

2 People, landscapes and time

The region is a medal struck in the likeness of its people

Paul Vidal de la Blache

Cultural landscapes, culture areas and the 'regional personality'

Material culture, artefacts and the landscapes

Distribution, diffusion of cultural forms

Anyone looking around the world can see a vast mosaic of different peoples with different customs and beliefs. This has been the starting point of a whole tradition of cultural geographies, concerned with the landscapes created by different groups in different places. This chapter will outline some of these approaches. In particular it will highlight the *material culture* of these groups as a process of transforming the environment. It will do this by following the work of the Berkeley school and looking at the commonalities it shares with the *Annales* school in France and the local history approaches in the UK. In each, geographers have studied the role of different groups in shaping their landscape into characteristic forms or cultural regions, marked by landscapes typical of the group in question. This in turn will raise questions about the relationship of 'culture' to people. The chapter will then look at how we might interpret such landscapes through the idea of a palimpsest. This will bring together the development of landscapes through time and the spatial diffusion of culture – the spread of ideas, practices and techniques. Such issues form the last section concentrating on the movement of cultures between the New and Old Worlds.

The changing face of the earth

The first issue to address is what is meant by landscape and what role it has played in cultural geography. Landscape above all implies a collective

shaping of the earth over time. Landscapes are not individual property; they reflect a society's – a culture's – beliefs, practices and technologies. Landscapes reflect the coming together of all these elements just as cultures do, since cultures are also not individual property and can only exist socially. Much research has looked at how the landscape shapes and is shaped by that particular social organisation. This draws on an ancient geographical tradition known as chorography: the study of how landscapes bring different processes together in unique patterns. It is thus often suggested to be an *idiographic* approach – in that it is less interested in general laws than individual and unique outcomes of combinations of circumstances. The founding figure of the Berkeley school approach, Carl Sauer, considered this in a 1925 essay entitled 'The Morphology of Landscape'. He suggested geography had to start not from some idea of spatial laws, derived in some manner from the natural sciences, but from the basic experience of areal differentiation. Geography was thus based around the diversity of landscapes as 'naively given sections of reality – not a sophisticated thesis' (Sauer 1962: 317).

Sauer was not arguing for empiricism, that is, merely collecting facts about places. Instead he was arguing for a science that asked how individual landscapes came to take on their shapes. The analysis would be rigorous but there never would be some general law explaining all the outcomes. In particular what Sauer was criticising was a very influential school in the early twentieth century, led famously in the United States by Ellen Semple, a school based around *environmental determinism*. This school saw the development of cultures as a process of human adaptation to basically climatic factors. This approach has come under relentless criticism since the 1920s on many grounds – not least its incipient racism. In essence it sought to explain the different cultures of the globe through a neo-Darwinian response to environmental stimuli. Thus it suggested the northern hemisphere temperate regions had 'naturally' achieved the greatest cultural and economic development because the climate forced the populace to work, but rewarded such labour – unlike the tropics, where it suggested people had not needed to labour, and the extreme north where existence was so marginal the possibilities for accumulating wealth were limited. As such it formed a self-serving justification for European imperialism, making a process of political conquest appear to be a natural order (see also Chapter 6). Sauer was especially antagonistic to this theory. To him it went against evidence about the diversity of cultures and subjected them all to a monocausal explanation:

Geography under the banner of environmental [determinism] represents a dogma, the assertion of a faith that brings rest to a **spirit** vexed by the riddle of the universe. It was a new evangel for the age of reason which set up its particular **form** of adequate order and even ultimate purpose.
(Sauer 1925, in 1962: 348)

What prompted his scepticism about many such theories was not just an understanding of the complexity of many cultures, but also a dislike for approaches that reduced this complexity to only one factor driving the whole system. Sauer retained a scepticism of any theories that looked not at the region as a whole but saw it as a system producing certain isolable end products. To Sauer the region, as expressed in its landscape as an ensemble, was the end product. Thus either monocausal explanation or breaking the landscape into particular products to look for 'scientific laws' seemed misguided since 'the complex reality of areal association was sacrificed in either case to a rigorous dogma of materialist cosmology' (Sauer 1962: 321).

Sauer thus appealed to an idiographic idea of geography – that is, study the unique configurations of land and life rather than **seeking** general laws, the so-called *nomothetic* approach (see also Chapter 7). He suggested focusing on the landscape as a synthetic vision, capturing the whole operation of a local culture. Sauer felt nomothetic approaches lost this sense of the living **totality** of culture by breaking it into factors and elements. Thus in a remarkable episode, Sauer was sharply critical of the Rockefeller Foundation's promotion and funding of high-yield maize varieties in Mexico in the 1940s. He was so critical as to be called 'an antiquarian' seeking to preserve old varieties as curios or museum pieces, and locking the local populace in the past. Sauer for his part was more obviously concerned that the local varieties of maize formed part of a highly developed local system, and he was thus wary that it could not be treated as one variable or tampered with without causing profound changes elsewhere. Moreover, his studies of the origins of domestic plants had led him to consider the diversity of varieties as a defining feature of 'cultural hearths' – the centres of innovation. He feared that imposing one Western grain would destroy this diversity bred over centuries and able to cope with specific ecological and cultural niches. He was thus **talking** of biodiversity before the idea became fashionable.

It may seem odd for a cultural geographer to be arguing over crop species and gene pools, but for Sauer these were very much a part of culture. They represented the material expressions and embodiments of social processes and knowledge. His typically pithy summary of the issue

is worth noting, when he commented that 'if pack trails are geographic phenomena, the pack trains that use them are also' (1962: 369). That is, the materials used in, and the knowledge and **skills** that enable, say, planting and harvesting are just as much part of a culture as knowledge and skills about, say, writing or the structure of social beliefs. Indeed they are often profoundly linked – hence Sauer's dislike of looking at isolated factors. For instance, take the first known examples of writing in Mesopotamia: the clay tablets appear to be a tax or tribute record about a grain harvest. The farming practices of ancient Mesopotamia and the rise of dense permanent agricultural settlements have to be seen in the light of technologies of writing, and the control and storage of knowledge by elite elements, enabling the extraction of a surplus to feed the first urban settlements. What this suggests is that the issues of **skills** and knowledge must be seen as part of a whole system that shapes a particular landscape (Box 2.1).

Notice how this definition binds together the material and the symbolic. So, as we saw above, the knowledge and **skills** of one generation may be embodied in the strains of crops it produces and passes on to the next – they are artefacts of cultures. Likewise landscapes are seen as both a product of cultures and as reproducing them through time. Sauer's work suggests that artefacts may be agents of change alongside the people that use them – the tools are not simply products of people but also help shape what those people do. It is perhaps obvious then why Sauer distrusted approaches that saw 'independent' factors and variables and also why he turned to the idea of landscape and cultural regions to get round this.

Box 2.1

Cultures, their material and reproduction

A useful summary of this position was provided by the anthropologist Alfred **Kroeber**: 'Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for **behaviour** acquired and transmitted by **symbols**, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action' (Kroeber and **Kluckholm** 1952, cited in **Zelinsky** 1973).

Regional personalities, cultural areas and landscape

For Sauer, the cultural region and its matching landscape was thus to form the **cornerstone** of analysis, forming the 'unit concept of geography' and defined as 'an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural' (1962: 321). It is a level at which the interaction of all the parts can be seen as a whole, but is equally defined against other areas where a different landscape can be found. So 'the unit of observation must therefore be defined as the area over which a functionally coherent way of life dominates.' (1962: 364). This sense of an integrated area corresponds with the work of Vidal de la Blache and the *Annales school* in France, where they sought to identify a *regional personality* or a *genre de vie*, expressed in the landscape. Sauer wrote approvingly of their regional monographs espousing 'the cultural landscape as the culminating expression of the organic area' (1962: 321). Again there is an emphasis on looking for the different cultures around the globe, and looking at their individual forms as a synthetic whole. The region was thus defined, not from physical characteristics as was typical in pre-war British geography, but from the way of life organised across those features (see Figure 2.1). The cultural region would almost inevitably not map neatly on to the physical, since most cultures centred on the borders of different physical ecosystems so they could utilise both (Sauer 1962: 364). In this Sauer drew on some old approaches to geography going back to Von Humboldt and beyond. Thus at the outset of his 1941 essay, 'The Personality of Mexico', Sauer states:

This is an excursion into the oldest tradition of geography. For whatever the problems of the day that may claim the attention of the specialist and which result in more precise systems of inspection and more formal systems of comparison, there remains a form of geographic curiosity that is never contained by systems. It is the art of seeing how land and life have come to differ from one part of the earth to another.

(Sauer 1962: 105)

The conception of personality here is that of a particular social system embracing the whole dynamic of land and life. In this sense Sauer is not suggesting a totally personal art, and thus demumng from the Italian philosopher Bernadetto Croce's view that 'the geographer who is describing a landscape has the same task as a landscape painter'. Rather than seeking to capture a particular view on landscape, Sauer advocated seeking out the typical or generic landscape that went with a particular culture.

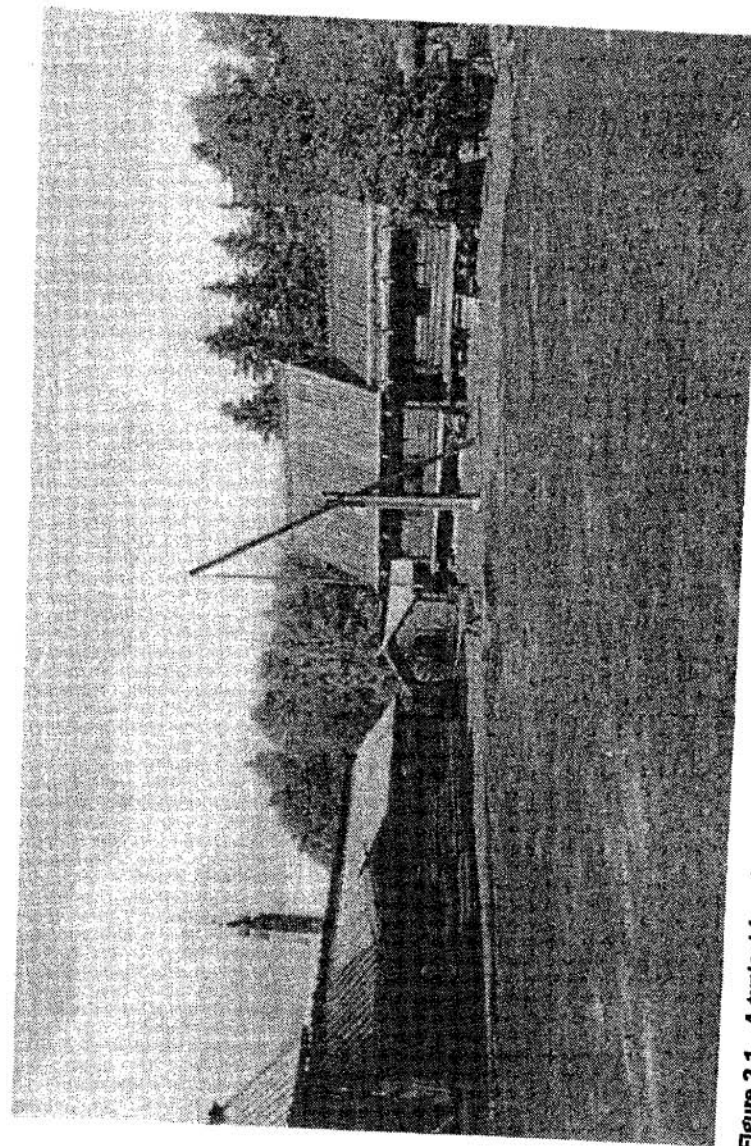


Figure 2.1 A typical farm layout preserved in Anders Zorn's Gammelgaard, from Dalarna, Sweden. The pattern of buildings is typical to the area and integrated into a seasonal rhythm with summer pastures. These buildings were built over several hundred years, and comprise typical forms and functions for a rural household with an outside cookhouse at far right and later watchmakers workshop at far left. In the middle is the typical well and store houses. The buildings go on to form an enclosed courtyard entered through arches.

However, what makes up the distinct personality of a region is not just an assemblage of parts but the way they are put together. The geographer thus would delve into particulars before returning to the synthetic level of the region. Thus Sauer's account of pre-Conquest Mexico suggests two typical cultural landscapes; one **central/southern** cultural region contrasted with a northern one. The dense pattern of villages, or pueblos, with highly intensive land utilisation in the central region supported great cities (often larger than their European counterparts) through a system of trade and surplus extraction. In contrast, there were already abandoned and ruined cities in the north by the time of the Spanish attack, where 'barbarians' had encroached and established a very different cultural system incapable of organising non-agricultural urban centres.

This typification of Mexico at the time of the Conquest suggests the elements one would look for in a cultural system. There would be distinctive arrangements of people and land, of basic livelihood, central assumptions about what is valuable or proper and thus aspirations – if not actual performance. Thus high Mexican culture was marked by intensive maize production, which sustained urban dwellers and those with non-agricultural livelihoods, which in turn required the acceptance of an Aztec elite and their extraction of surplus. This pattern enabled the Spanish to set up a colonial system of surplus extraction on the back of the Aztec system in central Mexico.

Others have looked at the invasion and colonisation of north America by Europeans for further examples of cultural regions. Thus Meinig's (1986) account of the colonisation of the Eastern Seaboard looked at the different cultural areas there. Thus French Acadian settlers had a particular sort of regional personality corresponding to a peasant culture, with subsistence production, land reclamation and dispersed settlements that was markedly different from the trading and **entrepôt** areas set up as part of the fur trade. Equally Zelinsky (1973) has charted these different cultural areas through the persistence of various distinctive traits – such as house or barn styles. Likewise there have been long-standing arguments over the development of a frontier culture, with suggestions that this led to a flattened social hierarchy and a culture of personal achievement linked to various strains of Protestantism. These cases illustrate the process of both adapting a culture to a new land and shaping that landscape through various cultural preferences. The starkest contrast is perhaps this individual settler model of dispersed farmsteads with the plantation landscape of the tobacco and cotton lands to the south, with the obscenely hierarchical relationships involved in slavery. At this point,

though, we need to think of the two parts of these interpretations where, on the one hand, they seek to develop ideas of cultural regions and landscapes, while, on the other, they chart the spread and change of cultures. Let us consider these parts in turn.

Cultural areas as a 'super-organic' metaphor?

A controversy over the Berkeley school approach to cultural areas developed from the late 1970s. Principally, Sauer is charged with treating culture as a 'super-organic' actor. That is, culture was treated not just holistically but as a single entity, as the region became too easily equated with a single actor without internal differentiation. To illustrate the problems with this we might ask whether it is justifiable to view the cultures of oppressed groups, be they the enslaved blacks in the USA or the colonised Indians, as being part of the same culture as their oppressors. This is important when we consider how black slaves were forcibly dispossessed of their own names (given their owners' surnames and **christian** names chosen for them) and how they struggled to develop their own culture in spirituals and other rituals. Can we say Amerindians who were having their religions destroyed as pagan or devilish products were part of one culture with the missionaries? The idea of a morphology as an 'organic or quasi-organic quality' of completeness (Sauer 1962: 326) tends to obscure these power relations.

This becomes especially problematic in work on contemporary or urban societies. The first question is about sub-cultures and their relationship to each other and a larger whole. Thus Zelinsky (1973) argues that all the sub-cultures around different artefacts, different cultural meanings and forms in the United States can still be grouped into a whole around the central values of individualism, market economics and so forth. He cautions against applying statements about the whole to any particular individual – which would be an example of an ecological fallacy, assuming what applies to the group as a whole applies to each member. But the central problem is that culture is both of individuals and beyond them. Sauer did not advocate an uncritical use of the 'organic analogy' but only a working device that seemed to help in the cases he studied: '[m]orphologic study does not necessarily affirm an organism in the biological sense . . . but only organized unit concepts that are related' (Sauer 1962: 326). The question is whether the biological metaphor helps or whether it does not obscure the power relations within and between

cultures. Moreover, culture is not always organically created, but can be invented or promoted or imposed as will be seen in Chapter 3 which will expand on how some different approaches see culture. The landscape or regional model also tends to downplay individual human agency – by focusing on the collective shaping of the landscape. The unit of analysis is the area or region or landscape not the actual living human beings. Equally it does not gel very well with the rapid changes of culture in urban societies. There are, though, connections with the school of urban ecology, analysing urban sub-cultures as found in discrete territorial spaces in the city. However, these studies do force us to think how the landscape can record change over time as cultures evolve and leave their own distinctive traces which accumulate into a palimpsest.

Landscape as a palimpsest

The term palimpsest derives from medieval writing blocks. It refers to where an original inscription would be erased and another written over it, again and again. The earlier inscriptions were never fully erased so over time the result was a composite – a palimpsest representing the sum of all the erasures and over-writings. Thus we might see an analogy with a culture inscribing itself on an area to suggest the landscape as the sum of erasures, accretions, anomalies and redundancies over time. As Sauer (1962: 333) put it, 'We cannot form an idea of landscape except in terms of its time relations as well as its space relations. It is in continuous process of development or of dissolution and replacement'.

There are obvious echoes in the local history approach of Hoskins (e.g. 1955) or the historical geography of Darby (1948) in the UK. In each case the landscape is the record of change, as cultural values change so new forms are required. Thus we can look at the feudal peasant system inscribed on the landscape of the open field system, marking the ox-drawn plough skills in the ridges and furrows, the relationship to the land in the collective management of the fields and the nucleated settlements. Equally we can see the rise of yeoman farming and mercantile interests in the enclosure of these fields, the spread of hedgerows and sheep leaving ridges and furrows as fossils in the landscape. The pre-existence of enclosed field systems in the south-west of the UK tells us the social structure there never totally fitted the Midlands feudal three-field model. The pattern of accretion, change and redundant forms suggests a lot about the evolution of the landscape and the local culture. Again it

implies a landscape shaped and shaping the people living there, becoming a bank of cultural memories – some still in use, others as residues of past practices and knowledges. Above all it emphasises the link of people and land. A great deal of argument has gone on over how to look at such a palimpsest – as a series of layers or as temporal process. It remains a useful starting point in conceiving of a landscape, but again it tends to regional types rather than individual actors. Moreover as a temporal account of a place over time, it has to be set in terms of the second strand of landscape interpretation – the spatial diffusion of change.

Cultural diffusion

Geographers have been fascinated by diffusion. Hagerstrand and others studied 'innovation' spreading among a static population, and tracked particular innovations at the scale of individual adopters. The Berkeley school was perhaps more interested in the movement and adaptation of cultures alongside specific artefacts and focused on general change rather than individuals. What this has given us is a series of rich accounts, especially focused around the European invasion and conquest in the Americas. This was a prime example of innovation and the reshaping of the landscape, origins and transformations, and evolution resulting cultures in historical and geographical setting.

Zelinsky (1973) charted the complex pattern of different types of settlers, with different cultural 'freight', arriving in different parts of the Eastern seaboard. The Acadian settlements mentioned before represent a good example of the sorts of analyses of origins that can be undertaken. The Acadians settled in an area where the indigenous peoples were non-agricultural so there was less of a conflict over land; what is more they reclaimed land from the salt marshes rather than clearing forests. The landscape created by them around the Bay of Fundy reflected a particular peasant society that drew on the agricultural knowledge and practices the settlers brought from Poitou and Aunis in France where they had seen the reclamation of marshland on the French Biscayan coast – but this in itself was a technique imported to France from the Netherlands. The movement of techniques was thus inscribed on the landscapes created. Not only that but where settlement areas were often refashioned on the model of the home region, trading landscapes were notable for being unlike the home country's – perhaps explained in the interest of trade in seeking out what is unobtainable at home.

This then exposes not only a series of different landscapes of settlers and traders in different areas but also a series of different contact zones with the indigenous population. For instance the landscape of the plains, of the buffalo-hunting tribes, was changed ahead of European invasion, by the diffusion of the horse and more efficient weapons from the south.

Likewise, the First Nations of Canada were drawn into a trading circuit based on beaver pelts before they were colonised. This trade became so lucrative it sparked off **territorial** clashes among peoples and led to tribes attempting to dispossess others of their land in order to secure the beaver population – intensifying local conflicts, **transforming** the objectives and stakes in such disputes, and, as firearms spread westwards, increasing the means for violence. The gradual hunting to extinction of beaver – in river basin after river basin – to feed the European market led the hunters, and thus the conflict, to spread ever further west.

Importantly the 'actors' in all this do not appear as 'super-organic cultures'. In describing these contact zones as heterogeneous and hybrid forms, this is one of the first approaches in geography to look at the change in cultures as groups interact. Furthermore, it allows a role for non-human agents. Thus the 'firearms' that percolated westward and the horses arriving on the plains were all agents of cultural change. What are normally treated as objects or products of culture, its artefacts, are shown to be very important agents of change. More unusually it also allows a role for micro-organisms. No one can look at the history of European invasion of the Americas without recognising the significance of an often prior invasion of European diseases that depopulated areas, destabilised cultures reducing their capacity to resist invasion and often challenged the religious and local authorities – a position of authority that European missionaries then could step into. In all these elements, then, this diffusional approach seems to give a sophisticated view in many ways of how cultures might be seen to spread and change. We can see this in the example of the plantation landscape in the Americas.

ations, people and products

The plantation landscape represents the coming together of a web of technologies and cultures to form a characteristic pattern based on highly unequal land control, matched with an orientation to export crops, embedded in a global system of extraction, and sustained by a impoverished and often enslaved workforce. But this landscape did not

appear out of nowhere or all at once. Initial European experiments in tropical agriculture were fragile indeed and often failed. It was the Portuguese who pioneered the plantation – not in the Americas but in the Atlantic islands off the African coast. It was they who, in the face of huge settler mortality rates, began to use African slaves. The Portuguese presence in the islands, especially Cape Verde, with local and mulatto (mixed ethnicity) populations gave them access to the intra-African slave trade, which they transformed in scale. By 1600, estimates suggest that these islands had extracted over 275,000 slaves, with many for the plantations on the islands but at least half sent on to the Americas and perhaps 50,000 sent to Europe (Meinig 1986: 24). It was on these islands that enslaved black labour, sugar cane and the plantation system were brought together. The islands then provided the model and testing ground of the plantation landscape as it emerged in the Americas. It was a very different model from the one the English state was developing through its 'plantations' in Ireland, sending settlers loyal to the state in order to exert control, reallocating lands to create Anglicised administrative districts, and carve up the regions of Ireland in new ways. Such plantations proved difficult to transpose into the Americas – as shown by the rather feeble British attempts to do so – though one might argue this plantation landscape finds its echoes two hundred years later as Jefferson mapped North America into geometric parcels of land for an agrarian settler landscape (see Chapter 7).

Summary

This chapter has attempted to illustrate some of the original approaches to the landscape. It has emphasised the concern with a holistic approach, and possible pitfalls stemming from that, and the connection to material culture. Also, both the *Annales* and Berkeley schools were concerned with the *longue durée*, that is changes over a lengthy periods of time – making both difficult to apply in sites of rapid change. The later sections on the diffusion emphasise the mixing and changing of cultures and the changing patterns they impose on the landscape. This does begin to challenge some ideas of organic people–land relationships, though. For a start, it suggests the need for ideas about social power, about the role of the state, and about the rapidity of change and the circuits and connections of different groups. For instance, it is possible to see an Atlantic circuit of trade sustaining an Atlantic **working** class, to see the commonalities and communication of ideas around the trading routes of the Atlantic as creating a disparate but coherent culture. In Chapter 10, different approaches that look to deal with these issues are outlined: **rethinking** culture in an era of global

communication, of rapid and often perennial human mobility, of vast metropolitan societies mixing people from many origins. Here cultures may not so much be regional personalities evolving over time, but rapidly changing sets of relationships. Relationships may not form bounded organic spatial areas but may be between distant peoples or by multiple cultures existing in the same place. In order to deal with ideas of power, the next chapter looks at how the landscape can be deliberately shaped and represented to create meanings and symbols.

Further reading

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