or synthesizing discipline. Regional courses, such as "The Geography of Latin America," typically cover a number of topics including geology, climate, vegetation, history, agriculture, forestry, mining, industry, transportation, housing and demography. In many colleges and universities, especially smaller ones, such courses may be necessary because of a limited number of regional course offerings. At the University of Texas at Austin, however, a different problem exists. There, of the more than 2300 faculty members, approximately 150 are Latin Americanists. Courses covering Latin American topics are offered in 23 departments as well as geography. The problem then is not one of synthesis but rather of doing something unique. This requires that geography as a discipline be defined explicitly. The combination of human ecological and regional concepts has proven to be a successful approach.

A sufficient number of geographers have been interested in regional studies long enough to merit these endeavors the status of a tradition within the discipline (Pattison 1964). Having been influenced by the writings of Carl Sauer (1925) or Richard Hartshorne (1939), geographers trained both in west coast and midwestern universities continue to involve themselves in learning about places, particularly those outside the United States. The second world war, of course, increased greatly the need to know about various regions, thereby driving up the demand for scholars with foreign area expertise (James 1972:448-452). Geographers were valued because of their interest in three things of tactical or military and strategic or economic importance: the biophysical environment, land use and resources.

Often overlooked or at least underappreciated by professional geographers is the fact that scholars from disciplines other than geography were also called upon in times of national need. Most notable among these were historians, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, geologists, botanists and those who possessed certain language skills. Scholars all, with regional expertise.

With the possible exception of foreign languages, the study of regions, *per se*, has not reached the level of a tradition in any discipline other than geography. Nevertheless, geographers, to our disadvantage I believe, have discounted the regional expertise of nongeographers. All too often we have told ourselves that geographers are integrators or synthesizers who describe and analyze all sorts of data in regional contexts (e.g., Taaffe 1974:13-16; Hart 1982). We have also told this to others, particularly in the classroom where we reach our largest audience of non-professional non-geographers. To illustrate, most courses titled "The Geography of Latin America" (or something similar) probably use one of three integrative textbooks (Blouet and Blouet 1982; James and Minkel 1986; Preston 1987).

In this paper, I take what some will think is a heretical position and argue that geography should not be presented as either a primarily integrative discipline, or "the" integrative discipline,

because it is not. Geographers, as we all know, do things other than synthesize, and scholars from other disciplines are involved in synthesis as well. My comments are based primarily on personal experiences with regional geography courses in a number of different academic settings.

As an undergraduate student, I took two regional courses at a small private college, Texas Christian University. As a graduate student at medium-sized state universities in the Midwest, I took regional courses in other disciplines; studied under two leading regional geographers, Jesse H. Wheeler and J. Trenton Kostbade at the University of Missouri; and developed Latin American expertise under the tutelage of B. L. Turner II at the University of Oklahoma. My first teaching job was at Mississippi State University, a small, predominantly agricultural college. There, combined with geology, geography was a service department in which I taught a course titled "The Geography of Latin America." This course was taught using a traditional integrative approach. [end p. 309] From all accounts it was a reasonable success, as I suspect is also the case with similar courses in other small and medium-sized universities with faculties composed of few geographers and few Latin Americanists.

In 1981, I accepted a position at the University of Texas at Austin and entered an academic environment unlike any I had encountered before. This university is, to say the least, large. There are approximately 50,000 students and 2,300 faculty members on campus. Of the latter, there are 18 geographers and approximately 150 Latin Americanists. There are centers or institutes of regional studies for Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, and, of course, Latin America, and regional programs focusing on American, European, and Soviet Union and Eastern European Studies. The Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas is the largest of its type in the United States, if not the world. Under its auspices, courses covering Latin American topics are taught in such diverse departments as anthropology, sociology, history, government, economics, linguistics, Spanish and Portuguese, botany, zoology, geological sciences, public affairs, law, architecture and planning, journalism, advertising, marketing, music, art, radio-television-film, physical and health education, curriculum and instruction, civil engineering, even English, as well as geography. Many of these courses are quite popular, with enrollments upwards of 100 students. Also, most of the professors who teach these courses trace their academic roots back to scholars who served as regional specialists in World War II.

Given the breadth and depth of this academic *milieu*, what should be the focus of a Latin American geography course? Clearly, it is not one of integration or synthesis. No one can discuss intelligently the geographical aspects of so many, or even a few of, the subjects taught at the University of Texas. Similarly, no one should even try. The problem of what should be covered in a regional geography course here involves the very definition of geography itself.

My experience over the past decade has convinced me that geography is not what a lot of geographers think it is. A clear distinction needs to be made between geography and the study of the spatial characteristics of certain phenomena. Just because something is geographical does not necessarily mean that it is geography. To illustrate, consider a few non-geographical examples. Roses are certainly botanical, but breeding different varieties is not in and of itself

botany, and planting them does not make one a botanist. Marriage is sociological, but participating in weddings is definitely not sociology, and getting married does not make one a sociologist. As for geography, the spatial distribution of a phenomenon represented by dots on a map is clearly geographical. The study of that phenomenon, however, is not always geography, and the person who drew the map and analyzed the data need not be a geographer. If such were the case, then anyone who plotted on a map and assessed the spatial distribution of zebras would be a geographer and the study of zebras would be geography. In other words, zoology would be geography and vice versa, and by extension the study of anything and everything would be geography. This exercise in logic illustrates a fatal flaw in our profession. We allow nearly everything to be studied in the name of geography. By attempting to be everything, geography is becoming nothing (see also Turner 1989). It has become increasingly all-inclusive. Rather than defining geography rigidly and distinguishing it from studies that are simply geographical, we are obscuring, and hence in danger of eliminating, an academic niche that should be clearly identified. Unfortunately, the term "discipline" just might not apply to geography any more.

This conclusion begs a definition of geography. Because of its vulnerability as an academic profession, geography needs to be unique and indispensable. Given the diversity of subjects, as evident by the number of departments that offer Latin American courses at the University of Texas, a certain amount of overlap and even integration is inevitable but should be minimized. If it is to be a science, even in the loosest sense of the term, geography has to focus on a concrete or tangible item. For example, zoology is the study of animals, and government is the study of policy-making. Lastly, it has to be defined in one brief sentence. As I see it, and as it is implicitly defined at the University of Texas, geography is the study of the surface of the earth, with emphasis on the shaping processes and the combinations of elements such as soils and human activities that result in distinctive regions. It involves understanding systemic relationships between certain elements rather than synthesizing diverse data.

By its very nature, human geography is rarely effective without including elements from the biophysical environment. For example, a study that simply maps the distribution of an ethnic group is geographical, but it is not geography; it is anthropology. One that involves the nature, extent, and degree to which that group utilizes, adapts to, or alters its biophysical environment is geography. It is also anthropological, but it is not anthropology. **[end p. 310]** In contrast to human geography, pure physical geography is possible because functional interlinkages between such elements as climate, vegetation, and landforms are not usually considered by practitioners in other disciplines.

Consider, as examples, botany and geology. Although they are interested in plants, botanists rarely consider details of the environments in which the subjects of their studies are found. Furthermore, studies of plant chemistry and genetics are beginning to dominate the discipline. Geologists, even those concerned specifically with geomorphology, often pay only scant attention to the effects of climate. They emphasize instead endogenic forces, such as volcanics and tectonics. Indeed, it should not be overlooked that geography as a professional field in this country developed as a result of the frustrations experienced by some members of geology departments.

Lastly, geography is multi-scalar. Studies, regardless of the processes and interrelationships involved, can range in spatial extent from individual parcels to global.

In light of these considerations, the issue of how one teaches a regional course on the geography of Latin America at the University of Texas can now be addressed. Here, we in geography are fortunate in that we have a sufficient number of students to justify several Latin American courses. The one that I teach is titled "The Geography of Mexico and Caribbean America." The approach taken is what might be called "regional ecology." It combines regional concepts (Kostbade 1965) with those of cultural ecology (Butzer 1989).

The basic format of the course involves 10 sub-regions identified largely on the basis of their overall distinctiveness. This form of regionalization is subjective, resulting in what are considered "general regions," but appropriate as a heuristic device (Kostbade 1968). The regions discussed in this course along with the principal physical and human characteristics on which they are identified are listed in Table 1<sup>(\*)</sup>. They are formulated, in part, after those delineated originally by West and Augelli (1966:11-16, 356-377) and in part by either major drainage areas or natural boundaries.

The class meets on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for 50 minutes. During a typical 15-week semester, two class periods are spent discussing introductory concepts, two are reserved for examinations, two are taken by holidays, and three are canceled so that I can attend professional meetings. Substantive matters are discussed, with a generous number of slides, in the remaining 35 class periods. Three lectures are generally delivered on each region. Four lectures are added to the coverage of the Central American east coast and the Mexican northwest. Fourth and fifth lectures are added to the sections covering the Pacific side of Central America and the Mesa Central of Mexico. The first lecture involves the region's biophysical geography. This is not a lecture on everything about the region's natural features but rather on the processes that have created specific environmental characteristics that directly impact or are impacted by humans (see Steward 1955:40). For example, volcanic activity is emphasized in the discussion of the Lesser Antilles. It, of course, resulted in islands that are small and have steep terrain, factors that contribute greatly to present-day conditions of limited agricultural production and overcrowding.

The second lecture on each region is a discussion of one or two significant human-environment interactions from times past. For example, in the lecture on the Yucatan, theories of ancient Maya subsistence practices and the implications of the numerous types of relict agricultural landforms are discussed. The focus here is not so much on archaeology or prehistory, but on how pre-Hispanic peoples used and manipulated their habitat. The third lecture on each region involves the present-day geography. As in the cases of previous lectures, only a few items are highlighted. For example, in the lecture on contemporary human-environmental conditions on the Mesa del Norte, the relationships between iron ore deposits near Durango, coal fields near Monclova, steel mills in Monterrey, markets outside the region (in Mexico City), and rail lines and highways are elucidated.

Throughout the three lectures on each region, a thread of continuity is woven. For example, the lecture just discussed is preceded by one in which Spanish silver mining is covered, and it is preceded by one involving mineralization on the margins of the sierras. The central theme is always that of "occupance," a metaphorical concept derived from the terms "occupy," to possess, control, dwell or reside in a region, and "occupation," an activity that serves as one's source of livelihood. Quite literally, the course is geography because it is the study of part of the surface of the earth and because it emphasizes the processes that shape and the combinations of elements that result in distinctive sub-regions. There is no textbook used in this course. Instead, the students purchase two packets of materials from one of the privately owned copy services near campus. One packet includes a reading for each lecture. For the most part, the readings are short, non-technical, up-to-date and written by geographers. The second packet contains two sets of illustrations (maps, diagrams, and so on) for each class period. The course is designed primarily for non-majors, but is a good introduction to the region for geography students [end p. 311] as well. The intent is to provide students who might well take only one geography course as part of their undergraduate program a taste of the region and its diversity from a diachronic, human-environmental perspective. Most graduates of the University of Texas travel to some portion of Middle America during their lives. Accordingly, the course is also intended to prepare them for what they will see and to sensitize them to the intricate, and often delicate, interactions between peoples of different cultures and their ekumene. The course appears to be reasonably successful. It attracts between 60 and 70 students each fall, and receives high ratings by students who participate in course-instructor surveys. In no small part, the success of this course lies in the fact that it covers material offered nowhere else on campus from a perspective proffered by no other department or discipline. By virtue of working at the University of Texas, in an academic environment more like that of *academia* as a whole than is the case on smaller campuses, it should work at other institutions and for the profession of geography in general.

**Table 1: Regions Discussed in GRG 341K/LAS 330 and Their Definitional Characteristics**

<u>Region</u>	<u>Principal Characteristics (Physical/Human)</u>
Lesser Antilles	Volcanic Islands/Overcrowding
Greater Antilles	Limestone Islands/Sugar plantations
Central American East Coast and Panama	Tropical rainforests/banana plantations
Central American West Coast, including volcanic ranges and Chiapas	Tropical dry forests, fertile soils/Indians, agricultural diversity
Yucatan	Karstic lowlands/Maya, tourism
Mexican East Coast and Tehuantepec	Hurricanes/Hazards, petroleum
Southern Highlands	Eroded landscape/Indians, deprivation
Central Highland Basins	Lakebeds, tectonics/High cultures, haciendas
Mesa del Norte	High desert/Sparse population, mining
The Northwest and the Borderlands	Low desert/"Green Revolution," frontiers

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