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# The Transformation of Geographic Thought: Cultural Landscapes and Structuralism in the 20th Century

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## Abstract:

Geographic philosophy has evolved significantly during the last century, reflecting broader epistemological and methodological advances. This paper investigates the evolution of geographic traditions, starting with the early forms of environmental determinism and possibilism, which established the groundwork for the cultural landscape and traditional regional geography methods. These traditions were later challenged by the rise of spatial science, which aimed to build a more scientific and quantitative foundation for geography. The primary goal of this research is to critically evaluate and contrast the spatial scientific tradition to the previous cultural landscape and traditional regional geography methodologies. This comparison illustrates the fundamental contrasts in their epistemological foundations, techniques, and spatial concepts. Second, the paper investigates the emergence of behavioral and humanistic geography in the 1970s, examining the elements that influenced their growth. This part looks into the growing realization of human complexity and behavior, and how these viewpoints provided a vital critique and expansion of the previous spatial scientific paradigm. Finally, the paper looks critically at the evolution of structuralist and structurationist approaches to geography. By contrasting these frameworks, the debate highlights their contributions to understanding the interplay of structure and agency in spatial study. To achieve these goals, the study gives a thorough overview and examination of the epistemological, methodological, and spatial concepts inherent in each tradition. These transformations and their repercussions are illustrated using contemporary literature and geographical examples.

**Key Words:** Geographic thought, cultural landscape, traditional regional geography, spatial science, behavioral geography, humanistic geography, structuralism, structuration, epistemology, methodology, space.

## Introduction

Geographic thought evolved during the twentieth century, with substantial alterations in its underlying concepts. This section compares and contrasts the spatial science tradition to prior cultural landscape and traditional regional geography approaches. To provide a thorough understanding, we will first present an introduction of each subject, along with pertinent examples, before critically comparing and contrasting them in a final discussion section. Cultural landscape geography, which emerged in the early twentieth century, stresses the evident impact of human activities on the natural environment. It focuses on how people interact with their surroundings, resulting in landscapes that reflect cultural beliefs, customs, and socioeconomic activity. Traditional regional geography, which emerged about the same time, seeks to characterize and analyze the unique characteristics of individual regions. This approach combines physical, cultural, and economic components to create a comprehensive understanding of various topics.

In contrast, the spatial science tradition, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, promotes a more scientific and quantitative approach to geography. This paradigm shift sought to improve the rigor and objectivity of geographic research by employing statistical tools, models, and ideas derived from the natural sciences. Spatial science investigates patterns, processes, and relationships within spatial distributions, using methods like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to examine spatial data. The next sections will provide thorough descriptions and examples of cultural landscape geography, traditional regional geography, and spatial science. The final debate will critically explore their epistemological and methodological distinctions, as well as their conceptualizations of space and place, to better understand the paradigmatic alterations that have influenced the discipline of geography.

## Cultural Landscape: An Overview

The cultural landscape tradition in geography arose in opposition to environmental determinism and possibilism, emphasizing culture's role as a transformative agent of nature.

Carl Sauer, a significant character in this tradition, promoted the concept through his research, particularly first at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and then at the University of California, Berkeley. Sauer rejected the deterministic assumption that the environment alone shaped human activities, arguing that culture considerably modifies observable Earth aspects, resulting in cultural landscapes. Sauer's concept of "man-land relationships," as articulated by Taffe (1974), emphasizes how cultural presence over time affects the physical form of landscapes. For example, Denevan (1992) showed how Native Americans changed their environment through vegetation changes and other earth-modifying techniques. Sauer chose the term "region" over "landscape" to stress the active role humans play in altering their environments. This tradition emphasizes on distinguishing separate locations and landscapes, as well as evaluating the civilizations within them, emphasizing their differences rather than commonalities.

The cultural landscape tradition's epistemology is essentially subjective because it requires observation-based interpretations, which can lead to researcher bias (Graham et al., 2010). Cultural landscape proponents use both idiographic and empirical methodologies. Idiographic approaches use qualitative judgments to describe disparities in various geographic factors (Visser & Jones III, 2010), whereas empirical methods use knowledge gained via observation without formal theoretical frameworks (Rhoads & Wilson, 2010). Extensive field surveys, historical accounts, documents, archeology, and maps are frequently included in empirical descriptions. Sauer's article "Barrens of Kentucky" (1927) typifies this strategy, which relies on comprehensive field observations. The cultural landscape tradition regards space as relative, describing landscapes in terms of other aspects. It also largely relies on historical recognition, as history is viewed as shaping and affecting culture. Sauer's research on the historical geography of frontier regions in the western United States, which looks at vegetation, settlement patterns, and land change linkages, emphasizes the relevance of historical context in cultural landscape studies (Sauer, 1930).

### **An Overview of Traditional Regional Geography**

While traditional regional geography and the cultural landscape tradition have certain assessment qualities in common, they also have important distinctions that should be noted. Regional geography developed through the contributions of important proponents including Mackinder, Herbertson, de la Blache, and Carl Sauer. It emerged from study conducted in Europe and North America in the 1930s, and Richard Hartshorne was one of its most notable proponents. These researchers proposed that changes on Earth's surface reflect patterns that humans, as active agents, display in their occupation of space. The emphasis that regional geography places on defining the guiding concepts of a region sets it apart from cultural landscape geography. By using these concepts, regional geographers sought to identify more general categories of regions, such as nodal, functional, or formal. The focus on methodical regional categorization is in opposition to the cultural landscape approach, which gives precedence to the distinct attributes of individual regions.

An other noteworthy distinction is the notion of exceptionalism. Exceptionalism was generally frowned upon in traditional regional geography. The idea of exceptionalism proposed that history and geography were essentially distinct from other sciences, with history giving narratives of events and geography explaining spatial patterns. Regional geography emphasized the significance of spatial patterns in comprehending human activity, while history concentrated on the temporal sequence of events, in order to combine these disciplines. Traditional regional geography aimed to provide a more comprehensive view of the link between persons and their environments by opposing exceptionalism and bridging the gap between spatial and historical studies. This tradition's distinctive contributions to the larger subject of geography are highlighted by its emphasis on the integration of spatial and historical perspectives together with systematic regional classification.

### **Spatial Science: A Scientific Approach to Geography**

Often called "scientific" geography, spatial science first appeared in the late 1950s as a challenge to conventional regional geography. Mathematical rigor and empirical methodology, according to proponents of spatial science, would improve the precision and legitimacy of geographic research. Spatial science, which was dominated by positivism, rationalism, and empiricism, placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of measurable and observable phenomena, especially through the use of mathematical formulas and algorithms. By the middle of the 1960s, spatial science—which emphasizes quantifiable attributes like position, distance, and patterns—had taken over as the dominant paradigm. This method looked for causality in geographical phenomena and insisted that mathematical proof was necessary for research to be considered scientifically acceptable. Spatial scientists transformed both academic research and practical applications of geography by rigorously adhering to the scientific method.

Researchers originally created ideas in the deductive, idiographic process of spatial science, based on precise observations and measurable facts. They then developed theories that had a direct bearing on the phenomenon they were researching. Models with an emphasis on repeatability were developed and tested using exacting mathematical techniques. After successful models were developed, laws explaining the phenomenon were created. On the other hand, several nomothetic, inductive scientists used their methods. This method started with a hypothesis and proceeded to build and test a model. The notion was subsequently put to use repeatedly through testing, which finally resulted in the creation of laws. The significance of theoretical building and repeatability was emphasized by both approaches. Within the scientific community, the goal of spatial science's scientific approach to geography was to make it more broadly accessible and technically sound. Spatial scientists aimed to establish geography as a subject with the same empirical and methodological standards as the natural sciences by following these strict procedures.

### **Methodological Spectrum in Geography: Cultural Landscape, Regional Geography, and Spatial Science**

The preceding sections discussed the cultural landscape, regional geography, and spatial science traditions in geography. These traditions differ greatly in their approaches and methodology. Cultural landscape and regional geography

stress broad ideas and frequently make subjective assumptions, relying on qualitative approaches and descriptive statistics. In contrast, spatial science seeks objective results through "hard science," which includes mathematical rigor, logic, and stringent quantitative methodologies. Cultural landscape and regional geographers, such as Denevan (1992), concentrate on the interaction of human activity and the physical environment, stressing process over pattern. They define distinct geographical traits and human-environmental connections through qualitative assessments and substantial fieldwork. This approach starkly contrasts with the spatial science tradition, represented by Dacey (1960), which favors pattern over process and frequently eliminates the human-environment.

Spatial scientists such as Kariel (1963) and Morrill (1965) emphasize the relevance of mathematics and statistics in obtaining precise measurements of distance, position, and spatial patterns. Their positivist techniques integrate geography with the natural sciences' empirical norms, with the goal of producing repeatable and generalizable findings. When comparing the two traditions, spatial science emphasizes mathematical rigor and objectivity, whereas cultural landscape and regional geography are more subjective and qualitative. Cultural landscape and regional geographers see regions as distinct entities formed by historical and cultural processes, whereas spatial scientists use mathematical models to discover universal spatial patterns. Finally, the cultural landscape/regional geography and spatial science traditions are at opposite extremes of the epistemological and methodological spectrum in geography, reflecting distinct goals and approaches to comprehending the Earth's surface and human-environment interactions.

### **Emergence of Behavioral and Humanistic Traditions in Geography**

The early 1970s saw the birth of behavioral and humanistic geography, a substantial divergence from the discipline's mainstream positivist and deterministic methods. Behavioral geography attempted to comprehend human behavior and decision-making processes within spatial environments. It used quantitative approaches to investigate geographical patterns of human activities and interactions, with the goal of predicting and explaining human behavior using empirical data. In contrast, humanistic geography emphasizes individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of their surroundings. It used qualitative methods like ethnography and phenomenology to investigate how people create and perceive space, prioritizing human agency and lived experiences over statistical analysis. Kevin Lynch's behavioral studies of environmental perception, and Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic research into sense of place, are two examples from this lineage. These researchers and others helped to raise awareness of the intricacies inherent in human-environmental relationships, challenging earlier assumptions. These traditions flourished in the 1970s due to a variety of circumstances, including frustration with positivist geography's constraints, increased interdisciplinary influences from psychology and sociology, and a broader societal trend toward individualism and cultural diversity. This age constituted a watershed moment in geography, as it broadened its theoretical and methodological horizons, embracing multiple views to better understand the human experience of space and place.

### **Conclusion**

This paper critically evaluated the evolution of geographic philosophy, with a focus on cultural landscape, traditional regional geography, spatial science, behavioral and humanistic geography, as well as structuralist and structurationist perspectives. Cultural landscape and traditional regional geography traditions are fundamentally different from spatial science, notably in terms of epistemologies and techniques. Spatial science's emphasis on quantitative analysis and positivism stands in stark contrast to the qualitative and interpretative techniques of cultural landscape and regional geography. The shift to more human-centered techniques in geography arose as a reaction to the Quantitative Revolution, which many people felt oversimplified human behavior to numerical facts. This critique sparked renewed interest in the social sciences, highlighting the significance of comprehending human decision-making mechanisms. Behavioral and humanistic geography arose from this environment, with the goal of investigating the intricacies of human behavior and subjective experiences in spatial contexts. Furthermore, the cultural movement in America throughout the 1960s and 1970s encouraged more radical views to geography, which included larger societal structures and their impact on decision-making and progress. These methods emphasized the need of taking into account the social and cultural factors that influence human-environment interactions. The traditions and methodologies explored in this article show the dynamic nature of spatial thought and its ability to adapt to broader intellectual and cultural developments. With recent technological breakthroughs over the last two decades, geography has continued to evolve, and more paradigm shifts are expected. This continued evolution suggests that geography will remain a dynamic and adaptable science, incorporating new approaches and views to better grasp the world's intricacies.

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