One generalization can safely be made about the future of geography in the twenty-first century: We cannot now predict what will be in fashion one hundred or even fifteen years from now (if the discipline still exists). Like all complex, out-of-equilibrium, spatiotemporal systems, it is fruitless to predict or legislate geography’s trajectory of knowledge production. Geographers, like all agents, frustrate and escape attempts to discipline them. Indeed, most of geography’s acknowledged twentieth-century landmarks of “progress,” for good or ill, stem from exactly such breakouts. The best we can do is to reflect on and seek to improve how we practice geography. In suggesting ways to do this, I will focus on what I see as the principal internal and external challenges to practicing geography well that we currently face, factionalism and commodification, and indicate ways to combat them.

Geography’s greatest strength as a discipline is its lack of a canon (i.e., an agreed best way to undertake geography). In contrast to economics, where consensus on the superior paradigm and method and the most influential economists and journals enforces a common worldview that even trained economists find borderline autistic (http://www.paecon.net), geographers struggle to find philosophical, theoretical, and methodological common ground. Within the discipline, this has been the cause of factionalism; we can all tell war stories grounded in our multiple internecine battles over what constitutes good geography. Our debates about which approach is best often regiment what our students into choosing, for example, between positivism and poststructuralism, human and physical geography, or qualitative and quantitative methods. At the same time, we worry that internal struggles reinforce our principal external weakness: nongeographers remain far less cognizant than we would like of what geography is or why it matters (other than to compile data and data models about the earth).

Factionalism undermines geography’s coherence. For example, the thematic subdivision of the Annals may create space for different kinds of geography, but it simultaneously forces authors to slot their research into one kind or another—as when an article submitted to the Annals, but allocated for reasons of exigency beyond the control of the authors to another section, was rejected from that section for not pursuing the appropriate epistemology. As Iris Marion Young (1990) points out, communities that validate difference also create, reinforce, and police barriers separating them.

There is a strong temptation to overcome problems of factionalism by legislating a canon, and I imagine we have all been drawn to this siren song at one time or another. Yet a canon poses as many barriers to effective geographical practice as factionalism. A canon undermines geography’s diversity and, thereby, its distinctiveness. Furthermore, once we recognize, with philosophers of science, that there is no such thing as a foolproof methodology or epistemology (Curry 1985; Longino 2002), then the idea of a canon becomes nonsensical—particularly, in a discipline where humanists and earth scientists should practice side by side. It is possible, however, to avoid falling into the traps of factionalism or canonization, by practicing geography in a way that recognizes but facilitates communication across different ways of knowing. My inspiration for this vision has been Helen Longino.

Longino (2002) offers a constructive alternative that all geographers would benefit from considering: envisioning a nonmonistic but nonrelativist approach to knowledge production. She argues that a “plurality of adequate and epistemically acceptable explanations or theories can be generated by a variety of different factors in any situation of inquiry” (184), each grounded in a set of methodological and substantive assumptions with respect to which that account is persuasive. She insists, and I would agree, that this plurality of explanations need not be reduced to a single, monistic truth about the world. Indeed, monistic accounts often gain influence by excluding competing explanations, or differently situated actors, from scholarly debate, rather than by attaining genuine consensus. She envisions a normative forum for scientific debate based on the four principles of venues, uptake, public standards, and tempered equality (Table 1).
In this view, the goal of scholarship can be a restless target—a ceaseless debate between different local epistemologies that nevertheless provides more reliable knowledge about the world than enforcement of any monistic viewpoint.

In this vision, objectivity is not equated with a disinterested approach to investigation—a chimera—but with rigorous, open, and critical democratic debate. The experiences that shape our situated understandings, and thereby, the theory-laden nature of every empirical investigation (Popper 1959), very often have a political dimension, as disputes about the causes and significance of global warming and the significance of environmental racism illustrate. Thus, under the proviso that each position accepts the principles of fallibility captured in Longino’s concepts of uptake and public standards, scholarly debate inevitably entails engaging, inter alia, diverse political perspectives.

As with any normative framework, there are many barriers to realizing such a vision, but practicing geography with this ethic in mind would make diversity our strength rather than a weakness. Geographers are also ideally equipped to engage in this kind of knowledge production, within but also beyond geography, due to the breadth of our discipline. We can do things to pursue this broader vision. Locally, our departments are places of knowledge production where it ought to be possible to make such engagements part of our everyday practice, showing students that they do not have to choose between approaches in order to be legitimate scholars.1 Nonlocally, we can foster and create think tanks where the requisite strongly democratic engagement can occur face to face. The Association of American Geographers and the International Geographic Union should catalyze such initiatives.

There is more, of course, to practicing geography well than such an ethic of respect and engagement. We must be far more proactive in incorporating and giving full voice to the variety of situated knowledges that make up the world we seek to understand. Geographers recognize and value the diversity of experiences worldwide, but we have been too loath to allow many of these to nose under the tent of our predominantly white, male, and Anglophone discipline. Human geographers have come to appreciate how even a limited inclusion of women has significantly enriched our understanding by incorporating feminist knowledge production into our toolkit, but we remain the whitest U.S. social science (Darden, personal communication). We also share with many other disciplines a marginalization of non-European philosophies and of non-English speaking scholars—whom we expect to read and write in English in order to be heard. Such exclusions impoverish geography, and good geographic practice should work proactively to reverse them by expanding the social and geographic diversity of our practitioners.2

If we take seriously the idea that good geographic practice entails giving voice to the widest possible variety of situated knowledges, then fieldwork should involve people in the places we study as full participants in our research—challenging the hierarchy of expertise that is presumed to separate academics from their informants (Nagar and Geiger 2000). This also implies that geographers should reciprocate toward the people and places that we draw from as scholars—making our research available, but also making ourselves available as a resource that such communities can call on (Liverman, this issue). Geographers should thus be at the forefront of recent interest in community-university research and service-based learning.

Externally, the ongoing commodification of academia also challenges effective geographical practice. Like much of social life, academic institutions labor under the influence of increasingly pervasive, market-oriented, neoliberal norms. Filtered through state legislatures to academic administrators and down to departments, scholars face selective incentives to maximize output and revenues, with rewards guided by “market forces.” At the University of Minnesota, for example, the long-term decline in state support (now just 20 percent of the university budget) means that the university relies more on tuition income (undermining access to education for

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Table 1. Longino’s Conditions for Knowledge Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venues:</th>
<th>Publicly recognized forums for criticisms of evidence, methods, assumptions and reasoning; criticism to be given the same weight as original research</th>
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<tr>
<td>Uptake:</td>
<td>Criticism must be taken seriously, and theories adjusted in the face of adequate criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public standards:</td>
<td>There must be publicly recognized standards for evaluating knowledge claims and the relevance of a criticism to a particular knowledge claim, to which criticisms must refer in order to obtain a hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempered equality:</td>
<td>Communities must be characterized by equality of intellectual authority. The social position or power of a community should not determine which perspectives are taken seriously. Participation is tempered by the side-condition that full recognition of participants requires that they conform to the responsibilities and standards discussed above.</td>
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Source: Leitner and Sheppard (2003), 528.
low-income families), and other external fundraising. This increases pressures both to maximize class size—and thereby College of Liberal Arts (CLA) tuition incomes—and undertake scholarship, applied geography, and instruction that attract external funding (particularly from for-profit and public organizations, who can be charged indirect costs). Workload policies provide selective incentives that reward teaching large classes but ignore graduate advising. More effort goes into developing cutting-edge pedagogies, believed to attract students, and marketing our courses. Our professional MGIS program (enrolling as many students as our MA/PhD graduate program) has been praised for tapping into a new tuition-generating market. We justify requests for faculty positions on the basis of their potential for external funding. Access to CLA funding for graduate education has been made conditional on realizing dramatic increases in departmental endowments (from alumni and the faculty), requiring significant energy with uncertain results. There is increased pressure to divert our diminishing disposable time for scholarship into grant writing, even in cultural geography, where grants are small and rare, and we are discussing whether tenure should be conditional on successful grant writing. Insidiously, we are measured by how much we produce, to which there is no upper limit, rather than by the length of our workweek.

We are enjoined to teach more students and classes to maximize tuition revenues and to publish frequently in order to create a reputation that attracts students and external funding. These pressures are not as extreme in the U.S. as in the U.K.’s beggar-thy-neighbor Research Assessment Exercise, but quantity receives more attention than quality. The economics of publishing also shapes the kind of scholarship that maximizes output (until we can wean ourselves from the view that good scholarship appears on paper). It catalyzes certain kinds of “quick” publications that, combined with higher teaching workloads, undermine our collective intellectual capital. I find myself, for example, devoting much energy to writing “think pieces” (such as this) and editing books that review the state of knowledge in response to opportunities created by publishers who find these more profitable than scholarly monographs. Such pedagogic writing is important to communicating what we do to students and a broader audience, but it takes energy away from original scholarship, whose impact is longer-term and less predictable, but of far greater import.

Expectations that external funding is the measure of a successful department can undermine geography’s diversity, favoring some areas of the discipline over others. Some areas, notably earth and geographic information science and quantitative social science, have access to, and in some cases require, more funding to complete the research. The golden rule also runs the danger of taking intradisciplinary prioritization further, validating those research questions and approaches favored by social and political elites. Commodification also shapes our commitments beyond the ivory tower and, thus, the other voices that enter geographical scholarship. Socially relevant research is too often equated with funded policy research and/or consulting work with policymakers and policy shapers. While universities pay lip service to community–university collaboration, this tends to get treated as a form of academic pro bono activity for the university’s immediate community. Community-based and activist research and outreach, particularly if it does not intersect with our perceived service audience and potential donors, tends to be categorized as of limited scientific and social value, as politics rather than applied geography, and as marginal to merit and promotion assessments. While essential to broadening the voices constituting geography, steadily rising demands on academics’ time and elevated productivity expectations leave little energy to spare for such activism, which is extraordinarily difficult to carry out effectively (Leitner and Sheppard 2003).

Trends toward progressive specialization accompany commodification. Just as firms specialize to enhance their competitive advantage, academia creates all kinds of niches where we can more easily maintain our “core competence” and serve our niche markets. Specialization devalues the distinctive contributions of geography (redefining them as interdisciplinary practices). We see this within geography, also, in the proliferation of specialized journals, driven in part by a desire to create space for emergent subgroups to develop their local epistemologies, but in part by publishers’ calculations that a journal with two hundred regular subscribers is likely to be more profitable than a scholarly monograph.

Commodification makes it hard to practice geography well. It can feed specialization and, thereby, factionalism. Geographers of all stripes have proven adept at responding to and taking advantage of these pressures, increasing enrollment, creating a new class of GIS-related occupations, and getting our research funded. Yet this saps time from the time-consuming, but path-breaking, scholarship that crosses the boundaries we create for ourselves, both between local epistemologies, but also, too often, between sophisticated theoretical exegesis and nuanced empirical investigation. With little time to think, it is tempting to stick to our niche. Yet if
we are to practice geography effectively, we must contest commodification, both within the academy and beyond. The challenge is to take advantage of any opportunities without falling into the traps they set for geography and its long-term intellectual vitality.

Contesting such trends includes leading university-wide initiatives to create and reinforce valuation systems that favor quality over quantity, and challenging the tendency of administrators to find ways to conform to rather than contest commodification (Castree 2000). At stake here is not only good geographic practice and the viability of a variegated discipline that is far from the top of funders’ lists, but scholarly and political independence. We should contest pressures for specialized knowledge and simple answers, from the scientific establishment, university administrators, policymakers, and students alike, by helping others learn from our own positive experience with a broad approach to scholarship. We should be at the forefront of both practicing collaborative research, embracing the breadth of the discipline, and interdisciplinary scholarship and instruction, challenging university and societal norms that devalue such activities (Rediscovering Geography Committee 1997). We must work to mitigate the intradisciplinary prioritization accompanying commodification by developing revenue-sharing agreements in which areas of geography that attract funding subsidize those whose work is vital in other ways. We must also undertake initiatives outside the academy: voting, lobbying, and helping our neighbors understand that tax dollars spent on providing a high-quality, liberal education to all are not wasteful.

In this vision, practicing geography well involves passion (in my case, for a geography that contributes to the emancipation of the least well off, cf. Mitchell, this issue), but also compassion and inclusion. We must work harder to allow the voices of others to be heard, and to recognize the consequences of our practices for our moral community (Lynn 2000). Practicing geography well also requires reflexive introspection—the willingness to recognize error and redress it and to challenge our presumptions about who or what belongs in our moral community. Effective geographic practice must also be geographical; it is at its best when engaging across a variety of places, spaces, and scales. It means, inter alia, getting out into the world (many of us barely make it to the library!), challenging our theories on the basis of these experiences, and vice versa. Fieldwork is a vital and distinctive aspect of practicing geography well, and we need to resist temptations to rely on others’ secondary or archival data (Sheppard 1993).

There is a lot left to do. Contemporary geographic practice too often strays far from such ideals and will require significant changes within ourselves, in geography, and within and beyond the academy. Our commitment to catalyzing such changes will shape our effectiveness as geographers in the foreseeable future.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank, without implicating, Helga Leitner for comments on an earlier draft.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Margaret Fitzsimmons for this point.
2. These are not the only groups, of course, whose voices are at least partially lost to us.
3. Those that have the gold make the rules.

References


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