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TGRG page ☆
Policy, theory and the future of transport geography

In 1997, Richard Gibb, co-convener of the TGRG session of the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in Exeter, noted that transport geography was shifting from its former largely empiricist nature towards placing an emphasis on the application of policy. He further pointed out that this would lead to the consideration of wider ideological priorities. Recent work by TGRG members on issues such as privatisation, deregulation and sustainability shows this trend continuing, although there are still limited examples of transport geographers engaging with the major theoretical debates currently occupying researchers from other groups. One exception is a forthcoming paper in collaboration with an economic geographer which examines the effect of rail freight privatisation on state/economy relations.

Brian Graham expanded on Gibb's theme in a recent TGRG page (Graham, 1999) when he proposed a research agenda for transport geography. He noted that, although traditionally the role of transport in key geographical debates has largely been overlooked, increasing attention is being paid to the relationships between – and therefore the policies and underlying ideologies which seek to address – transport, mobility, behaviour and social change.

Why mention all this again? The primary reason is to reaffirm the point that there is a possibly unprecedented opportunity for transport geographers to assert the centrality of their skills both within, and outside of, the discipline of geography. Transport geographers can make a unique contribution in bridging the gap between more 'traditional' transport studies and human geography (and, indeed, the humanities and social sciences at large).

The trouble is that this opportunity could all too easily pass us by. Geographers, it seems, are already being marginalised in policymaking circles (Peck, 1999). Worse, transport geographers risk becoming isolated even from the geographical mainstream, especially in the UK where the academic vogue has become quite heavily qualitative and/or theoretical (although this could, of course, to some extent explain the marginalisation of mainstream geography itself). It would seem that too many geographers regard the work of TGRG members as of only incidental relevance to the predominant concerns of the discipline. Whereas others are busy examining modes of social regulation, advancing theories of globalisation and regionalisation and (re)presenting contested discourses, transport geographers are perceived to be counting cars on ferries, marvelling at the intricacies of hub and spoke networks and indulging in the development of high speed rail links. How parochial! We know this is usually not the case – as a whole host of our recent work would verify – yet getting that message across can prove difficult. How many geographers from other research groups attended the Sussex TGRG session?

Outside of academia, there have been notable successes, such as John Farrington's policy relevant work about the rural poor which achieved substantial coverage in the British media (see, for example, Tweedie, 2000) to the presumed embarrassment of the government and the definite embarrassment of the author (!) Instances such as these are all too few, however, and, like all academics, we need to capitalise on them whenever we can.

None of this will seem particularly new to those of us in the TGRG. The above is only amplifying concerns expressed in this page before and positive steps are being taken. The TGRG's survey of colleagues, for example, is significantly broader in scope than originally intended and includes sections on the role, contribution and future of transport geography. The survey is nearing completion and we will be reporting its results in future TGRG pages. We now expect it not only to provide us with information regarding current transport geography courses, but also to stimulate debate within the Group regarding the way ahead. It will hopefully make us think more critically about how we wish to define and promote ourselves and our work within the wider frameworks of geography and social science. It will hopefully confirm that, in five years' time, we should not have 'sold the pass' to others as they begin to wake up to

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the centrality of transport to their policies and theories.

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