

REVEALING THE TRUTH BEHIND DUALISMS AND DICHOTOMIES IN GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Ever since its inception, geography has encountered several methodological issues which has methodological issues be it in the classical era, the medieval period or in modern geography. This has given birth to different dualisms in the subject. The rise of dualism was particularly prominent in the post-Renaissance period that divided the subject into various exclusive branches of knowledge. It got formally introduced in geography in the 17th century which may be termed as the *classical period of modern geography*. In simple words, the word 'dualism,' means the state of being divided and in the context of any domain of knowledge, it therefore means contrasting stances. Dualism finally leads to the branching off of any discipline or more precisely, its bifurcation. Some of the most prominent dualisms in geography have been between the systematic and regional geography, physical and human geography and historical and contemporary geography. The question however, that arises is whether the dichotomies in geography created due to dualism in the subject are mutually exclusive or interdependent and therefore, whether the dualisms and dichotomies in geography are logical or not.

Key words: Dualism, dichotomy, methodological differences, approaches, reality.

Introduction

Ever since its inception, geography has encountered several methodological issues be it in the classical era, the medieval period or in modern geography. This has given birth to different dualisms in the subject. The rise of dualism was particularly prominent in the post-Renaissance period that divided the subject into various exclusive branches of knowledge. It got formally introduced in geography in the 17th century which may be termed as the *classical period of modern geography*. In simple words, the word '*dualism*,' means the state of being divided and in the context of any domain of knowledge, it therefore means contrasting stances. Dualism finally leads to the branching off of any discipline or more precisely, its bifurcation. This bifurcation may be termed as '*dichotomy*.' Some of the most prominent dualisms in geography are----

- i. General (or Systematic) vs. Regional Geography.
- ii. Physical vs. Human Geography.
- iii. Historical vs. Contemporary Geography.

Systematic Geography versus Regional Geography

The dualism and dichotomy between systematic and regional geography was originally rooted in another dichotomy between the *approaches to the study of geography*---- namely, the *idiographic or inductive approach* and the *nomothetic or deductive approach*. While the former was not keen in developing laws but mainly focused on the description of particular places in the context of its land, sea or places and find its relation with other places; the latter sought to develop laws and make deductions based on those laws.

The first partition of geography was done by a German philosopher, **Bernhard Varenius** in his '*Geographia Generalis*' between *special geography* concerned with the description of particular places on the basis of direct observations and, *general geography* based on mathematical or astronomical laws that could be applied universally. Eventually special

geography evolved into regional geography while general geography developed into systematic geography.

It was the German geographer, **Alexander von Humboldt** who formally laid the foundation of systematic geography. He differentiated between *uranography* as dealing with the celestial bodies and *geography* as dealing with the terrestrial part whose main objective is to decipher the unity in the vast diversity of phenomena and having some sort of causality among them. Inspired by the views of **Hegel**, Humboldt therefore, asserted in his famous book '*Cosmos*' that geography is essentially concerned with developing an understanding of the '*harmonious unity of the cosmos*.' Humboldt opined that humans like other phenomena were a part of the Nature. He categorized the knowledge of the natural phenomena as the-----*systematic sciences* like botany, zoology or geology that classified phenomena on the basis of their forms and grouped them based on their commonalities; *historical sciences* that was concerned with the development of phenomena over time; and, *geography or earth sciences*

that included all the phenomena found on the earth's surface and dealt with their spatial distribution and spatial interaction.

The inductive approach in geography was introduced by **Carl Ritter**, a contemporary of Alexander von Humboldt. Ritter used the concept of '*erdteile*' or continents as his units of the study of geography. In his book '*Erdkunde*,' Ritter outlined the fact that the study of geography was based on local conditions that included *topographical* meaning the division of the earth's surface into natural divisions; *formal* dealing with the distribution of natural phenomena like water, air etc. that forms the bases of human life; and, *material* which dealt with the distribution of biotic life, minerals etc.

Under the influence of *Darwinianism* in the 19th century, geography witnessed significant furtherance in systematic geography. **Ferdinand von Richtofen** distinguished between systematic geography as analytic as well as regressive and regional geography as synthetic as well as descriptive. He laid down a guideline for a systematic study of phenomena on the earth's surface.

Friedrich Ratzel in his '*Anthropogeographie*' set a framework for a systematic study of human geography. His concept of geography was based on two propositions----one was the interrelationship between humans and the environment and second was the interrelationship amongst humans. **Alfred Hettner** differentiated between systematic as that which was concerned with developing laws and theories and regional geography that was more interested in studying the peculiarities.

In France, while the French geographer **Vidal de la Blache** introduced the concept of '*pays*' or small local units with a view to revive the regional tradition in the study of geography. However, he was contested by **Reclus** whose concept of '*le terra*' was centred on systematic geography.

Finally, the dichotomy between systematic and regional geography led to the *Hartshorne-Schaefer debate*. **Richard Hartshorne** introduced the concept of '*areal differentiation*' in his '*Nature of Geography*' which he believed was regional in its approach while **Schaefer** rejected this to advocate for a systematic scientific approach.

Physical Geography versus Human Geography

Bernhard Varenius was the first to introduce the dualism between *physical and human geography* though he himself was not much interested in human geography which he believed could not be subject to mathematical laws to generate universal principles. On the other hand, the methods of the natural sciences could be used with precision to draw conclusions regarding natural phenomena.

For four decades between 1756 and 1796, **Immanuel Kant** offered a series of lectures on physical geography at the University of Konigsberg. He advocated the fact that the features visible on the earth's surface were not only a resultant of the physical processes but also human actions. He was of the view that physical geography constituted the first part of the knowledge of the world that formed the basis for understanding the earth as the home of the humans and it also aided in furthering philosophical studies.

After Kant, **Humboldt** stressed upon the study of physical geography since he believed in the '*unity of nature.*' According to him, physical geography involved the study of the mutually interdependent phenomena on the earth's surface that made up for the '*natural whole,*' and that human elements were largely function of differences in natural conditions. As opposed to this, **Ritter's** views were largely anthropocentric in nature. With his *teleological approach*, Ritter conceived the earth to be created by God with the purpose to educate humans and facilitate their development. He was of the opinion that, just like the natural phenomena of any spatial unit have their bearings on humans, humans in turn, could also have their influence on the land.

Under the influence of the *Darwinian* tradition in the second half of the 19th century, there was surge in the inclination of geographers towards physical geography. **Mary Somerville** authored her '*Physical Geography*' while **Thomas Henry Huxley** authored '*Physiography.*' While **Alfred Hettner** accorded more importance to the physical environment as compared to the cultural environment, **Albrecht Penck** coined the term '*geomorphology*' meaning the study of landforms. Penck also put forward his '*principles of landform evolution.*' American geographer, **William Morris Davis** propounded his concept of the '*normal cycle of erosion.*' **Semple** went forward to explain humans as product of the earth's surface. There were other scholars like **Koppen, Mill, Martonne, Dokuchaiev, Mackinder, Chisholm, Herbertson and Huntington**, who recognized physical geography as the core of geographical studies. Several sub-fields of physical geography like *geomorphology, climatology, oceanography, pedology, biogeography and environmental geography* evolved with time.

The human element in geography was introduced by **Friedrich Ratzel**, also known as the '*father of political geography.*' Ratzel in his '*Anthropogeographie,*' described geography as the study of human races. But Ratzel too, was influenced by the Darwinian ideas and incorporated Darwin's two propositions in his works. One was that of *struggle and natural selection*, and the other was that of *association and organization.* Therefore, Ratzel tried to establish an analogy between political units and living organisms.

It was the French geographer, **Vidal de la Blache** who is actually known as the founding father of modern human geography though he himself considered human geography as a natural science. Blache's '*Principles de Geographie Humaine*,' consisted of several parts, each of which was devoted to different aspects of human geography. The introductory part analysed the concept of cultural milieu and the principle of terrestrial unity. Part one dealt with population clusters and density while the second part described the man-milieu relationship. Finally, the third part focused on transport and communication. The Vidalienne tradition was carried forward by **Jean Brunhes** not only within France but also to other parts of the world as well. Inspired by the Vidalienne views, French historian **Lucien Febvre**, asserted on humans as important modifier of the earth's surface over time through their labour and decision-making. American geographer, **Isaiah Bowman** was also an advocate of the anthropocentric approach in geography while **Carl O. Sauer** propounded his '*landscape paradigm*' or more precisely the concept of *cultural landscape* highlighting on humans as agents of changing the natural landscape.

Several sub-fields of human geography like *population geography, settlement geography, urban geography, social geography, cultural geography, political geography, economic geography and historical geography* evolved with time.

In fact, the dichotomy between the philosophies of *environmental determinism* and *possibilism* in geography or the two revolutions in geography, namely the *positive-quantitative* and the *critical revolution* may be attributed to this dualism between physical and human geography.

Historical Geography versus Contemporary Geography

Greek scholar **Herodotus** asserted that all history should be treated geographically and all geography should be treated historically. Thereafter, **Immanuel Kant** opined that since a person's experience was restricted to a specified time and a particular space, his knowledge needs to be supplemented with that of others. Such indirect knowledge could be categorized as---
-narrative concerned with *time* that ultimately evolved into *history*; and, *descriptive* concerned with *space* that finally evolved into *geography*. Eventually, as the historical approach in

geography got acknowledged, the dichotomy between historical and contemporary geography emerged as an important dualism in geography.

As is revealed by the name, all modern and post-modern geographical knowledge is included in *contemporary geography* which is a witness to the constant revamping of methodologies and approaches in the study of geography. On the other hand, *historical geography* deals with the geographical events from the past. To mention here is the '*Geography of Puranas*' by **S. M. Ali**. American geographer, **Ralph Brown** made significant contributions in the field of historical geography. Even the **Vidalienne** tradition adopted a historical approach.

The essence of historical geography revolved around certain themes----

The Geographical Factor in History---- In the latter part of the 19th century, historical geography was conceived to study the impact of geographical factor in shaping the history of a place. On the other hand, **Whittlesey**, opined that the historical approach in geography provided for a spatio-temporal framework in the study of any spatial unit.

Changing Cultural Landscape---historical geography was also conceived to be the study of the cultural landscape existing in the past be it the type of settlements or house types, cropping pattern and so on.

Reconstruction of Past Geographies---This aspect of historical geography enables contemporary geographers to interpret any geographical phenomena from any spatial unit in a more comprehensive way in present times since it involved all fields of geographical knowledge.

Geographical Changes through Time---Any spatial unit comprises of different geographical phenomena, be it natural or cultural. These phenomena changes with time which in turn, changes the character of the space. Historical geographers are mainly concerned with the study of these changes in geographical phenomena with time.

Reality of Dualisms and Dichotomies in Geography

Though the discipline of geography has got several dualisms in it arising out of methodological differences that has led to its dichotomous nature culminating in the branching off of the discipline into different sub-branches; the question that arises is whether such sub-fields of geography are mutually exclusive or are interrelated.

Bernhard Varenius who formally introduced dualisms in geography by partitioning it between general and special geography, stressed on the fact that general geography could infer the general hypotheses and laws based on the database provided by special geography. On one hand while Humboldt recognized the interdependence of areal phenomena to study the natural whole. Ritter acknowledged Humboldt's systematic studies while undertaking special studies of any region. Richtofen on one hand followed the precedence of Humboldt in establishing the affinity between geography and the natural sciences while he also attempted to restore the Ritterian tradition. Hettner asserted that geographical studies could involve both idiographic and nomothetic approaches. The concept of '*compage*' introduced by Whittlesey for the study of regional geography relied on the functional association existing between humans and their physical, biotic and social environment within any spatial unit. These facts are enough to blur the so-called dualism between systematic and regional geography.

In physical geography, analogy is drawn between the life cycle of humans and the evolution of landforms while the study of '*pays*' in human geography involves natural regions. Hence, it is again not possible to study humans independent of their physical environment. The study of human-Nature relationship has therefore, emerged as the central theme of geography. However, there have been different approaches in geographical studies that sometimes accorded greater importance to Nature and sometimes to humans or sometimes places them in harmony with each other.

Finally, regarding the dualism between contemporary and historical geography, it may be stated that the present cannot be studied properly without knowing the past and contemporary

geography eventually becomes historical geography with the passage of time. Hence, Mackinder asserted the fact that historical geography basically involved the study of the historical present.

Thus, it may be stated that the dichotomies of geography arising out of dualisms, eventually leads to one another and so, the dualisms in the subject stand as illogical since they are not mutually exclusive and are interdependent on each other.

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