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CHANGING TRENDS IN THE TEACHING OF GEOGRAPHY – FROM “GEOLOGY TO (NOT QUITE YET) THEOLOGY”?

Abstract: Post 1989, major changes have been made in the teaching of Geography at school. Until then, Geography was expected to provide pupils with “reliable” and “stable” information. For this reason, great emphasis was placed on the astronomical underpinnings of geography, characteristic features of the geographical environment (particularly geological structure and relief) as well as the role of natural conditions in agriculture. In the curriculum, economic issues received a conventional treatment, especially those related to countries of the Communist bloc, while population, social and political issues were only marginally discussed, partly to avoid indoctrination of youth. Contemporary curricula look at the world in a much more dynamic way and put more emphasis on social issues. Examples here include references to electoral geography, conflicts relating to the development of the Amazon Rainforest or various forms of NGO’s aid to the poorest countries. All this means that programmes must be updated on a continuous basis. We are not only supposed to impart knowledge, but also to show pupils how to perceive problems in the world at large, how to observe and form their own opinions.

The scope of geographic studies used to be spitefully summed up as being “from geology to theology”. Today, Geography at school is definitely evolving “from geology” to a more or less satisfactory humanisation of teaching.

Key words: school curricula, evolution after 1989, humanisation of teaching

Since time immemorial, geographers have argued whether geography is a natural or rather a social science. Or perhaps a mathematical and natural science – which would enhance the status of cartography and geoinformation (geoinformatics?)? Or maybe it is in the domain of the humanities? Maybe the

Earth science should be considered as a separate discipline? There are even those say it should be classified as an engineering science! That is, provided geography is a science at all, a premise which is questioned by many geographers who claim that it is one of the *arts* and not *sciences*. Inevitably, this dispute has had to leave its mark on how Geography is taught at school, both with regard to the selection of the teaching contents and, in consequence, the teaching methods. This is an issue of particular importance in Poland in view of the increasing tendency to merge school subjects into blocks and prepare teachers to teach two subjects. How, therefore, should geography be categorised?

In the inter-War period, and long after World War II, the tendency prevailing in Polish schools was to teach individual subjects as distinctly separate branches of study. Geography was taught in the early classes of primary schools, and was always taught as an independent subject. The disputes relating to the classification of sciences were held at the higher levels, much above the level of the school. Although in some schools Geography teachers were also university professors, the majority of teachers completed teacher training at the secondary level. Tertiary education institutions would frequently take a different stance to the classification of geography. For instance, in 1939, there were two bodies specialising in geography at the University of Warsaw: the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Philosophy, and the Department of Anthropogeography at the Faculty of Humanities, whereas the major research centre in economic geography was not the University, but the Warsaw School of Economics [*Szkoła Główna Handlowa*] (Richling et al. 2008). This dichotomy at the University of Warsaw was continued until 1952, when the Institute of Geography was set up at the Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences. By contrast, in Kraków, where, since the time of Wincenty Pol (1849–52), geography was a part of the Faculty of Humanities, in 1945 it was divided into Physical Geography at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and the Department of Anthropogeography (which existed until 1948) at the Faculty of Humanities (Jackowski 2008).

In an effort to unify the organisational structures at universities in the post-War period, and to adapt them to the structures prevailing in the Communist bloc, geography was gradually moved to faculties of mathematics and natural sciences, natural sciences, or those of biology and Earth sciences¹. Even though these changes were introduced using the administrative channels, this was approved, and sometimes supported or in some cases initiated, by geographers, and not only individuals who had their obvious interests in such a transition. This was a period of Stalinist repressions, aimed at the humanities in particular, and geographers were not left out, which was the reason why many repre-

¹ The tendency to set up faculties of Earth sciences or of geography and biology came later.

representatives of the discipline accepted the classification of geography which was alien to them, not wanting to share the tragic fate of Professor Stanisław Gorzuchowski (Liszewski 1998) and some other geographers.

Although slow and much overdue, the changes in the organisation of science did affect the way Geography was taught at school. Starting from the 1950s, the departments and chairs of Physical Geography at universities grew in size, which was accompanied by an increasing share of physical geographers, particularly geomorphologists, among the senior academic staff. University syllabuses included more and more physical geography, and, inevitably, the share of socio-economic geography diminished. Graduates with such an academic background would become school teachers and had a natural preference for the teaching contents they were best familiar with. School curricula and textbooks were evaluated (among others) by scholars who were frequently physical geographers themselves. They formed the core of the teams preparing core curricula until the end of the twentieth century. Social and economic contents in school teaching were also trimmed down for patriotic reasons, so as to reduce the impact of the inevitable political indoctrination involved². It must be borne in mind that school textbooks offered a conventional approach to economic issues, not only with regard to socialist countries which, invariably, were arenas of “all-rounded and dynamic economic development”. In a similar vein, the way capitalist countries were described did not change for many years, and offered an obsolete picture. Characteristically, when describing e.g. the economy of Sweden most attention would be given to agriculture and mining even though these two areas play a minor part in generating the GDP. Population, social and political issues received only peremptory coverage. In effect, in order to curb down indoctrination, content which was characterised by “neutrality of opinion” was promoted, i.e. astronomical foundations of geography, cartography, the structure of the Earth, exo- and endogenous morphological processes, etc. On top of that, a significant share of physical geography in the curriculum was explained by the unspoken paradigm of the day that schools were primarily expected to provide knowledge – knowledge which is solid and permanent. Much less thought was given to – thinking³. In consequence, geography came to be perceived as a subject associated with natural sciences.

² *Poznaj Świat* monthly can here serve as a very telling example (in its prime, the monthly had a circulation of over 100,000). For many years, the November issue was entirely devoted to the Soviet Union. And, even though for 11 months in the year the majority of features in the periodicals tackled topics from regional and human geography, in the November issues all the articles were consistently devoted to physical geography, history of geographic discoveries or ethnographic trivia. Economy-related content would only appear as short notes in the column “Across the Lands and Over the Seas”.

³ Fortunately, we have always had ingenious and dedicated teachers, who helped us go unscathed through many an aberration of the educational system.

Until 1999, this did not have much significance because every subject existed, and was taught, separately. However, when primary school was contracted to six years, which involved the introduction of blocs of subjects for classes (Grades) 4–6 (*Rozporządzenie Ministra...*, 1999), the question about the nature of geography became very pertinent. The efforts undertaken by some educators to preserve its separate character as a subject were most likely doomed from the very start, nor did they receive any staunch support from the academic circles. At the end of the day, Geography, together with Biology, Chemistry and Physics, formed a new subject – Science. Geography remained as a separate subject in the lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*) but it is considered as a subject in the field of natural sciences, with geography issues incorporated into the mathematical and natural science part of the final exam (at present, the natural science part). Even though many aspects of the teaching contents in Science at primary school are typically geographical in nature (which was emphasised especially by Wilczyńska-Wołoszyn 1999), according to the education authorities biologists were teachers best prepared to teach it. This was partly due to stereotyped attitudes of the policy makers, and partly owing to the distrust of Geography teachers about the new subject. Geographers from academia were relatively uninterested in the professional training of Science teachers and did not manifest sufficient involvement during scientific conferences. In effect, we can currently see how geographical content gradually gives way to content associated with other subjects, mainly Physics and Chemistry. The vision of “nature-based geography” seems to be very strongly rooted in the awareness of the education authorities.

Paradoxically, the changes which occurred during this time both in academic geography and in Geography curricula took a completely different course.

Academic geography in Poland is more and more open to the developments in Western Europe, where the academic affiliation of geography varies from country to country. It is sometimes classified as a natural science, but more frequently so as one of the humanities (for instance, in France, it is usually a part of the *Faculté des lettres*, just as is the case in Spanish-speaking countries, and is frequently affiliate with the *Faculty of Arts* in Anglo-Saxon countries). In some cases, geography forms one department together with: economics; planning (not only spatial planning); history or environmental protection. Considering the fact that university departments are generally of a greater size than in Poland, geography is an independent unit only in exceptional cases. Both socio-economic and political geography and nearly always very strongly represented and grounded in practice on the one hand, and on the other are considerably involved in political and ideological disputes (which is inter alia manifested by gender geography, human geography, the phenomenological trend in geography, environmental perception research, etc.). On the other hand, Geography

at school is usually classified as a humanistic subject, which is exemplified by the combination of competences to teach geography and history in some countries as well as joint curricula (e.g. in the French *collèges* Geography is combined with History and Civic Education; *Bulletin officiel...*, 2008, Głowacz 2010).

In Poland, the process of the 'liberation' of academic geography from the organisational structures of natural sciences began in Warsaw. The 'joke of history' was that this was initiated by the communist authorities, which heretofore had been so keen to squeeze geography into natural sciences. However, following the student protests of March 1968, the state authorities decided to make contacts between the university youth more difficult by breaking the University of Warsaw down into a number of small departments and independent institutes. One of the consequences of this process was the 1969 repositioning of the Institute of Geography, until then a part of the Department of Biology and Earth Sciences, into a unit directly reporting to the Rector of the University. When autonomous institutes were liquidated in 1977, Geography was merged with the Institute of African Studies, a unit with a distinctly liberal and interdisciplinary profile (with the faculty including many geographers, economists, sociologists, etc.), to form the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, in which geographers played a dominant role. To take another example, in 2001 the Faculty of Geographic Sciences was established at the University of Łódź – an entity of a purely geographic character, which had no other adornments or additions to its name.

The dynamic development of socio-economic geography in Polish universities was underpinned by the intense and diverse social and economic changes that took place in Poland post 1989, which could now be freely discussed and allowed for differences of opinion, as well as Poland's opening up to the world and establishing more intense contacts with Western geography. This was manifested by the number of doctoral and postdoctoral dissertations, and, in the span of a decade, in the number of professorial nominations. As a result, socio-economic geographers at universities have considerably gained in importance. This phenomenon is also associated with the widely recognised fact that science is underfinanced: physical geography research in many cases requires expensive equipment, while research in the field of socio-economic geography simply needs less funding. In consequence of these processes, geography is less and less perceived as a natural science among the academic community, and this coincides with students showing a decreasing interest in physical geography.

Although the author of this paper has on many occasions called for the unity of geography, he is sadly aware that this increasingly seems to be an isolated stance. Many examples can be found to corroborate this view. The Central Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles which awards professorships and postdoctoral degrees has always treated geography as a discipline which is not

wholly unified: individual matters were referred either to Section II (Economic Sciences) or Section V (Mathematical, Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences). The process of adequate categorisation was frequently fraught with discussions, differences and appeals, particularly in the case of non-standard dissertations. The Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PASC) and the Committee on Geographical Sciences PASC were parts of its Division VII: Earth and Mining Sciences. In 2010, when the decision was made to reduce the number of PASC divisions, which involved liquidating of Division VII, heated debate started on how to categorise geography. On the one hand, some representatives of other Earth sciences did want to include socio-economic geographers into their community, but on the other many socio-economic geographers opted for the separation of geography and its inclusion into the humanities. This dispute has not been satisfactorily resolved until today. The Scientific Council of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Economy of the Jagiellonian University had advocated such a separation even earlier, a view which was presented *inter alia* at the 6th Polish Geographers Forum held in May 2010, and upheld by most of the heads of academic geography institutions in November 2010. The dispute on the place of geography was rekindled on the occasion of the 2010 categorisation of scientific entities, appraisal of their achievements, and the principles and levels of relevant state funding. Proposals were voiced to include geography into either economic or social sciences, a move which would entail tangible financial benefits for geographers.

In the same period, Geography at school is less and less a 'Science' subject. The first symptom of this was the core curriculum for lower secondary schools adopted in 1999 (*Rozporządzenie Ministra...*, 1999). The core curriculum is very general in character, which allows for the development of quite different teaching programmes; it specifies only 10 teaching contents, half of them from the sphere of socio-economic geography:

4. Management of the Earth's natural resources.

5. Contemporary economic, social and political changes across continents and in selected countries.

6. Sources of conflicts and attempts at their resolution (using specific examples)⁴.

7. Poland's cultural and economic potential.

9. Problems relating to integration in the world, Europe and Poland.

The physical and socio-economic geography contents can (and should) be integrated in the three main concepts:

⁴ The proof of the provisions laid down in the core curriculum being vague and ambiguous is that, for example, F. Plit (2000), as part of this heading, discussed not only political, economic, religious conflicts but also "conflicts between man and nature". A similar approach was later adopted in several other textbooks and programmes.

3. Interactions between man and the Earth.
8. Poland in Europe and in the world.
10. Examples of natural environment protection in Poland and abroad.

Only in two cases, the generalised teaching contents in the core curriculum are unequivocally associated with physical geography.

We can look at these core curricula developed by geographers as their specific reaction to the introduction of Science to primary schools, which also incorporated geography. Both these curricula still remain in force in Grades II (2010/11 school-year) and III (2010/11 and 2011/12 school-years) of the lower secondary school.

The new core curricula which are gradually being introduced (as of 2009) are not as dominated by aspects of geography that are not related to its features as a natural science, nor do they however give any ground to look at geography as a strictly natural-science subject. The new curricula also give the green light to the teaching of regional geography. In the past, this discipline made up a significant part of most curricula and textbook cycles, but owing to the general nature of the core curriculum provisions, actual programmes of teaching could well be developed, leaving out regional geography.

Changes in the teaching content are well visible when we look at Geography as it is taught in general upper secondary schools (*liceum*). When the former political system came to an end, Geography was taught in Grades I to IV, while in Grades I and II it comprised physical geography and geology. The mandatory textbook of the time was one by W. Stankowski (1st edition 1987), widely viewed as difficult but reliable. It dwelled in particular on such components of the natural environment as the geological structure and relief of the Earth's surface, which was encapsulated in its very title (*Geografia fizyczna z geologią, podręcznik dla szkoły średniej* [Physical geography with geology, a textbook for secondary schools]). In Grade III, the subject of teaching was Poland in Europe (Batorowicz, Nalewajko, Suliborski 1988), and in Grade IV – socio-economic geography of the world (Dobosiewicz, Domachowski 1989).

The first changes to this curriculum were introduced in 1990. On the premise that “the requirements of the curricula in their present shape could not be fulfilled, and their excessive load and overly encyclopaedic nature lead to an unnecessary workload for pupils on the one hand, and on the other hand – to only superficial teaching”, “reduced mandatory teaching contents” were introduced (Ministerstwo Edukacji..., 1990, p. 2). At the same time, the number of course hours was increased, but the school inertia was so powerful that, in practice, teachers would still continue to teach “from the book”. The share of the physical geography content was even smaller than that of socio-economic content because, in 1990, there were two hours of Geography per week in Grade III (and one hour in the remaining grades), while economic topics prevailed in

Grade III. In reality, however, Geography in Grade IV, due to the upcoming secondary education exam (*matura*), mostly focused on reviewing the material (or, conversely, was ignored by pupils who chose other subject to take at the exam). In addition to that, the textbook in Grade III was so detached from the new social, economic and political reality that teachers, surprised by the pace of changes and a little adrift themselves, would rather delve deeper into physical geography than teach about the ongoing socio-economic changes. Fortunately, soon new textbooks were published, but the first tendency was to reduce their content, while the time for a qualitative modification of their content came later.

Significant changes were not made until 2001 when the new core curriculum was adopted. It came into force as of the 2002/2003 school year and continues until today (*Podstawa programowa...*, 2001). At the basic level, the new core curriculum introduced eight teaching contents, but in a much more detailed way than was the case with lower secondary schools. Item one is related to the sources of geographic information, and only one of the remaining seven is directly connected with physical geography (2. Functioning of the Earth's natural system...). Three items deal with the interactions between the natural environment and human activity (3. Functional and spatial linkages and inter-relationships in the system: man – nature – economy...; 4. Causes and consequences of the uneven distribution of the Earth's population; 8. Conditions and natural, socio-economic and cultural consequences of the development of tourism and recreation), but with more emphasis on anthropogenic activity. The remaining three: items 5, 6 and 7, broadly framed, are clearly socio-economic in character, with a considerable emphasis on political geography issues. Moreover, these teaching contents are new, not only because the phenomena they tackle are new but also owing to an implicit change in the criteria of topic selection. These include such issues as cooperation between Euroregions, twin cities and municipalities, with references to the pupils' home and international cooperation at the local level. The new curriculum involves a departure from static and statistical approaches on the national scale and suggests looking at problems from the regional and local perspective ("the little homeland"). Topics introduced to schools for the first time include electoral geography (in the extended Geography curriculum). Another interesting trend is the considerably expanded scope of issues related to recreation and tourism, and replacing of regional geography by geography of tourism. For instance, despite the many detailed programmes and available textbooks, in all the textbooks for Geography in upper secondary schools (and in some of those for lower secondary schools), we will find an enumeration of the Polish properties inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Other contents newly introduced in schools are related to cultural geography, and primarily geography of religion, which is exemplified by maps of civi-

lisations commonly found in school textbooks (based on Samuel Huntington's or modified approaches), the geographical ranges of the world's major religions, distribution of various religions and their followers in Poland and the territorial structure of the Catholic Church, the most numerous religious denomination in Poland. There is also some coverage of religious minorities, and the photographs of Orthodox churches in Podlasie or the mosque in Bohoniki (or Kruszyniany) are among the most popular illustrations.

In 2012, a new core curriculum will be introduced to general upper secondary schools (*Rozporządzenie Ministra... z dnia 23 grudnia 2008 r...*). Those pupils who choose to take Geography as one of their *matura* subjects will be provided with a solid amount of knowledge, arranged by branches, albeit a little conventionally. The new curriculum incorporates both physical and socio-economic geography, viewed both globally and with regionally, with a detailed discussion of the geography of Poland. However, for the majority of upper secondary school students, Geography will be a mandatory subject only in Grade I (basic curriculum) where, according to the Minister's Regulation referred to above, "pupils should acquaint themselves with social and economic issues as well as natural environment-related issues of the contemporary world. The topics illustrating these issues should change depending on the importance and relevance of actual problems". These statements suggest that contents related to socio-economic issues will have priority.

According to the common – and rather spiteful – expressions summarising the topical scope of geography, it deals with all kinds of issues, ranging "from geology to theology". This acerbic saying is largely true and at the same time... admirable. Reaching for such remote disciplines is necessary to explain various phenomena and processes that are the salt of geography. Two decades ago, Geography taught at Polish schools was close to geology in its content. Since the new core curriculum is only now being introduced, not all of its consequences can be predicted, especially considering the fact that it leaves room for modifications. There can be little doubt however that the role of physical geography is diminishing and the role of socio-economic geography is increasing, along with the introduction of utterly new fields of interest (electoral geography, cultural geography, geography of religion, geography of tourism). And even in physical geography, less attention is devoted to geology, and more to the biosphere, its protection, rational management of various ecosystems, etc. This is associated with the teaching about issues related to eco-development and rational natural environment management.

Contemporary school geography has not as yet (and very desirably so) entered the field of theology. However, the process of humanisation of geography is well visible. For this reason, we should not find it surprising if the next reform to come excludes Geography from the group of natural science subjects taught

in the lower secondary school. This will be more in tune with the actual teaching contents as well as the trends in the development of this scientific discipline. But what will be the long-term consequences of such a move? Will Geography be classified as one of the liberal subjects? What significant changes will it mean for primary schools (what about Science)? It is rather unlikely to expect that Geography will be taught as a separate subject in the primary school. There could also be potential changes in the offing for the training of Geography teachers. If primary school teachers are to teach two subjects, should we link Geography with Biology or rather with History, Civic Education, Enterprise? These changes should not take us by surprise. On the contrary – we should try to shape them now, educators and scientists working hand in hand, as it would be better for us all if the fate of Geography depended on geographers, and not somebody else.

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