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# THE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AS THE ESSENTIAL GEOGRAPHICAL EXPRESSION

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THE PERSISTENCE of honest confusion among intelligent laymen about the field of geography, and the apparent heterogeneity of its subject matter, underline the continuing need to search for a clear and meaningful formulation of its central theme. Such a theme should possess enough internal coherence to make "boundary" demarcation unnecessary, be distinct from those of other subjects, and be more or less in tune with the standpoints implicit in most current geographical work.

### COMMON GROUND IN GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT

The expansion and deepening of the study of geography in recent decades has coincided with the emergence of certain common assumptions about its inherent character and objectives.

The first point on which there is general agreement is the essential unity of the field, which has already become almost traditional in North America and western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Only in the Soviet Union, China, and to some extent in eastern Europe do there exist influential schools of thought which deny the validity of a unified view of geography, and they are subject to increasing challenge.<sup>2</sup>

Belief in a philosophical unity has usually come to be associated with the idea that regional studies form the logical culmination, and this is especially evident in France, Britain, and the United States.<sup>3</sup> The strong regional tradition in Russia is reasserting itself, in spite of difficulties of organization, and Marxist theoretical positions are being engaged to buttress both the regional and the unified approach in geography.<sup>4</sup>

The general notion of "space" inevitably permeates geographical thought, but its abstraction as the distinguishing feature of geography has been emphasized most in Germany,<sup>5</sup> although this is not to imply that regional studies have been neglected.

The closely related but slightly more specific concept of "distribution" has perhaps gained wider implicit acceptance in north-west Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup>

Finally there has recently been a widespread reaffirmation of the old principle of the fundamental relativity of the geographical subject matter to man. Though this has been clearly implied throughout the long history of geography, the need for its recent reaffirmation stems largely from the massive post-Darwinian growth of quasi-independent, self-contained sciences like geomorphology under the geographical umbrella. It is significant that in Germany, where this development has been most pronounced, there seems to have been most reluctance to subscribe to an "anthropocentric" geography.<sup>7</sup> Geographers in the United States, France, and Britain have been prominent advocates of this position<sup>8</sup> and in the Soviet Union it has taken the form of a re-examination of the significance of such terms as "environment" and "resources."<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that the international climate of opinion on this question is more favourable than at any time during the "modern" development of the subject.

### THE SEARCH FOR A SPECIFIC THEME

While the majority of geographers would probably subscribe to most, if not all, of these general principles, the quest for a guiding formula entails more dispute. This is a measure of its vital significance for the subject and its practitioners. In Mackinder's words, "As a discipline, a subject requires rough definition for the purposes of organization. It should exhibit a central idea or a consistent chain of argument."<sup>10</sup>

### SPATIAL PURISM

Of the "central ideas" formulated by geographers, the group which has probably gained the widest currency is that which

concentrates on the abstract concepts of "space" or "area." The major role played by Germans in establishing these concepts has been demonstrated in Hartshorne's book, *The Nature of Geography*,<sup>11</sup> and the latter work has undoubtedly given wide dissemination to the phrase "areal differentiation" in the English-speaking world. However many geographers, and others, have found this phrase unsatisfying as an indicator of the essence of the subject<sup>12</sup> and in view of this Hartshorne has also recently doubted its usefulness.<sup>13</sup> In common with definitions of geography as simply the study of "area"<sup>14</sup> or "space,"<sup>15</sup> it tends to give the appearance of being unspecific and lacking a recognizable coherence. To restore the missing dynamism Ullman suggests "spatial interaction."<sup>16</sup> However, although this is a salutary corrective to a narrowly morphological approach to geography, one is left with the impression that something is still missing. Apart from the special (if not very serious) connotation of the word "space" in the lay mind today, the crucial question which appends itself inevitably to concepts like "areal differentiation," "spatial interaction," and "distributions"<sup>17</sup> is—"of what?" Hettner advised the selection of only those phenomena whose variations are interrelated with those of other phenomena over the face of the earth,<sup>18</sup> but since almost everything on the earth's surface is functionally related in some way to something else, this still fails to provide a very helpful focus. It is often paralleled today by defining geography in terms of such phrases as the association of "things" on the earth's surface.<sup>19</sup> These broad and rather diffuse themes have been amplified recently by Ackerman as follows: "... illuminating co-variant relations among earth features . . . the differentiation of the content of space on the earth's surface and the analysis of space relations within the same universe. . . ."<sup>20</sup>

While few geographers would deny that the general concepts of "space" or "distribution" are vital to the subject's survival, it does appear that the category of definitions in the previous paragraph has in common an unfocused quality which tends to puzzle intelligent laymen while providing little guidance for working geographers.

Slightly closer to the common under-

standing is the idea of geography as an investigation of "the significance of likenesses and differences among places on the face of the earth."<sup>21</sup> However, although "place" has a more human ring in popular parlance than "area," the distinction is so subjective that one is still left without any clear guidance about what may constitute "significance" in this context.

#### THE INTRODUCTION OF MAN

The idea of human relativity in geography has, from Strabo onwards, found recognition in such characterizations of the field as "the earth as the home of man" or the somewhat broader and subtler "the earth as the world of man" as recently restated by Hartshorne.<sup>22</sup> Unquestionably such a rider, if fully accepted, can bring the horizon of the subject into sharper focus, although it has sometimes seemed to be a way of paying lip-service to an old principle while retaining *carte blanche* to study the earth from virtually any angle.

All the sciences are inevitably guided by a basic human interest in the phenomena they are studying, but as geography has come to be constituted in a quite special way, with man himself as an integral part of the whole study alongside heterogeneous natural phenomena, the precise nature of their relationship, though elusive, should, if possible, be pinned down.

The concept of "environment," traditionally used but not always fully understood by geographers, still seems a satisfactory way of expressing this relationship, but it does mean that the natural phenomena with which geography is concerned are meaningful (in geography) *only* in terms of complete relativity to man. They are, in fact, hardly separable, for, as Mackinder put it, "man is a part of his own environment, as cheese-mites are a part of the cheese."<sup>23</sup>

#### MAN TO THE CENTRE OF THE STAGE

Although the use of the term "environment" implies the philosophical primacy of man in geography as it has in fact crystallized into an organized body of knowledge, most statements of the field concentrate upon earth rather than man, no doubt in deference to the derivation of the word. However this emphasis has been explicitly reversed in several essays, of which one of

the earliest and most influential was Barrows's presidential address entitled "Geography as Human Ecology."<sup>24</sup> Not that there was anything very revolutionary then or now in the statement that "geography will aim to make clear the relationships existing between natural environments and the distribution and activities of man . . . adjustment to environment rather than environmental influence."<sup>25</sup> The methodological novelty consisted in the way the horse was apparently being brought out from behind the cart. A generation earlier Hettner had implicitly adopted a somewhat similar posture when he said, "A sure scientific knowledge of the actually existing causal relationships is only possible if one proceeds from the human facts, classifies these, and pursues them to their geographical roots,"<sup>26</sup> though in his general geographical philosophy he differed significantly from Barrows.

The view of geography as human ecology has been echoed in many countries,<sup>27</sup> and Barrows's influence on the course of geographical method may well have been inadequately recognized. However, the term "human ecology" is now unacceptable, both because of its biological associations and because it has been adopted for a quite widely cultivated branch of sociology dealing with purely human relations within specific communities.<sup>28</sup> Also, Barrows's bodily exclusion of such fields as geomorphology and climatology from geography proper, if taken literally, would be a surgical operation fatal to the subject. Paradoxically, though, he had insisted on thorough and detailed grounding in these and similar fields for geographers,<sup>29</sup> and it could in fact be objected that his human ecology paid too exclusive attention to "adjustment" to the natural environment. However, this stated emphasis was no more to be associated with crude "environmentalism" than was Mackinder's view of geography as "a philosophy of Man's environment, Man himself—his body—being an element in that environment."<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the oft-quoted remark of Vidal de la Blache that geography is "the study of places, not men,"<sup>31</sup> it is in France that the idea of geography as essentially a social science has been most thoroughly advocated in recent years. For instance,

Cholley, in his influential *Guide to the Student of Geography*, concludes that "the geographical point of view is essentially a kind of philosophy of man considered as the principal inhabitant of the earth."<sup>32</sup> Le Lannou, in an illuminating and profound study, conceives of geography as the study of "man the inhabitant (L'homme-habitant)"<sup>33</sup> and, like Barrows, draws the logical conclusion that "human geography" is simply geography ("géographie tout court"), but unlike Barrows finds a necessary and important place *within* the subject for systematic studies of the various aspects of the natural environment.

If there is tacit agreement among geographers that the spatial context and human significance are the touchstones of things geographical, can they not be essentially fused in the superficially simple, yet profoundly complicated question—"Why are people where they are?" Several geographers in different countries have come close to identifying their subject with this central question,<sup>34</sup> and it seems desirable to examine the suitability of such a central role for it in the organization of our subject.

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION

The thesis of this paper is that, *in essence*, geography is concerned with the problem of the uneven distribution of population over the earth. However two points about this expression should be kept in mind. First, the full significance of "distribution" as a controlling point of view has to be kept to the fore if the "ge" is not to slip out of geography. Second, "population" in this context is essentially synonymous with "man" and not used in the rather restricted sense adopted by demographers and statisticians. The word is used because it does seem to suggest more precisely than "man" those social groupings or patterns on the earth (compare the transitive verb "to populate") upon which the geographer concentrates his attention. A reliable population map is the primary document—the point of departure—for geographical analysis.

This formula provides general guidance in the difficult matter of selection of significant material for inclusion in geographical studies. Hartshorne has said that "the prob-

lem of selection is of greatest importance in respect to human phenomena because of the unlimited number of areal variations that can be observed,"<sup>35</sup> and cited Plewe's questions about the relevance of regional variations in cathedral architecture, contents of art galleries, and so on. Whereas general clauses like "significance to man" or "interrelated phenomena" are not very helpful in practice, the more specific criterion of relevance or possible relevance to the task of understanding the *distribution* of population does sharpen the focus without narrowing the range of vision.

This idea acts as a master-thread, capable of weaving into a coherent pattern the otherwise disparate strands of the subject and expressing its philosophical unity, particularly in the context of regional studies. Such a framework has in fact been implicit in some of the most successful and rounded geographical essays, and in one, which remains without peer as a regional geography on the continental scale, it has been essentially spelled out. In the introduction to *Latin America*, James stated that "this book deals with the arrangement of people on the land, and since a geographer is interested primarily in the significance of the factor of location in human affairs, he must inevitably stress the distinctions, the contrasts, the elements which make one place, and the people in it, different from another place and from other people . . . these themes have to do with the pattern of population and the relation of this pattern to the various factors which have combined to produce it."<sup>36</sup>

#### IDEAS ABOUT PLACE

It is now widely accepted that the physical character of the earth can only be assessed meaningfully in terms of the ideas and valuations which particular groups of people have about it at particular periods of time.<sup>37</sup> Thus *ideas about place* emerge as closer to the heart of the matter than an "objective" study of place as such. The most conclusive and telling geographical commentary on a place is made when people make it their home and gain their living from it or at least do not move away, so that the cumulative geographical values of any area may be said to be reflected in the distribution of

population. The obvious fact that the mobility of people in many countries is heavily restricted by political, economic, or social forces is one which would have to be reckoned with in any geographical study of those areas and is itself a geographical fact of the first magnitude. The term "geographical factor," as used by historians, economists, and others as a synonym for "the physical factor," is still tacitly embodied in the mode of organization and the criteria for selection of material employed by some geographers, although it has been flatly disowned by the bulk of the profession. This habit of thought derives from the days when the geographer's chief object of study was the physical earth, and human geography a sort of postscript which was to be philosophically fitted into, as flowing from, the classifications of this physical "basis."

The *idea*, which inevitably interposes itself between man and environment, has somehow to be embodied more prominently in statements of the geographical field, if such remnants of "environmentalist" attitudes are to be exorcised. We need to take up an explicit philosophical position which expresses and gives support to the trends in our practice, and it would seem that this involves uprooting the former philosophical subordination of "man" to "earth."

The emphasis upon "earth" as the ultimate end of study in geography is founded on tradition and buttressed by the literal derivation of the name of our field. Although we cannot afford to be permanently bound by the habits of mind of our predecessors, neither can we afford to overturn them lightly. A passage from Hartshorne's recent book highlights this question of emphasis. After quoting Cholley's statement that "the geographical conception is in the last analysis a kind of philosophy of man considered as the principal inhabitant of the planet," he comments, "The expression, however, is easily misunderstood; specifically its meaning for me is greatly changed by the form in which Le Lannou puts it: 'geography is the knowledge of man considered as an inhabitant of the planet'. I should wish to restate it: geography is man's study of the earth as the planet of which he is the principal inhabitant."<sup>38</sup>

Although he does not discuss the reasons for his definite preference, it is undoubtedly the one which would instinctively occur to a great many geographers.

Yet it is contended here that to focus essentially upon the problem of the distribution of population is to bring the study of man "down to earth" rather more positively than is implied in the French definitions, while keeping "ideas" (about place) more firmly enthroned than in Hartshorne's statement. This viewpoint necessarily permeates the stuff of regional geography in any case. It would obviously be fruitless to try to account for the existence of such cities as Washington, Los Angeles, or Leningrad without giving prominence to the ideas, by no means always rational ones,<sup>39</sup> which have brought them into being and perpetuated them. Several geographers have recently pointed out the necessity of examining much more closely the workings of men's minds in relation to their surroundings<sup>40</sup> (and also in their relations with each other). As Sauer has emphasized, the most difficult task in geography is "to evaluate site and situation, from the point of view of the people and periods concerned."<sup>41</sup> It requires in good measure the imaginative insight of the novelist or historian combined with the "eye for country" of the field man. In particular the quest for the immensely complicated truth about "situation," nowadays necessarily in a global context, does heighten the whole geographical perspective. If explored through the populating process, with changing ideas about place as a focus, not only environmentalism but also a monolithic economic determinism are effectively prevented from taking over. Renewed scope and purpose is given to the study of processes, interactions, and functions, correcting a certain over-emphasis upon morphology and tangible objects which has manifested itself in the various branches of the subject.<sup>42</sup> The artificial man-nature dichotomy, which has bedevilled much geographical work and has both encouraged environmentalism and split geographers into two camps, tends to vanish. Further, the space-time dichotomy between geography and history, expounded by Hettner, for instance,<sup>43</sup> has little mean-

conceived as the study of the changing distribution and differential growth of population over the land through time. Population is a dynamic phenomenon and can hardly be considered otherwise, but restriction of the study to distributional aspects makes the geographical character clear.

#### THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

What has been called "Statistical Determinism" must be as rigorously eschewed as physical or economic determinism. Although official population statistics provide, of course, highly valuable raw material for geography, they are not indispensable. The distribution of population is qualitative as much as quantitative, and obviously cannot begin to be properly interpreted without a thorough knowledge of the natural environment. This vital subdivision of the subject has so far had a retarded growth, except perhaps in the Soviet Union,<sup>44</sup> through being treated either in terms of its own evolutionary history, or as something quasi-static with a somewhat mystical control over man, or both. In particular, the modern rise of a geomorphology with self-contained methods and philosophy has often appeared as a cuckoo capable of disrupting the coherence of the geographical nest in which it was deposited. This circumstance has led to an inflated view of the importance of geomorphology in geography (particularly in comparison with other branches of natural geography), even among some eminent "human" geographers, and to logical confusion between geomorphology and historical geography in relation to geography as a whole. Thus for Darby, "the foundations of geographical study lie in geomorphology and in historical geography . . . the basic elements of our discipline,"<sup>45</sup> while for Spate, "the genetical approach . . . is the vindication of its [geomorphology's] inclusion *en bloc* within the ambit of geography."<sup>46</sup> Wooldridge and Linton go further, averring that "features in human distribution or economy which are not, in any evident sense, a reflex of physical conditions . . . are intrinsically 'sociological' rather than 'geographical' in the ordinary sense of the term . . . only the closest study of 'physique' can

or were geographical determinants. Any such close comprehension of the terrain can be obtained in one way only, by tracing its evolution."<sup>47</sup>

The result of this emphasis has been the extreme paucity of information, even for regions where geomorphologists have been active, about what is actually going on, in qualitative and quantitative terms, in the living natural environment. The concept of geography as essentially concerned with human distributions provides the required stimulus and guidance for the sorely needed enrichment of an integrated study of the natural environments with which men have to reckon, in terms of interacting processes and precise characteristics. The collapse of a sweeping environmentalism has made the rejuvenation of detailed and thorough environmental studies all the more necessary to the validity and survival of geographical work as a whole. The genetic method in "natural" geography should be retained insofar as this makes for a more profound understanding of actual functioning conditions, but not otherwise.<sup>48</sup> The only meaningful common denominator of the otherwise distinct branches of natural (or physical) geography is the link with man as part of his environment, so that it necessarily occupies a logically subordinate, though vital role in the subject, a role that is expressed through relativity to the distribution of population. Even in uninhabited areas, the task of illuminating the peculiarly negative qualities of environment, future possibilities, and effects upon neighbouring inhabited lands provide many challenges for natural geographical work.

#### A SIMPLER LANGUAGE

By focusing on the central problem of the distribution of population, one can also avoid the necessity for using and defining much of what might be called geographical jargon. For instance, abstract or general terms like "areal differentiation" or "space relations," and ambiguous words like "Landschaft" or "the geographical envelope" become redundant. It is very desir-

economics, sociology, or geology. Even the term "geographical factor," which properly means nothing more or less than the factor of location or distribution, should in practice be as rarely employed by geographers as "the historical factor" is by historians.

#### A SPECIAL FIELD?

It may be objected that the approach outlined in this paper is simply that of one topical subdivision of geography, called "population geography," whose case has recently been presented by Trewartha.<sup>49</sup> But it is difficult to see how this "branch," whose objective is, according to James, "to define and bring forth the significance of differences from place to place in the number and kind of human inhabitants,"<sup>50</sup> could achieve this end at all adequately without becoming the whole geographical tree. Thorough interpretation of the pattern of population automatically engages and integrates the whole realm of geographical knowledge. The lack of a wide acceptance of "population geography" as a "special field" and of references to "population," as distinct from "man," in the writings of geographers, may indicate that it is neither necessary nor practicable. There seems no particular reason for geographers to adopt the statistician's restricted use of population rather than the broader connotation of man in society. Can there really be any meaningful distinction for geographers between "the distribution of man" and "the distribution of population" or between "human geography" and "population geography"? Competence in the handling of statistics is nowadays basic to serious work in geography as a whole and all of its subdivisions, and cannot be considered a skill peculiar to certain topical specialists.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the strengthening of an "anthropocentric" coherence in geography, for which Trewartha forcefully pleads, might be better achieved by infusing more awareness of population distribution as a controlling viewpoint in the already traditional systematic fields of the subject and above

suggest, of course, that it is simply a product of the operation of other factors, because previous patterns of population exert a strong cumulative influence on the character of subsequent changes.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICAL AFFAIRS

No subject should be judged primarily on its direct and tangible usefulness; the main value of geography lies in its contribution to the building of broad and humane educational foundations. Nevertheless the geographical approach and method is being increasingly applied to planning operations in both communist and non-communist states, at both local and national levels. The distribution of population, besides expressing the prevailing geographical conditions and because of this, is a convenient and revealing starting-point for attempting a planned organization of a community or region.<sup>52</sup> This central theme also identifies geography in the lay mind with such perennially crucial and talked-about topics as the earth's habitability, "overpopulation," the balance of population and resources, and so on, into which the sobering influence of the informed geographical world-view can profitably be injected.

#### A SPINE FOR REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

While regional geography is frequently acknowledged as the crowning chapter of the subject, the low quality and interest value of actual regional studies—"such wooden things," as Sauer called them<sup>53</sup>—is just as frequently commented upon. In part this is due to uninspired style, but often also to the fact that a cohesive spark of life is never breathed into the dry bones of the systematic specialisms which have been assiduously collected. Such symptoms have led some geographers to prescribe polishing up the bones by elevating systematic studies to a much higher pedestal,<sup>54</sup> just as medical practitioners seem to concentrate more and more on small segments of the body and less and less on the whole man. There is a danger for geography, which is nothing if not an entity, in such fragmentation and specialization and the lure of a "scientific" aura with a spawning technical vocabulary. Who can possibly pin a "systematic specialism" label (and make it stick) on the greatest of our geo-

graphical predecessors, like Mackinder, Hettner, Vidal de la Blache, or Anuchin (to go no further back), or on many of our most eminent contemporaries? Systematic studies do, of course, play a vitally important part in the training of geographers, and their findings must be tested and re-tested by research, but the survival of geography requires that they remain logically subordinate and subservient to the regional synthesis.<sup>55</sup>

The distribution of population is the key to the whole geographical personality of a region and can endow regional geography with life, meaning, and interest.

#### A DISTINCTIVE FIELD

Finally it is submitted that the distribution of population presents as the central geographical theme a coherent problem which is clearly distinct from that which other disciplines have evolved and are marking out for themselves. While the economist is concerned with the location of economic activities and the demographer with movements of population, their interest in these phenomena is marginal, whereas for the geographer it is all-important and involves the viewpoint on which his training has been focused. While all are concerned with man, distribution is the vital concept distinguishing geography from other social sciences and from history, and its interpretation necessitates systematic study of the earth as the human home and provider, and of ideas about its worth. Similarly although such disciplines as geology, meteorology, and botany are concerned to study systematically particular classes of phenomena on or near the earth's surface, geography culls from each of them the subject matter it needs to provide an integrated picture of the natural background of man. In other words geography is clearly marked off from history and the social sciences by its distributional context and from the natural and biological sciences by its human standpoint. Its philosophical position is unique and the method of cultivation of its unified field very much its own.

#### CONCLUSION

The contention of this paper has been that the distribution of population is the essential geographical expression, thorough

interpretation of which can weave the many strands of geographical knowledge into a coherent and intelligible pattern. This idea is presented, not as a straitjacket for our subject, but to draw attention to what appears to be a guiding star, on which we may find it helpful to take bearings when setting the course of our professional work.

The preamble to the main argument has been concerned to show that this idea has been implicit in the development of the subject for a long time and that it is in line with recent trends in geographical thought in most countries, in which the subject is represented as essentially man-centred, yet bound to the spatial plane of the earth's surface and possessing an elusive but none the less real unity which finds most apt expression in regional studies.

The most important general function performed by the concept of the distribution of population as the essential geographical expression is that of a philosophical keystone for building a securely unified subject. The twin notions of "distribution" as a controlling point of view and of social man on the earth coalesce at the heart of geography and in this expression. The bringing of man (population) to the fore as *the* tangible object of our study, with distribution as *the* abstract context, results from the widespread conviction that the meaning of the natural environment is relative to particular human values and ideas at particular periods. Thus *ideas about place* come closer to the heart of our subject matter than place itself, and find their cumulative reflection in the chosen distribution of population in any region.

This expression has special application as the point of departure for regional geography, the status of which, as the ultimate chapter of the subject, needs to be vigorously reasserted, if it is not to be out-distanced and sidestepped by the systematic specialisms which should subserve it. A regional geography so focused gives full play to the study of historical processes as they have operated to produce the current distribution of population and gives no encouragement to environmentalist ways of thought. On the other hand, although in this system the terms "human geography" and "population geography"

become synonymous with "geography" and therefore redundant, renewed scope and purpose is given to the integrated study of processes in the living natural environment, vital topics often hitherto overlooked by the self-contained, evolutionary approach which has characterized much work in "physical geography." The unduly morphological approach to both natural and cultural phenomena is replaced by one which is more dynamic and functional.

Geography is made more attractive and intelligible to laymen, partly through being identified with the perennially crucial problem of the earth's habitability, rather than with an abstract concept like space or place, and partly through rendering redundant a number of technical terms not within the common understanding. At the same time no lowering of the standards of scholarship or shrinking of the recognized geographical field is involved, while a useful philosophical framework for practising geographers is offered.

The uniqueness of the field of geography is not only retained, but heightened. The coherent and momentous problem presented by the uneven distribution of population over the earth expresses the essence of our field and calls into orderly play the broad realm of geographical knowledge.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le thème principal de cet article est que la répartition de la population constitue le fait essentiel en géographie et que l'interprétation de ce fait peut permettre d'effectuer le tissage des fils multiples de la connaissance géographique en une trame cohérente et intelligible. Ce n'est pas l'intention de l'auteur d'offrir un moule rigide, mais plutôt une idée-directrice qui puisse servir de point d'orientation aux travaux des géographes.

Ce concept est implicitement contenu depuis longtemps dans l'histoire de la pensée géographique et on le retrouve à la base de l'orientation contemporaine de la géographie en plusieurs pays. Cette orientation est essentiellement anthropocentrique bien que le sujet demeure étroitement lié au plan spatial de la surface terrestre. Son unité, sinon toujours patente, n'en est pas moins réelle et s'exprime le plus manifestement dans les études régionales.

Cette vue de la répartition de la population comme idée maîtresse de la géographie est, philosophiquement parlant, la clef de voûte qui donne à l'édifice son unité. La notion de distribution comme facteur de contrôle et celle de l'homme comme être sociable, habitant de la terre, se coalisent au coeur même de la géographie et dans la définition de ce terme. Puisque l'on accepte généralement que le milieu naturel ne prend un sens vraiment géographique que lorsqu'on le considère en rapport avec des valeurs et des concepts humains particuliers et à des périodes données de l'histoire, les faits de l'homme (faits de population) constituent donc l'objet tangible de notre discipline tandis que les faits de répartition en sont le contexte abstrait. Les idées sur les lieux touchent de plus près l'objet de notre étude que les lieux seuls et trouvent leur expression cumulative dans la répartition de la population dans diverses régions.

Cette idée s'applique tout particulièrement à la géographie régionale dont elle devrait constituer le point de départ. Elle servirait ainsi à réaffirmer la position de la géographie régionale, qui est bien le terme et le produit

ultime des recherches géographiques. Autrement, la géographie régionale pourrait être perdue de vue ou même ignorée dans la masse de matériaux que nous livrent les travaux systématiques et spécialisés, alors que ces derniers devraient plutôt être subordonnés aux fins des études régionales. Ainsi orientée, la géographie régionale donne pleine valeur aux facteurs historiques qui ont influé sur la distribution actuelle de la population et permet d'éviter les dangers d'une conception trop déterministe. De plus, bien que, suivant cette vue, les termes "géographie humaine" et "géographie de la population" deviennent synonymes de "géographie" et par conséquent redondants, des horizons nouveaux et élargis sont ainsi ouverts à l'étude des modes de développement du milieu naturel vivant. Il s'agit là d'un domaine de recherche qui est d'une importance vitale et qui a été négligé jusqu'ici dans les travaux de "géographie physique", où l'on prend une vue compartimentée et évolutionniste de la réalité. Ainsi, au lieu de placer un accent trop prononcé sur les aspects purement morphologiques des phénomènes naturels et humains, on pourrait étudier ces derniers par une méthode plus dynamique et fonctionnelle.

Le caractère unique du domaine de la géographie est par là non seulement préservé mais accentué. Le problème de la répartition inégale de la population à la surface du globe exprime l'essence même de notre champ de recherche et son étude engage en un jeu ordonné toutes les ressources de la connaissance géographique.