



Center for Slavic and East European Studies

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# Newsletter

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## The World in the Round

### A Talk With Geography Professor David Hooson

*David Hooson is a professor in the UC Berkeley Department of Geography. He received his M.A. from Oxford University in 1950 and his Ph.D. from London University in 1955. He is currently revising his book, The Soviet Union: People and Regions, a basic text in the field since its publication in 1966. Professor Hooson is the author of many articles, among them pieces on the geography of the Soviet Union and the history of geographic thought.*

*His service to the community includes four years as Dean of Social Sciences, six years as chair of the Department of Geography, three years as Chair of the Center (1967-1970), and eight years as Chair of the Working Group on the History of Geographical Thought, a joint project of the International Geographical Union and International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science. We talked in his office on March 5, 1991.*

**AH:** *When I began thinking about geography and my talk with you, I found myself listing the various fields that overlap with geography, or that have splintered off from it: anthropology, ecology, energy and resources, demography, geology, economics—there really are quite a few. Do you see geography as a sort of umbrella, sheltering and unifying all these and more?*

**DH:** Geography is a unified field, but one that is not very well understood, especially in America, which seems to have less of a grasp of the material distinctions of geography than does any other developed country. As to what geography is, 20 years ago when I was chairman of the department, I was asked to write down a description for the university catalog. Surprisingly, no one has changed a word since—I say surprisingly since my colleagues and I hold different views about what geography is. The clincher is the phrase “seen as

inhabitants and transformers of the earth.” I think many people confuse geography with geology and would be surprised that I didn't begin with an emphasis on the physical world. But in the last four decades, the field has shifted from physical geography to a more human-centered view of the world.

#### From the UC Berkeley Catalog: Text by David Hooson

The Geography Department aims to provide a broad-ranging perspective on humans as inhabitants and transformers of the face of the earth. The search for this kind of understanding involves thorough study of (a) the interlocking systems of the natural environment (climate, landforms, biota) and the evaluation of natural resources; (b) those diverse historical, cultural, social, economic and political structures and processes which affect the location and spatial organization of population groups and their activities; and (c) significant geographical units, whether described as cities, regions, nations or landscapes, where integrated interpretation can be attempted, and a variety of problems thereby better understood.

**AH:** *Am I right in saying that a deterministic view of geography prevailed in the U.S. in the first part of the century?*

**DH:** You're quite right. It grew out of this emphasis on physical geography, which attributes too much influence to the physical environment on human activities and on human thought. I think that direction has something to do with the disenchantment with geography that followed, and with the resultant lack of understanding of its function.

**AH:** *Would it be fair to say that human geography takes the opposite tack?*

*Hooson* from page 1

**DH:** Yes. Human geography looks at people and their environments, but especially people modifying their environments. You take a region and see how it has evolved through different stages. A region is both a physical and a cultural unit. I much prefer, myself, to look at regions from all aspects. I try to decide when and why a place has become the way it is—and there are many complex threads woven into that attempt. A regional study differs from an historical one mainly in its focus on place, environment, and why people have come to be where they are.

**AH:** *I would think that widening interest in ecology has given geography a boost in recent years.*

**DH:** Oh, it has. Everything has conspired to make geography more important—there's been an acceleration in terms of development, environmental disasters, urbanization, regional identity, etc.

**AH:** *What are the advantages of non-specialization?*

**DH:** The more time that goes by, the more we see that the real problems in the world nearly always need an interdisciplinary approach. They require scholars who attempt to see things synthetically. The way I see it—and not all my colleagues would agree—our main function is to bring data together in a sort of holistic view of the world, with nature and man combined in an historically oriented perspective. And, I should add, an international one. When I talk about the Soviet Union to my classes, I usually have in mind points of comparison with other countries, especially North America, which, to my way of thinking, is the most applicable comparison.

**AH:** *I can see certain disadvantages in not specializing: not being taken seriously because you're perceived as spreading yourself too thin; or perhaps because you don't have a specialized vocabulary or a technological mystique or method; or because you use data from other specializations. How much of the data used by geographers are collected by geographers?*

**DH:** We collect much of our own data. Fieldwork is a basic aspect of geography. A field such as economics relies much more heavily on statistics not collected by economists.

**AH:** *How can an individual geographer collect enough data to create a regional picture, leaving aside for the moment the special problem of data collection from the Soviet Union?*

**DH:** But you see, we're meted out *too much* information in the modern world. We see our task as that of filling in and checking up on the data that is available, not accumulating

### Biographical Notes

V. V. Dokuchaev, 1846-1903. A physical geographer and professor at the University of St. Petersburg, Dokuchaev developed a synthetic approach to the natural landscape based on zones. His classic work, *Russian Blackearth*, was published in 1883.

Alexander von Humboldt, 1769-1859. A German naturalist and scientific traveler, Humboldt was the first representative of the classical period of physical geography and biogeography.

Sir Halford John Mackinder, 1861-1947. Mackinder was a British political geographer who promoted the teaching of regional and world geography; he was a member of Parliament, 1910-1922.

Carl Ortwin Sauer, 1889-1975. With his firm belief in the importance of the human role in changing the face of the earth, Sauer's thought was, above all, ecological. He taught for many years in the Department of Geography at UC Berkeley. His voluminous publications include studies of Mexican and Southwestern U.S. communities, ecological works, and investigations of prehistory in North America.

P. P. Semenov Tyanshansky, 1827-1914. Tyanshansky was head of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society for many years and published a history of its activities from 1845-1895. His exploration of the Tien Shan area earned him the suffix Tien-Shanskii. Tyanshansky was instrumental in the preparation of the first Russian census, which appeared in 1897.

A. I. Voeikov, 1842-1916. A regional geographer and agricultural climatologist, Voeikov enjoyed an international reputation and participated in the activities of the U.S. Smithsonian Institution. In 1884 his *Climates of the World* appeared in Russian and was soon translated.

masses of new data. We use various clues. I've found one's grasp of an area can be quite intuitive if one has been there. I realize that may sound unscientific.

**AH:** *How do you protect yourself from information overload?*

**DH:** You have to be quite ruthless, really, and trust your own judgment. You can spend your life chasing the detail—some people have—and just drown in it.

**AH:** *When I think of biology, I think of Huxley and Darwin; when I think of geology I think of Lyle; economics, Adam Smith; psychology, Freud. Are there comparable figures in geography?*

**DH:** Not the sort of names that have rung round the world, for good or ill. Humboldt in Germany, a true universal scholar in the early 19th century, was very much a geographer. In Britain there was a man called Halford Mackinder, a well-known figure. I was lecturing at the Pentagon when I first arrived in America, and I learned that the generals I

was teaching regarded Mackinder as the major influence in their thinking about strategic and political questions. He founded the school of geography I attended at Oxford, and my professor at Oxford had been a student of his. I gave a talk at Oxford about three years ago for Mackinder's centennial. Possibly the greatest impact he made was with an article published in 1904 called "The Geographical Pivot of History," in which he discussed the notions of the heartland and sea power—putting geography and history together with politics. It was later regarded as having been prophetic.

He's a very different proposition from someone like Carl Sauer, for instance. Mackinder was a man of action, very much a political animal, whereas Sauer was contemplative, more interested in the past.

**AH:** What sorts of maps do geographers use in these days of satellite photo maps and computer simulations?

**DH:** Geographers use maps from the global to the local scale, but perhaps the most common scale is a regional one. I do think maps can and should be attractive, and they should be simple. Computer cartography and satellite photos have, of course, helped enormously with speed and accuracy, but simple maps built on a few ideas are still basic.

**AH:** I understand that you chart data on a map, but I'm unclear on the difference between a chart and a map.

**DH:** I was in the Navy, and of course sailors use navigational charts—the term seems to be less used now in relation to other kinds of maps. I think that really the term "map" covers everything, including depth charts and computer-derived maps. It's just the idea of putting things on a plane to show where something is in relation to where other things are.

**AH:** Are maps of the Soviet Union difficult to come by?

**DH:** That's been a consistent problem. When I first went to the Soviet Union in 1960, I got a whole swag of maps because this was the time when things were opening up in a big way there. They were good ones, too. But now—and by "now" I mean the last 20 years or so, including right now—they're not as good. I tried to locate new, good maps in Moscow and Leningrad last summer, but in spite of glasnost I wasn't very successful.

**AH:** Why do you think that is?

**DH:** While their cartography is very good technically, it's been bedevilled by the requirements of secrecy. Until about three years ago, the Soviets had been known to alter maps for publication and have now officially confessed to it.

**AH:** Wasn't a new director of the Geographical Institute [the Institute of Geography of the USSR Academy of

FIG. 62—The Far East: economy. Minerals: C = black coal, Li = lignite, Pb = lead, Sn = tin

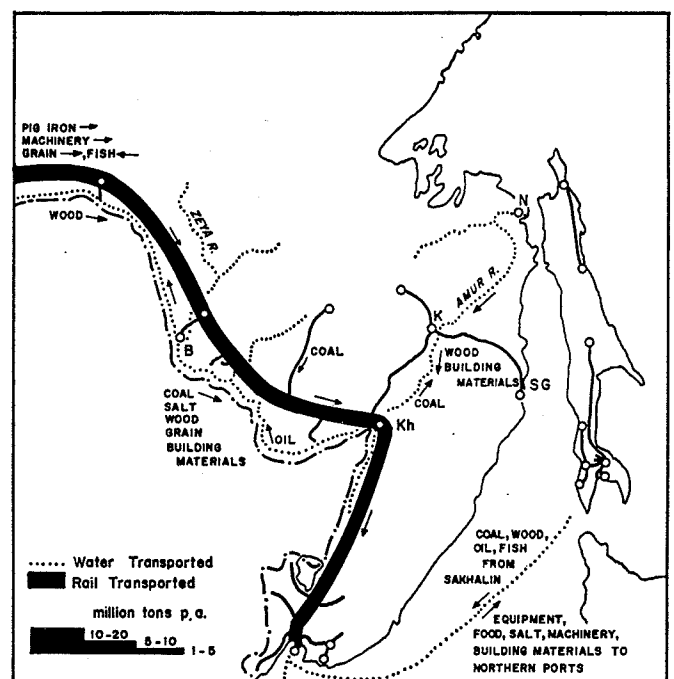
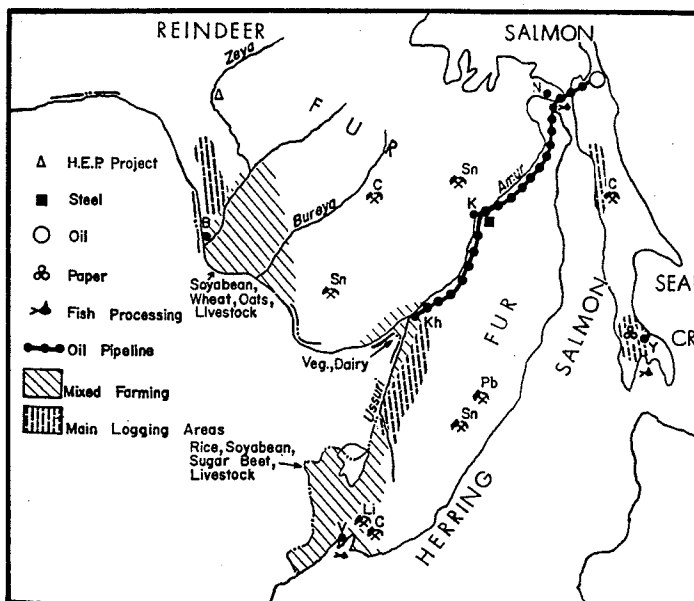


FIG. 61—The Far East: movements

*Sciences] installed in 1987?*

**DH:** Yes. Gerasimov [I. P. Gerasimov] died after thirty years in office as the absolute boss of Soviet geography. He was my nemesis back in the late '50s and early '60s. He died in office at age 80, in typical Soviet fashion. The new director is quite different.

**AH:** *Is there anything else you'd like to comment on about maps; how you use them in your work?*

**DH:** Well, I always feel naked without them.

**AH:** *That brings to mind a graphic picture!*

**DH:** Yes, like a figleaf! But I do always take in around three quite large wall maps into any class. I need them to refer to. That's why I usually give my lectures without notes, walking around.

**AH:** *In his book, Land and Life, Carl Sauer said: "It's as difficult to define a geographer as it is to define geography." Let's talk about the making of a geographer. You grew up on a farm in Wales. Did you go to a local school?*

**DH:** It was practically next door. And then at seventeen I went to Oxford.

**AH:** *What led you to choose geography as your life's work?*

**DH:** Growing up on a working farm of some complexity, it was impossible not to be aware of geographical realities, from climate to marketing. But my valley was claustrophobic as well as beautiful, and I became passionately curious about the world beyond the mountains. At an impressionable age, a venerable professor of geography, H. J. Fleure, dropped by the farm, and I was hooked.

**AH:** *Did you go to Oxford on a scholarship?*

**DH:** Not exactly. It was during World War II, so the Navy paid for me to get in. Then after the war I went on a G.I. Bill sort of thing. I wanted to do my graduate work in the United States, but Britain was poverty-stricken, and there was no money for overseas travel as there is now—no scholarships or fellowships—so I took a local subject, an historical study of the evolution of a region, from the time of its agricultural origins to its incorporation into the suburbs of London. Money for research seemed to arrive just after I arrived in the U.S., at about the time Sputnik went up in 1957.

**AH:** *I'm sure there's a connection between Sputnik and research dollars. When did you come to the United States?*

**DH:** In 1956. I came to the University of Maryland on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. and immediately got into Russian studies in a big way. I had a carrel at the Library of Congress. There were so many journals coming out of the Soviet Union, and I found the debate going on there in geographical circles absolutely fascinating. I learned to read the language quite quickly, though I've never really mastered the speaking of Russian. We'll talk more about that debate when we get into Russian geography.

**AH:** *In an article you wrote on Carl Sauer you said, "While I agree that a geographer who concentrates exclusively on the contemporary scene is not only 'held by a peculiar obsession' but may often...fall through the ice...I also feel that an undue preoccupation with origins to the neglect of insistent recent problems and questions could arguably be labelled as perverse, if not reactionary."*

**DH:** It's true, my interest spans both the historical and the contemporary. The bit you quoted was written in light of Sauer's increasing interest in prehistory during his later life. He, of course, had had many other geographic interests as well.

**AH:** *When you arrived in 1956, what was the dominant geographical philosophy in the American academy?*

**DH:** Geography was becoming more human-oriented than was Britain's, but it was spotty and there wasn't a lot of it. I found Berkeley's department to be by far the most congenial. Its philosophy, associated with Sauer, took a broad-ranging view of mankind as inhabitant and transformer of the planet. "The Berkeley School" was very different from what was going on in the rest of America. I felt quite at home here.

**AH:** *Describe the Berkeley School. All I could gather is that it was a group of Sauer's former students, who taught, and teach, here and elsewhere.*

**DH:** It's definitely that. It's also a way of thought which takes the long view, a combination of cultural, historical and ecological approaches.

**AH:** *That sounds so contemporary.*

**DH:** Yes. Economics and sociology were not overemphasized here.

**AH:** *You were hired as a Soviet specialist?*

**DH:** It was a job that was created. Greg Grossman [professor of economics] was chair of the Center at the time. He sprung me from a teaching job in Vancouver and enticed me down for a year. My salary was paid for by the Center.

During that year a committee was formed to see about expanding Soviet studies at Berkeley, with James Hart of the Bancroft Library as chair. They decided they wanted a geographer prepared to specialize in the Soviet Union and offered the position to me.

There was already someone teaching a course on the geography of the Soviet Union, a friend of Sauer's called Nicholas Mirov. But he was really a forester and plant geneticist. His course was almost entirely natural: he rarely mentioned such places as Moscow and Leningrad. But he was a fine old Siberian.

**AH:** *I imagine that Russian geography would have had a strong German component, particularly in the 18th century, and a French component in the 19th century. In general, how did outside influences affect the development of Russian geography?*

**DH:** That's true. In my research on the history of Russian geography I found a strong initial influence from Germany clear through to the early 19th century, and then some French influence. But Germany was the key. However, very soon there developed an indigenous Russian quality, which really goes back to Peter the Great. The problems were different in Russia and the culture strong. One of the themes I discovered in pre-Soviet Russian geography was that of a very distinctive Russian school related to their specific conditions and environments.

**AH:** *When did the Russian School develop?*

**DH:** From about 1870-1914, a very rich period of Russian cultural and scientific development.

**AH:** *Would you name some important figures in Tsarist geography and discuss their work?*

**DH:** Well, there was Dokuchaev, who focused mostly on the natural conditions, the black earth and the steppes. He had a theory about the tie-up between climate and soil, and between vegetation and agriculture, which was new; it had a great influence on the rest of the scientific world. Another man, Voeikov, did climatology—theories about heat and water balance, environmental protection—very modern theories. So there was this bio-geographic way of looking at the world right from the beginning.

**AH:** *Did their work impact the world outside Russia?*

**DH:** Very much so. Though later the work seemed to get lost, and I had to re-discover it. As with many things Russian, it got pushed aside on the world scale. But it was a rich vein to mine and I loved doing it.

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***...it must have been exciting to come across unknown places which you then had to characterize for the rest of the world, and map them from the start... This is the first century when we haven't done that sort of exploration.***

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Then there were the explorers such as Peter Semenov Tyanshansky, who put together the Russian Geographical Society, the most popular and well respected of its kind in the 19th century. Tyanshansky had a long publishing record and was a social activist, campaigning for good causes such as the freeing of the serfs. He also explored new parts of Siberia and Central Asia.

**AH:** *Do you and other geographers of your acquaintance regret having missed that time of geographic exploration?*

**DH:** Yes, of course. We explore in other ways now, more in the mind. But it must have been exciting to come across unknown places which you then had to characterize for the rest of the world and to map from the start. It was quite different. This is the first century when we haven't done that sort of exploration.

**AH:** *Was Tsar Nicholas II interested in geography? I remember the Prokudin-Gorskii photography exhibit that the Center helped sponsor some time ago. During the first decade of this century the Tsar set Prokudin-Gorskii up with his own train and equipment; he roamed the country for several years making a pictorial documentary of Russia.*

**DH:** Those were wonderful photographs. Yes, I think Nicholas was interested. Certainly many of those in the Russian Geographical Society were well-placed in his government. There were both government-funded and privately-funded expeditions.

**AH:** *Was the country pretty well described by the time of World War I?*

**DH:** Pretty much. Remember, they were opening up new territories at the same time they were describing them. Russia was on a colonial kick in the latter part of the 19th century, and places like Central Asia, which had always been there but had remained unknown, geographically speaking, were re-discovered.

**AH:** *So what happened after the revolution? Were its effects felt immediately by geographers?*

**DH:** No. The changes came on slowly. Although the 1920s were a transitional time, many aspects of life went on as before. Geography went on rather freely until Stalin clamped down.

**AH:** *I'm interested in the planning or programming approach that pertained under Stalin.*

**DH:** Yes. You see, geographers, like everyone else, were mobilized for immediate tasks. It was a disastrous time, though many new positions were created for geographers. They became narrowly preoccupied with practical tasks such as prospecting and developing resources. A very important tradition was lost. Many retreated into physical geography, because cultural or human geography had no status under the totalitarian system. Economic geography became what is often called programming or planning geography. After a couple of decades, Soviet geography had become largely a physical science. Admittedly there was a need for the Soviets to find and develop their resources, but generations of scholars were lost.

**AH:** *During the Stalinist period, did many geographers experience repression, prison?*

**DH:** Indeed they did. It could have been for something as minor as disagreeing with Stalin, or for making a "wrong" decision, say, on the location of industry. In fact, a close friend of Sauer's, Vavilov [N. I. Vavilov, 1887-1942], died in a prison camp.

**AH:** *What happened when Stalin died?*

**DH:** When I first got wind of what was going on in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I was staggered by the intensity of the disputations, the openness of discussion about what geography could be and should be in the Soviet Union.

**AH:** *These arguments were in print?*

**DH:** Yes, they appeared in the journals I was reading at the Library of Congress. But they weren't being followed by anybody else here, as far as I could see. So I made contact with some Soviets and wrote my first article on the subject in 1959. It covered the new trends and arguments there and caused quite a furor in the Soviet Union.

**AH:** *What did you say that was considered controversial?*

**DH:** Gerasimov—you remember him as the fellow who was Tsar of the Institute of Geography—he thought I was subversive, making common cause with people who wanted to humanize geography, to re-establish its pre-revolutionary character. These were younger people, mostly without

power. They were trying to write, but were often stifled. They found it difficult to get published, difficult to travel.

**AH:** *But you did find out about them from reading their articles in journals?*

**DH:** Right. They were able to publish, but with difficulty. There was one senior influential retired person, Baransky, who went out of his way to encourage them. I made common cause with him as well. So I got into the fray during this dynamic time, and addressed both current and historical questions. The Stalinists had been at pains to discourage historical studies in order to concentrate on what they thought was entirely communist. The point is, however, that it was the emotional and intellectual upsurge there that was fascinating. It was far stronger than anything I'd come across in the West.

**AH:** *Were there other Western scholars involved in the debate?*

**DH:** No, very few. As they say, "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." Because I was the only one involved, I was thought to know something about it.

**AH:** *Were you able to travel to the Soviet Union at that time?*

**DH:** Yes, my first visit was in 1960. I travelled all over the country, and by that I mean, in addition to Russia and the Ukraine, the Far East, Central Asia, the Caucasus. As you see, things had opened up very much. I went to places I'd read about, and that ignited the spark for me. Then I led some groups of geographers to the Soviet Union. Although group travel might not seem like a good way to go, in the Soviet Union it opens many doors. I got to see things I'd never have seen had I gone alone.

**AH:** *You had to be a scholar, though, and not just a private citizen?*

**DH:** Oh, yes. If you said you were doing research, that was fine with them, so long as they knew who you were.

**AH:** *Were you, in fact, able to do research?*

Not in a proper way—it was more like reconnaissance, picking up whatever you could, talking to people, keeping your eyes open. Is that research? I don't know.

**AH:** *Could you get printed material?*

**DH:** *Much* more. In some ways it was better then than now. Most of the books I've got here in my office came from that time. I was writing my books then and needed all that.

**AH:** *Do you see any correspondences between the ferment in the USSR and the political and countercultural movements in the U.S. during the 1960s?*

**DH:** The Soviet experience arose out of different circumstances. Stalin had died, and after that long, difficult period, a shot of adrenaline was injected into society. There was confidence and optimism—all the things we'd like to see now, but don't. But certainly there was the same sort of questioning going on. In terms of scholarship, by the time of the '70s and '80s, there was less and less of a yield from work in the Soviet Union. By that time it happened that I was doing other things, but for those deeply involved with the Soviet Union it got very boring and frustrating.

**AH:** *You report in an article on your International Geographic Union Commission work, "My feeling is that the rest of the world should be very discriminating in their imports [of knowledge, expertise, etc.], avoid neglecting their own gardens, and keep their options open." Would you expand on that statement as it applies to the Soviet Union?*

**DH:** That statement applies to many fields, as well as to many countries. There's a tendency to view the West as the font of all wisdom. I have found in my work that a lot of quite original and productive geography originates in the Third World, in places with no computers and no money for research. The people in these countries are still much more expert on their part of the world than we are. Yet they consistently defer to techniques and philosophies that are Western, and specifically American. I was simply saying that they have a great deal to give, to teach, out of their own experience. This observation certainly includes the Soviet Union, whose people often feel inferior.

In spite of the difficulties associated with repression, the Soviets are in some ways better in touch with their own history, their own geography, than we are in touch with ours. That has partly to do with the fact that they weren't levelled with by their government, and so they have been scrambling, trying to discover the real history, the real truth. But the Soviets are lucky: they have such a rich history of geography to draw on in their country. □

