

On what it takes to be a good geographer

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This paper argues that, in order to take place, space and scale more seriously in the study of our discipline, we have to complement the pervasive understanding of geography as a tradition of thought or an extended conversation with an understanding of our discipline as a tradition of practice, in which the main focus is on the becoming of geographers. It is argued that the theme of ‘what it takes to be a good geographer’ is a fertile way to study this process of becoming. The four main advantages of this approach are illustrated empirically in the body of the argument by the author’s reflections on his socializing within two very different geographical traditions.

Key words: Romania, history and philosophy of geography, observant participation, regulative ideal, performance

Approaching geography

Rationale of the paper

Historians of geography (Livingstone 2000) have argued recently that space and place should be taken more seriously in the attempts to understand the becoming of our discipline. In this paper, I argue that, in order to do so, we have to complement the pervasive understanding of geography as a ‘tradition of thought’ or extended conversation (Livingstone 1992; Peet 1998) with an understanding of the discipline as a ‘tradition of practice’, in the study of which the chief concern is not the abstract dynamic of ideas, but the concrete becoming of geographers. Hence, I suggest that this becoming might be captured in terms of the regulative ideal of what it takes to be a good geographer. This is helpful for four main reasons: firstly, because it regulates the performance of the geographer at all levels and stages of his or her career – from the beginning of undergraduate studies to promotion to full professorship; secondly, because it makes apparent the role that wider social and political contexts play in the production of geographies; thirdly, because it pays little respect to the conventional dichotomy between disciplinary philosophy and disciplinary practice, and blurs in insightful ways the distinction between

the normative and the descriptive in scientific knowledge production; fourthly, because it brings place, space and scale to the forefront of enquiry, and thus makes explicit the geography of geographies.

I do not approach these issues in a purely theoretical register. Instead, I exploit the advantage of having been socialized in two distinct disciplinary traditions, and illustrate the theoretical propositions by drawing extensively on the empirical ‘data’ of my ‘fractured’ history. To be more specific, I did my first degree in geography at the ‘Babes-Bolyai’ University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, between 1996 and 2000, and then moved for my PhD studies to the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol, UK. I should emphasize at this early point that this paper does *not* attempt a systematic comparative analysis of the two departments. They are used selectively and unevenly in my argument, to illustrate the theoretical proposition of this paper, i.e. that the theme of what it takes to be a good geographer is a fertile complement to the standard approaches to geography as a tradition of thought or an extended conversation.

Also, I should emphasize that it is unavoidable that my subject position has biased the way I see and interpret things (see Rose 1997; Sidaway 2000),

despite attempts to support my explanations with more objective data (e.g. analysis of the curricula, of the marking criteria, of existing literature, etc.). I first detail the theoretical argument of the paper, and then illustrate its advantages by reflecting on several facets of what it takes to be a good geographer at Cluj-Napoca and/or Bristol.

Thinking of what it takes to be a good geographer

The integrative theme of this essay – thinking of what it takes to be a good geographer – is fruitful for at least four reasons. First, what it takes to be a good geographer constitutes a *regulative ideal* that influences the preaching and doing of geography *at all levels and stages*: from teaching to research; from the undergraduate students who have to follow a certain path of training and accomplish certain standards in order to graduate as geographers; to the academics who have to play the game of institutional geography (norms of proper research, productivity and relevance of research, specialization, acquisition and maintenance of expertise, etc.) in their search for the rewards associated with being acknowledged as good or top geographers.

Second, it prompts reflection on the relations between disciplinary philosophies and practices and the *broader social contexts*. The actual preaching and doing of geography is a compromise between philosophical convictions about geography (from the level of the individual academic to the level of national scientific communities), and the need to adapt to, and meet the pressures and demands that society, businesses and policy-makers have made of, disciplinary communities in various historical circumstances (see Johnston 2002a). I suspect that the regulative ideal of a ‘good geographer’ is the very expression of this compromise, and a gate through which needs ‘external’ to the discipline are internalized and operationalized (in training and assessment requirements, departmental development strategies, etc.). Thus, one can argue that in the United States a command of GIS is increasingly expected of a good geographer. Similarly, one might point to the celebration of transferable skills in the UK, and to all the expectations that underpin the narrow but widespread definitions of relevance.¹ To put it differently, the aforementioned compromise runs through various overlapping expressions that range from ‘A good geographer has to be socially useful’ to ‘Better-trained geographers are socially more useful’!

Third, it captures *relations between the philosophy and the practice of geography*, going beyond the concern with how the latter *reflects* the former. Philosophies of geography may be explicit and written (e.g. exemplars such as Hartshorne’s *The nature of geography*) or implicit, ‘hidden’ in the performance of scientific endeavours. It can happen that an ‘official’, explicit philosophy, invoked for the sake of intellectual acceptability, is denied systematically in practice; practice which instead has shaped, has been shaped by and has reproduced, an implicit philosophy perhaps less acceptable and not easily detectable in the disciplinary artefacts. This is evidently the case at Cluj-Napoca. On the one hand, in the few philosophical reflections heard during my four years of undergraduate study in geography, environmental determinism and ‘voluntarism’ were presented as ‘bad’ extremes, and possibilism was praised as a sensible third way. On the other hand, in many of the lectures about culture–nature relations in specific regions, the staff actually endorsed environmentally deterministic views. Disciplinary philosophies and practices are mutually constituted: we have to put philosophies into practice, but also practice into philosophies.

Fourth – as I illustrate in the remainder of this paper – what is meant by a ‘good geographer’ is always *place-specific*, a fact that has substantive consequences for any attempt to broaden the geographical ‘conversation’ beyond the confines of major or minor languages (Short *et al.* 2001), and of different national schools. As scientists in the process of becoming, we constantly expose ourselves to criticism, either from our superiors (as students), or our peers (as professional geographers). Such criticism is grounded in more or less explicit norms of good research. However, these norms are themselves varying from place to place. To take the case of British geography (see Sidaway 1998), international research agendas and international recognition (i.e. the *scale* of research and influence) are highly valued in the RAE, and departments with a regional regime of research might therefore be disadvantaged. But space is also involved in the norms of good research by means of the spatial imagination underpinning their vocabularies. Thus, from an Anglo-American perspective, the geography practised at Cluj-Napoca may seem backward and parochial, both terms that codify space pejoratively in our cognitive schema.

Methods of becoming: some facets of what it takes to be a good geographer

In what follows, I will illustrate these themes and try to explain some of the facets of what I feel it takes to be a good geographer in the department at Cluj-Napoca (I was an undergraduate student there between 1996 and 2000), contrasting them – where appropriate – with the situation at Bristol (I have been a postgraduate student here since 2000).

To have a good memory, to be fit and to love the mountain

Until very recently the Romanian higher education system was elitist; to be sure, there were no tuition fees, but in order to reach tertiary education, high-school pupils had to learn, usually by heart, a number of textbooks on which they were examined after sitting the equivalent of their A-levels. For geography, there were three entry exams each asking for reproduction and understanding of a textbook (see Barnes 2002 for a discussion of the agency of books in geography). These were *General physical geography with elements of geology* (Posea and Mandrut 1992), *Human and economic geography of the world* (Cucu et al. 1993) and *The geography of Romania* (Tufescu et al. 1994). Once admitted for undergraduate studies in geography, the challenge for students was to take care not to forget the content of these books, as they constituted the minimal knowledge requirement from which the staff drew to develop our geographical education. Most exams were oral exams, and the consensus among staff was that if a student was asked a question from one of these three ‘fundamental’ textbooks and did not know the answer, (s)he should not be allowed to pass that exam. This shows that at Cluj-Napoca geography still has a lot to do with memorization, although it has to be said that mechanical memorization is considered a major ‘sin’! There, it is difficult to imagine a good geographer without a good memory: during my four years of undergraduate training, we had to learn by heart altitudes, names, locations, etc. because, so the argument went, one has to know well the raw empirical data in order to elaborate theories and follow chains of causation. This type of learning has significant implications for the everyday routines of staff and students, ranging from the nature of the tutorial work (focused on mapping the information delivered at lectures) to the style of evaluation (questions checking the assimilation of received wisdom, rather than originality). On coming to

Bristol, I realized that it is more acceptable not to know things that former Romanian colleagues would find outrageous not to know by heart. Instead, at Bristol there is a premium on wide reading, on developing the ability of being critical, of having analytical presence and originality, and of constructing (and considering) an argument or a model. To support this observation, one might look at the marking criteria for undergraduate work, which stipulate that first class marks are awarded

For work which is excellent not only in terms of the range and depth of understanding of the material used, but also in terms of its level of argument and analysis. First Class pieces of work are clearly focused on the question being answered, and show evidence of intelligence, originality and insight. (Year Two Course Booklet 2002, 25–6)

The explanation for this difference stands partly in the much more traditionalist Romanian academic culture, which privileges the staff as repositories of reliable knowledge and situates the students on a lower, novice-like rank: one is supposed to know and endorse his/her professor’s ideas and, with the help of his/her professor’s interpretation, fiercely criticize those of his/her rivals. This is reinforced by a restricted engagement with theoretical and philosophical issues, reflecting the empiricism and encyclopaedic temptations that still dominate the discipline in Romania (see below).

Derived from this power configuration, I felt that at Cluj-Napoca education consisted mainly of making things difficult for the student, expecting him or her to rise to the high standards set. All my peers realized that things were going to be made difficult for us on the occasion of our first fieldwork in October 1996. To begin with, the academic staff told us that we were really lucky to study geography at Cluj-Napoca, as, in comparison with the other two prestigious Romanian geography departments at Iasi and Bucharest, it enjoys an ideal location. References to ‘a natural laboratory’, or ‘a geographical laboratory’ were common, citing the proximity of the mountains and the impressive variety of natural phenomena and landforms surrounding, or indeed within, the city (e.g. landslides). A teaching assistant who was completing his PhD in geomorphology led the first fieldwork: a one-day trip in some hills near the city. In total, from early morning until evening, we had to walk more than 30 kilometres, including some sections over rough and steep terrain. The teaching assistant warned us that *this was geography*, and that

this first trip was just a very easy one, especially for freshers. Some of my peers, exhausted and scared by the prospect of four years of commando-like training, started very seriously considering giving up geography, or at least transferring to another department more inclined towards human geography. We all realized that to be successful meant that we had to be supremely fit when, at a certain point of the trip, instead of choosing to walk on a comfortable paved way to our next destination, the teaching assistant decided that we would go by a different route, as long as the other, but more 'natural' and more difficult.²

One can approach this account of fieldwork as support for the more outspoken feminist critiques of geography that tend to prioritize physical performance as a masculinity-validating end in itself (e.g. Rose 1993).³ However, given the theme of this paper, it is more important to pay attention to the fact that in Romania fieldwork tends to be equated with going out into the 'natural environment', and more specifically with mountains (for undergraduates at Bristol this is not necessarily the case). In four years of undergraduate training, there were only one or two half-day geographical applications in the urban realm. The explanation for this state of affairs resides in the traditional intellectual position of Romanian geography as a natural, 'hard' science (see Pop 1999 2000; for some, the 'natural' is more obvious in the mountains, the urban realm is 'too human'), and in the privileged position geomorphology has always enjoyed within branches of Romanian geography as a *whole*. It is to this that I now turn.

To know geomorphology well

Most of our geographical trips and fieldwork had, as their central purpose, an understanding of geomorphology and the determinant role that landforms play in geographical formations. This is just one aspect that shows how at Cluj-Napoca geomorphology is the 'queenly branch' of geography. Geomorphology dominates the structure and content of the curricula, and the ways that departmental culture was, and is, performed by both students and staff. It is no accident that the course in geomorphology is taught by the (former) head of the department and most reputed member of staff. This is the largest of the physical geography courses (five hours per week throughout 28 weeks of second year) and one of the largest in the whole curriculum (Table 1). It provides the most feared exam, acting as a gatekeeper,

halfway through the undergraduates' four years training in geography. The quantity and difficulty of the material required was impressive because the professor has been keen to (a) defend and reinforce the prestige of the department's traditional expertise in geomorphology, ensuring that all graduates know the bases of this sub-discipline well and (b) introduce a very systematic account of geomorphology that reviews all the major schools of thought: the landscape tradition, the Anglo-American process geomorphology, French geomorphology, Russian and German geomorphology. . . . This drive for comprehensiveness is discussed later in the paper. The emphasis on geomorphology had its impacts on student behaviour. Fear was performed diversely, including episodes of crying, trembling, denial: actions and emotions exacerbated by the fact that the exam was a viva. The anxiety of students was at its height when we were queuing outside the exam room, waiting to be invited in one by one. As we discovered the marks awarded from students leaving the exam room, we tried to detect trends in the mood of the professor. Well in advance of the viva, senior students took pleasure in recounting 'horror stories' from their generation. Thus informed of the difficulty of the exam, half of the students in my year did not even dare to show up to the normal exam scheduled in June, preferring to sacrifice the whole summer to learn thoroughly the impressive amount of information required (they had their viva in September). Of those who did try their chances in June, about 50 per cent failed and 50 per cent passed, albeit with very low scores.

The geomorphology course aside, many other 'in-between' geography courses (e.g. landscape geography, environmental geography, regional geography) had at their core a lot of geomorphology. Two examples are the courses on the Regional Geography of Continents, which insisted on regional geomorphology and palaeogeomorphology (both professors of regional geography have their PhDs in geomorphology), and the Physical Geography of Romania (three-quarters of the lectures were about Romanian landforms). In order to better support the emphasis on geomorphology, in the second year we also had a compulsory course in General Geology and the Geology of Romania. A further course on Regional Geography of Romania emphasized landforms, rather than alternative criteria (historical, economic, political, cultural, etc.) as the principal basis for regional classification. In the first half of the course, we learned the Carpathian and

Table 1 The undergraduate curriculum for Honours Geography at Cluj-Napoca (1996–2000)

| Courses | Hours/week |
|--|-----------------|
| <i>Year 1</i> | <i>24 total</i> |
| General geography | 3 |
| Cartography–topography | 3 |
| Population and settlements | 3 |
| Hydrology | 4 |
| Meteorology–climatology | 4 |
| Optional course | 3 |
| Fieldwork | 1 month |
| Sport | 2 |
| Foreign language | 2 |
| <i>Year 2</i> | <i>24 total</i> |
| Biogeography and the geography of soils | 4 |
| General geology and the geology of Romania | 3 |
| Geomorphology | 5 |
| Regional geography of Europe | 3 |
| Economic geography of the World | 3 |
| Optional | 2 |
| Fieldwork | 1 month |
| Sport | 2 |
| Foreign language | 2 |
| <i>Year 3</i> | <i>24 total</i> |
| Dynamic geo-ecology and the typology of landscape | 3 |
| Environmental geography | 4 |
| Regional geography of America and Africa | 3 |
| Physical and human geography of Romania | 6 |
| Specialization (two courses) | 4+4 |
| Fieldwork | 1 month |
| <i>Year 4</i> | <i>24 total</i> |
| The theory and methodology of geography | 3 |
| The organization of the geographical space and the management of the territory | 6 |
| Regional geography of Romania | 7 |
| Specialization (two courses) | 4+4 |
| Fieldwork | 1 month |

Subcarpathian regions (taught by a geomorphologist), and in the second semester we studied, from a regional perspective, the Transylvanian Plateau and the hills and plains that constitute the extra-Carpathian space (taught by a human geographer).

Why did geomorphology and geomorphologic determinism play such a prominent role in the Romanian mode of geography, and in this department in particular? The answer is, I suspect, a messy mixture of the country's political history, the intellectual histories of the national geographical school and of the department, and path dependency. In combination, these all illustrate the second theoretical

theme of this paper: how contexts become 'texts' – how the requirement to know geomorphology well as part of the regulative ideal of a good geographer has largely been induced by factors above or outside the department.

From the start, the influential philosophy of the discipline propounded by the founding father of Romanian geography, Simion Mehedinti, placed the human realm in a peripheral position as a mere adjunct of the biosphere (Mehedinti 1931). His powerful position as the first professor of geography in Romania (appointed in 1900 in Bucharest) enabled him to impose this definition on Romanian

geography with lasting consequences. All four geographers subsequently elected as members of the Romanian Academy in the twentieth century had principal research interests in geomorphology. One of them, George Valsan, was the first holder of the chair in geography at the University of Cluj-Napoca (1919). He placed physical geography, and most especially geomorphology, at the core of the department. This was further strengthened by the inputs of a leading figure of French physical geography, Emmanuel de Martonne, who organized a series of geographical expeditions around Romania and trained the most promising members of staff in physical geography.

However, this intellectual legacy alone does not fully explain the type of geography practised in Romania, and at Cluj-Napoca more specifically. The country's political context has also had a substantial impact. Indeed, the pressure on academia following the advent of the Communist regime (1947) has been well documented in the last decades by a number of historians and humanist intellectuals (e.g. Mungiu 1995; Bozgan 1998). The disciplines most affected were those in the social sciences and humanities, which the regime closely regulated in order to promote a correct political message, in agreement with the utopian imperatives of the new rulers. Geographers were privileged to have the intellectual history of their discipline more closely aligned with the hard sciences, and found refuge in this identity. Even today in Romania, geography is rarely perceived as having anything to do with the social sciences. In the national committees of academic assessment, geography is assigned to the 'natural sciences' group, together with geology and biology.

This specific political context and intellectual legacy led to the development of Romanian geography following a strikingly different path to its Anglo-American counterpart. One will not find in its history a quantitative revolution, or even a Marxist turn! More recently, attempts to turn away from Marxism and challenge geography's position within the natural sciences group, and to advocate 'a cultural turn', have been met with suspicion (Simandan 2000).

To know every bit of your homeland and to be as comprehensive as possible

In order to pass as a good, let alone brilliant, geographer at Cluj-Napoca, it is very important to know in detail the geography of Romania. This

encyclopaedic 'obsession' arises in part out of the recent and contested formation of the Romanian 'national and unitary state', as the Constitution of 1991 states. Geography is seen as an active contributor to the national project through its 'scientific' defence of the unitary character of the Romanian landscape; it is also the outcome of the communist regime, in that Ceausescu favoured a very nationalistic version of communism, which stimulated geography's retreat into natural science, far away from the kind of subversive critical geography that developed in parts of Anglo-American geography and unmasked the discipline's association with state interests.

The importance of 'political context/departmental text' is illustrated by the contemporary situation at Bristol. Here there is no separate course in the geography of the United Kingdom. Instead, what I think is distinctive in Bristol is the emphasis placed on knowing theory and methodology. These developments have roots in the quantitative revolution, when a general feeling of disciplinary parochialism and inadequacy stimulated a distinct theoretical turn, opening up geography to other disciplines and philosophies (Johnston 2002b). Within the UK, Bristol played an especially prominent role in this movement, retaining its strength in conceptual geography ever since. This emphasis on theory and methodology has given Bristol a competitive edge in the contest for world-wide recognition (see Haggett 1995). To be sure, research on these conceptual themes is likely to ensure a different mode and scale of connection with the discipline as a whole, in sharp contrast with Cluj-Napoca, where research has traditionally had a regional focus. The three top geography departments in the country have always had a tacit agreement concerning their region of research: Iasi handles Moldavia, Cluj-Napoca covers Transylvania and Bucharest does the South. This tradition of regional specialization is reinforced by cultural prejudices, economic constraints and the strong premium put on the insider's perspective. What we see here is not only the way in which the spatial regime of research (global-theoretical versus regional-empirical) of a department favours or undermines its attempts to build an international reputation, but also how that spatial regime of research has been determined by 'internal' factors, such as key figures (Thrift 1995) and key texts (Barnes 2002), and 'external' factors, such as language (Bradshaw 1990; Short *et al.* 2001), political freedom, financial resources, the cultural

legacy of imperialism (Potter 2001), and indeed how the norms of good research are biased unfairly towards certain spatial regimes of research. Most recently, Castree (2002) asks for geographers to discuss the impacts of current RAE standards of academic excellence (a premium on theory production, methodological innovation and international status) that, in their delineation of power relations, are neither fair nor necessarily productive, and might widen the gaps cleaved by imperialism and global capitalism.

At Cluj-Napoca, it is desirable to be competent in as many areas of geography as possible, competence need not be assessed only in terms of research output; teaching is one way to prove it also. More generally, *comprehensiveness* is a regulative ideal for both students and academics. At Bristol, being *selective* is not only 'normal', but also in many cases the thing to go for. Of the many examples that could substantiate these observations, perhaps the most suggestive concerns the structure of the undergraduate curricula, for it *activates* a whole departmental philosophy of what makes a good geographer.

At Bristol, the single honours geography programme comprises a first 'foundation year in geography' with four common courses: Physical Geography (but without a distinct module in geomorphology), Human Geography, Geographical Methods and Geographical Practices. These are followed by two more years of specialization in human geography (Space and Society), physical geography (Environmental Processes), or combined aspects of physical and human geography (Environment and Society). Students following these specializations share a common course in Geographical Methods during their second year. At Cluj-Napoca, the single honours geography programme (see Table 1) comprises four years: the first two cover *techniques* and *analytical* geographies, the last two *in-between* or *synthetic* geographies (two-thirds of total study time) with the remaining third for specialization (students have to choose one out of three from geomorphology–pedology, hydrology–meteorology, and human and regional geography).

From my own experience, I would argue that the explanation of this difference (synthesis and comprehensiveness at Cluj-Napoca, selectivity and analysis at Bristol) has to be framed in terms of historically and geographically specific developments. In Romanian geography there is an uncontested understanding of the discipline as the 'queenly science', or as a 'crossroads discipline', and of the geographer as

an *omnium gatherer*. By way of contrast, in British geography this view has lost some ground in the aftermath of the quantitative revolution, which shifted the emphasis from synthetic/integrative relations (linking culture and nature, and the social and 'harder' sciences) to specialist/analytical ones (Johnston 2002b). But there is a risk of over-generalization if we leave the explanation at the national level. It is important also to consider the particular traditions of departments (shaped by figures like Peter Haggett at Bristol) and their policies of research (e.g. to maintain its 5* RAE ranking, Bristol's research is organized in clusters in which the department has already built an international reputation). However, the Geography Benchmark Statement, an impressive concern for environmental topics in many first degrees, or the blossoming literature in favour of a stronger emphasis on the integrative or synthetic theme (e.g. for physical geography, see Douglas 1986; Stoddart 1987; Newson 1992; Gregory 2000) are likely to provide some challenges for departments such as Bristol that have aligned themselves with the analytical approach.

At this point I want to pause to highlight the third theoretical theme – how best to capture the relation between philosophies and practices of geography. I will begin with a confession. The most frequent critique my first supervisor makes about my draft papers is that I am overly concerned with complete coverage of an issue (i.e. comprehensiveness) to the detriment of more detailed analysis. His all too frequent recommendation is 'Try to make fewer points, and go into more depth with your analysis. Focus on your strengths'.⁴ Added to this, at Cluj-Napoca the chief goal of exam questions was to check if each and every chapter taught had been satisfactorily assimilated, whereas, while working as an exam invigilator at Bristol, I have been surprised to notice that the students are given a choice of questions. Here the message seems to be 'pick the one you know best and show us how well you can do!'

The point worth noting here is not the reiteration of the different epistemic styles at work in the two traditions (comprehensive versus analytic approaches), but some less conspicuous (precisely because they are too obvious) means of disciplinary performance. Think of the feedback a research student receives from his or her supervisor, responses from editors and anonymous referees, think of the exam questions and marking criteria,

think yet more about the curricula, or about a job announcement for a lectureship in geography. . . . All of these dwell in, and weave, the promiscuous space of encounter between theory and practice; they are all *practical texts and textual practices*; they are all implicated in, and implied by, the crude performance of an academic discipline; they are all material effects, signifiers and machines that mediate the ways in which the normative meets the descriptive in scientific knowledge production. Reflections on the discipline of geography have favoured the analysis of capital texts (e.g. Hartshorne's *The nature of geography* or Mehedinti's *Terra: introduction to geography as a science*) or the ways in which these have been reflected in disciplinary practices. This has the effect of separating, or 'purifying' (cf. Latour 1993) theory and grand texts from practices, but overlooks the conspicuous fact that *most* of what makes a discipline populates the hybrid spaces between these two ends of the chain. The normative – in our case the regulative ideal of what it takes to be a good geographer – is not reducible to what exemplars demand, but is an entanglement of discursive and non-discursive practices, of written, uttered, felt or performed things. To be sure, a discipline is more than 'to discipline', but disciplining its potential professional performers through varied *methods of becoming* – such as exercising the capacity to memorize, harnessing a fit body and inscribing mindsets through fieldwork or concentrating on passing the threshold of the geomorphology exam – is at the core of the reproduction and growth of disciplinary repositories of knowledge. These include not only written texts, but also the embodied minds of their performers (in our case, of geographers) and those difficult-to-grasp things, such as the knowledge to police a practice in order to generate desired effects.

Discussion

In this paper I have suggested that a focus on the theme of 'what it takes to be a good geographer' is a necessary complement to the well-established approach to our discipline as a tradition of thought, or extended conversation, in which, although the lives of individual geographers are not overlooked, the chief concern remains with the dynamic of ideas within and between different worldviews (Marxism, humanism, post-structuralism, etc.). There are four

main advantages that make this theme salient for enquiries into the production of geographies.

First, the theme of what it takes to be a good geographer does not assume that the geographer has a stable identity. Instead, it sees identity as an *ongoing performance* (Butler 1990 1993), as a subject position thoroughly dependent on both the other subject positions of the same individual (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) and the places where he or she learns what makes a geographer (the department, the conference hall, the field, the screen of the computer, the tiny space of a draft paper). This approach complicates the comfortable assumption that one becomes a professional geographer after having successfully completed postgraduate studies (e.g. Johnston 1997, Ch. 1), thus qualifying to join in with the extended conversation on which the understanding of geography depends (Livingstone 1992; Johnston 1997; Peet 1998).

Second, the same theme captures well the fluid and pervasive manners through which wider social, political and cultural contexts shape the practice of geography. One way to grasp these manners is to note that the subject position of an individual geographer is not insulated from his or her other subject positions, but develops in close relation to them. *We are never geographers only*; instead, our way of performing geography is unavoidably embedded in the other subject positions that make an individual. One other way to grasp these manners at a personal level is to look back at this paper and see how the contexts (regional, national, global) of my story seem to be collapsed within the unit of analysis (the two geography departments), and how *scale* might be defined exactly in these terms (as contexts collapsed within the unit of analysis; Simandan 2001).

Third, the theme of what it takes to be a good geographer undoes the theory/practice dichotomy and blurs the border that conventionally separates the normative from the descriptive. It does so by paying attention to what we do every day in geography. We might read exemplars and then try to apply their instructions, but we are more likely to find ourselves teaching within the framework set by the curricula, marking essays according to the departmental assessment criteria, reading post-structuralist philosophy in search for impressive quotations, rewriting a draft paper to make the gatekeepers (editors, referees, supervisors) let us in, looking for a job and writing letters of application that persuade the appointment committee how well we match the

job announcement, etc. Most of what we do as geographers populates, it has been argued, the hybrid space between theory and practice. This approach to geography is significant in that it speaks volumes about what average geographers do. The approach to geography as extended conversation/tradition of thought is necessarily elitist: only those who wrote seminal papers are allowed to play out the script of geography. This type of (hi)story is the history of the chosen few, and occludes the story of how those chosen few are chosen.

Fourth, this theme brings space, place and scale, to the forefront. This is not just an addition to the set of anodyne 'discoveries' that reiterate the core postulate of geography (that 'space matters'). The central interest of this paper was on the ways in which space, place and scale co-produce geographical practices. It has been shown how various spaces (national, departmental) are entangled in the production of geographies; how specific spatial performances (fieldwork, passing an oral exam) are policed to shape one's professional becoming; how what makes a good geographer depends on which spatial regime of research (international, regional) is favoured by the norms of quality research (e.g. the RAE); and how these very norms allow particular ways of seeing that underscore potentially problematic spatial imaginations (e.g. advanced geography versus parochial geography).

I would like to end this paper by raising the politics of geographical practice. We are now in the awkward, yet fertile, position of thinking through the question of how we, as supposedly 'good' geographers, negotiate our differences. But if we are to do so in any kind of constructive fashion, we have to acknowledge that the laudable drive to make different geographical traditions speak to each other necessarily conjures up the spectre of self-centredness (e.g. from an Anglo-American perspective Romanian geography seems backward) and the intellectual poverty that follows from taking incommensurability – of thought and action – far too seriously. Instead, a perspective that sees 'paradigms' as configurations of epistemic gains and epistemic losses might prevent excessively general judgements of value, and so give birth to novel and profitable conversations.

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Notes

- 1 By narrow definitions of relevance I refer to those arguments that celebrate the virtues of applied and applicable research and label 'less urgent' or 'less relevant' the retreat of some geographers into purely abstract theorizing.
- 2 Thinking back to the notion of the regulative ideal, it is also important to note that staff who failed to meet the rigorous standards of the department, such as those who were 'overweight' or were unable to lecture without the aid of extensive notes, were subject to ridicule.
- 3 In Romania there is no such thing as feminist geography, a fact that helps explain the unproblematic acceptance of the 'macho' model of the geographer.
- 4 A similar message was often put across by the guest editors and the referees while I was writing and re-writing this paper!

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