

PETER LANG



Curiosity,
Inquiry,



AND THE

Geographical
Imagination



DANIEL W. GADE

PREFACE

In this evocation of the joys of intellectual curiosity, I have intertwined essays and personal memory to bear witness to how the voracious drive to know can engage the human mind about the world. The empirical assumption behind that knowing is the personal necessity to engage in the activities of learning and questing. A diverse series of topical investigations undertaken over more than 40 years about place, people or process offers a certain view of knowledge that together falls under the scope of geography. Anchoring the sheer will to know as catalyst is the unfolding of an organic process of learning through time from an inchoate notion to a fleshed out piece of research. The experience of moving along multiple trails of wondering has opened my thinking about the larger meaning of the human desire to know for its own sake. Two romantic perspectives form the grand assumption behind this book. One is that learning cannot be isolated from motivation and that one wants to begin to understand his or her own life. I contend that psychological forces explain best the personal configurations in the pursuit of learning, though without discounting the role of social forces including the inspiration derived from others. The other perspective is the romantic need to understand one's own life, which comes through individualizing experience and, paradoxically, universalizing it at the same time.

To allay any possible misinterpretation, I wish here at the start to define the terms of the title of this work. By curiosity I mean the pursuit of knowl-

edge and by inquiry, I refer to that pursuit in an academic calling. The expression “geographical imagination” conveys a distinctive way of thinking that scholars and others construct to learn about the world at various scales. Geographical imagination refers to a particular sensitivity toward place, landscape, and the spatial patterns of the earth we live on. In those dimensions lie the human and non-human as they occur in diverse cultures and life-sustaining activities. Geographical imagination is a subset of larger conceptualizations of the human effort to think creatively.

Four main objectives characterize this work. One is to make explicit how curiosity becomes the driving phenomenon behind scholarly research as a way of inviting readers to ponder questions of inner and outer motivations not in the abstract, but through a concrete examination of a specific trajectory. A second goal is to communicate research as a continual process from the hatching of ideas to completion of some of them as a finished piece of writing. Where intellectual curiosity leads is always uncertain. To those who think only in terms of “results,” this objective has a subversive quality that stands counter to how many people view research. An instrumentalizing mentality that has gained continuous ground in recent decades has distorted the research process by emphasizing large grants and teams of participants. Thirdly, I initiate a conversation how life and scholarship are bound together by recognizing the underlying metaphysic of romanticism in understanding the quest to know and its execution. Lastly, this book also seeks to explicate the particular perspective of a scholarly domain, cultural-historical geography, both by my own fieldwork and by reference to its development and seminal figures. This work also becomes a template into issues of disciplinary practice, the culture of scholarship, and the university as institutional facilitator. Much about this book transcends any particular discipline to offer food for thought on the inquisitive spirit that merges science, art, philosophy and history.

The logic of the book draws readers through three main registers of the inquisitive spirit. Part One delves into curiosity in general, historic, exemplary and archetypal terms. Part Two focuses on the domain of cultural-historical geography, its founder and inspirational exemplar Carl O. Sauer for whom epistemic curiosity was a supreme value, and how this circle of affinity has centered on intrinsic scholarly motivation. By offering a model of how to rematerialize geography by highlighting the empirical fact, this subfield still serves as an antidote to the extravagant theorizations over recent decades. Part Three provides a personalized and introspective account of how an exuberant approach to scholarly investigation, spawning of innumerable questions, goes forward as a

process. The chapters in this section discuss a wide range of geographical topics at various stages of development, but in each case suggest how scholarly trajectories actually function: in fits and starts where some topics take priority and others are necessarily pushed back. Like individuals, any particular research topic is always in a state of becoming.

In this work I have blended the empirical, philosophical and reflexive to elucidate the meaning of the scholarly quest beyond the addition of knowledge. As such, it is a polyvocal narrative in which personal rhetoric of expression and evocation raises issues evoked by fact-based reportage. By contextualizing geographical knowledge not just as a written text, but as one authored, the division of subject and object is blurred. Autobiographical reflection in these pages is a form of reflexivity which seeks to tie the researcher to the researched. Michel de Montaigne's declaration that he myself was the subject of his book ("je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre") resonates in these pages that follow. It is meant to suggest that scholars bring their personal values to their inquiries even when they assume they are not. Research topics, pet ideas, and the emphasis on certain facts and not others are all fragments of some autobiography. How curiosity enters into the inner biography of individual practitioners allows a deeper meaning of the scholarly quest. When the epistemic quest pervades the existence of those under its spell, scholarly learning becomes an expression of passionate thought and an act of discernment. Rather than the scholar as simply a producer of knowledge, he or she is also an agent of intellectual curiosity as a moral virtue. To discuss the experience of scholarship that incorporates a self-reflective awareness becomes a way to explain a certain kind of intellectual commitment and a particular way of looking at the world. The personal becomes a way to grasp also how geographers think about things that silent authorship does not reveal. Too often, emotion and cognition are perceived as distinct when, in fact, wonder, inspiration, and intuition tie these two domains together.

To understand the broader meaning of this five-decade long journey of learning could only have come with age. As Schopenhauer is reputed to have said, the first 40 years of life give us the text; the next 30 supply the commentary. At age 70, one knows twice as much as one knew at age 35 and has accumulated a capital of *savoir-faire* that is appropriate to communicate. Reflection on that sweep through a lifetime requires the exercise of memory and an evaluation of its larger meaning by teasing out philosophical strands. Decade seven elicits the coherence of a romantic paradigm which decades four and five could not and decade six did not. The *troisième* âge heightens appreciation that

not only is everything we know suffused with the past, but also that scholars themselves form part of the historical stream of scholarship even when the topics are focused on learning about the world. It is a recognition that scholarly activity has a personal core that invites attentiveness to the intellectual and creative impulses as much as to what our thinking has discovered.