

Geography and Development : Crisis commitment and Renewal

Terence G. McGee

Volume 39, Number 108, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/022529ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/022529ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

McGee, T. G. (1995). Geography and Development : Crisis commitment and Renewal. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 39(108), 527–535.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/022529ar>

Geography and Development : Crisis Commitment and Renewal

Terence G. McGee

Department of Geography
University of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION

Struggling with the mood of this essay, I escaped to the cinema. Much of what geography is about is captured in films. Created, manipulated and real landscapes are merged in these images. The film, *The Postman* is set in an isolated island off the coast of Southern Italy, in the early 1950s. A fishing community clings to the edge of the island dominated by looming cliffs, the sea and the mountain. This seems to be a classic picture of underdevelopment as portrayed in Carlo Levi's classic *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Yet this world is beginning to change. Electricity has come to the village. There are weekly newspapers and movie shows. And the politicians in their corrupt manner are offering doubtful improvements in public works in return for votes. The plot revolves around the arrival of Pablo Neruda, the Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet, after being banished from Chile for his communist activities and the reluctant offer of exile by the Italian government. The rather inarticulate son of a fisherman is the postman who delivers mail to Neruda and they develop a friendly relationship in which Neruda's advice, but mostly his poetry, is successfully used by the postman to win the heart of his village sweetheart. At the marriage, Neruda reads his poetry and receives the news that he can return to Chile. But he leaves behind a sense of discontent in the village; a realization that the condition of underdevelopment does not have to be endured. The «postman» becomes an active communist and is killed by the police in a political rally shortly after his marriage. Even the "good" outsider can destroy the «inside» of the local.

This film captures the central motif of my essay, i.e. the elusive relationship between "outside" and "inside", which in a spatial sense it has now become fashionable to describe as the local-global dialectic. The fact that our discipline (at least the human part of it) appears to be in a considerable state of confusion in a world in which the global seems to be so much more important than the local concerns me deeply. Ideas, fieldwork, methodologies which we once comfortably felt a part of our discipline have become slippery and ethereal. Multiple visions of our discipline now exist. There is a sense of crisis.

If this situation pertains generally in human geography, it is doubly so in the geography of development. Perhaps, this is no surprise since the field carries an inordinate amount of ideological and theoretical baggage. Four elements contribute to this unease. First, the erosion of socialist power, although this does not automatically assume a replacement by capitalism. Secondly, there is new

considerable disillusionment with the modernist project which classical and Marxist theories of economic development assumed would bring about the condition of "development". Thirdly, the increasing scepticism that the world can be ecologically sustainable if the condition of global development were to assume levels of fossil fuel consumption presently operating in the Group of 7 countries. Finally, the growing importance of global processes such as information flows and transportation technology which seem to be making the local less important.

Of course, it is well understood that "globalization" which involves the integration of national economies to a global system of production, consumption and trade is not a recent phenomenon as the world systems theorist have convincingly argued (see Wallerstein, 1974). However, many researchers argue that the current phase of globalization (post 1945) is qualitatively different for two reasons. First, economic activity is now being functionally integrated at a global level (Dicken, 1992). I have written about this process with respect to the semi-conductor industry in Malaysia (McGee, 1987). Secondly, because developments in new micro-electronic-based computers enable «large amounts of data to be transported cheaply over long distances» and thus «have radically changed the worldwide organization of finance, of competition, of supply, and of demand. Other technological developments, like wide-bodied aircraft and container ships which have facilitated the rapid movement of large volumes of people and freight» (Linge and Walmsley, 1995) are also important.

These developments spawn concepts such as global cities, global consumption and the global village which suggest that global transformation is a one way process. Thus the major forces shaping development at the state or locality level become less important. This idea is best summarized by Castells' writing in *The Informational City* (1989) :

The new international economy creates a variable geometry of production and consumption, labor and capital management and information — a geometry that denies the specific meaning of place outside its position in a network whose shape changes relentlessly in response to messages of unseen signals and unknown codes. (Castells, 1989, p. 348)

The end-product of this line of thinking is the kind of article which has «the end of geography» somewhere in the title. Thus, if place is no longer of importance, and only «the geography of networks» is, then the traditional role of the geography of development at least in part can be questioned. On the other hand, one might argue that geographers have a well established tradition of studying networks and flows through space that can certainly contribute to the geography of development.

This view of globalism that sees it as some form of as "international steamroller" (Linge and Walmsley, 1995, p. 3) is even further reinforced by views of political-ideological convergence expressed by Fukuyama in *The End of History*, globalization of consumption practices (Armstrong and McGee, 1985) and ideas of

time-space compression (Harvey, 1989). Some writers see these global processes as destroying local cultures and reconstructing them in globally understood terms. The pervasive flow of international media images reinforces this view of the "macization" of the world. In many ways, this view seems to be a continuation of the modernization project in which the globe will emerge as a developed version of the United States. Some writers have even gone so far to see new "network landscapes" in this cultural formation. Thus, Appadurai writes of ethnoscaples (flows of people; immigrants; refugees; tourists, etc.); technoscaples (machinery, technology and information); finanscaples (capital); mediascaples (flows of images in television, films, magazines, etc.); and ideoscaples (ideologies and world views) (Appadurai, 1990).

Others have seen the emergence of global "cyborg cultures" in which the boundaries between people and machines break down (Haraway, 1992). Others, particularly Thrift (1994), have tried to see this emergence of global culture in terms of a constant feeling of mobility through networks that portrays individuals moving through an increasingly boundaryless world.

Thus, in the spheres of economic, technical and cultural activity, the effect of globalization is to downgrade the importance of "place". As Thrift asks «What is place in this new "in-between" world? The short answer is — compromised; permanently in a state of enunciation between addresses, always deferred. Places are 'stages of intensity', traces of movement, speed and circulation» (Thrift, 1994, p. 222). My judgment is that this assessment of globalism is deeply disturbing the practitioners of the conventional mode of geography which rested upon the application of our geographical skills to the understanding of the geography of places (see Brown, 1988). With hindsight, now much chagrined, we realize (at least those of us from the 'Eurocentric' heartland of geography) that we assumed too much superiority, knowledge and power as we studied places in other countries and cultures (see McGee, 1991). We took too little notice of the people who did know : the local inhabitants and the post-modernists, who do not go to other places, but only read what other post-modernists write about them and flagellate us with our errors.

Is there any way out of this crisis in development geography? First, we have to escape from the idea of the global steamroller, and see the relationship between global and local as a dialectic which is in a constant state of flux. We have to reassert the local embedded in "place" as the reality of local groupings negotiating their control of the local with the global with varying degrees of success. The idea of negotiation enables a major focus to be placed upon the role of local movements engaged in resistance against elements of global. Escobar (1992a and b), Slater (1992a and b), Pred and Watts (1992), Sacks (1992), and Schurman (1993) have produced important contributions to the understanding of this interaction. In this concept, the core-elements that make up the roots of place — the environment, local culture, local economies, historical layerings of shared experience —, the lived experience of the place are crucial to explaining the global-local relationship.

This approach avoids the dangers of portraying the local and global as bounded separate entities and also enables flexibility in scale of the local, whether it be a village, a nation, a region, or in some cases an ethnic group geographically dispersed within a national unit. It also enables the investigation of the role of collaborating local units (e.g. the Mexican State's adoption of Structural Adjustment Policies and their effect on local regions such as Chiapas) which Corbridge (1989) and Peet (1993) have urged us not to neglect, particularly as they reflect in class liaisons between different levels of the local and international capitalism.

The contortions of the preceding paragraph indicate the difficulties of applying this concept of the local-global dialectic. It is particularly difficult to analyze the relations between the different levels of the local on "domains" as I have called them (McGee, 1986-1987; Brown, 1988). In the end, the most fruitful approach is to define a "geographic site" in which the local-global dialectic is being worked out. It is often thought that such sites are contested terrains in which the global and local are dueling for control, but in fact, as Lefebvre (1991) has pointed out, the local and the global are constantly interacting in the shaping and production of spaces.

The second way to escape from this view of the global steamroller is to attack it on empirical grounds. Clearly, the countries of the globe are very unevenly impacted by these global processes. Perhaps 80 % of the world's inhabitants, particularly many of the poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America, still exist in localities where networks still remain primarily interpersonal and local; indeed such local networks may be the crucial element in their battle for survival. The persistence of the informal sector in Africa, Latin America and Asia is ample evidence of this assertion (see McGee, 1976, 1978). Part of this emphasis upon the unevenness of global impact is the fact that it is an Eurocentric concept, making an assumption that these global forces emanating from the wealthier countries are so powerful that the local will collapse. These global forces do not always impact directly, but are sometimes filtered into the local through collaboration with the national state. The strategy of regional alliances to promote free trade areas is an interesting example of the diverse ways in which global ideologies can be introduced (see McGee, 1991, and Dirlik, 1992).

Thus, it seems to me, by reasserting the need to study the dialogue between localism and globalism, we are returned to the very "heart" of geography.

COMMITMENT TO THE LOCAL

It is my firm belief that this return to the "heart of geography" involves a commitment to the local. As I have studied development in Southeast Asia, I have made a firm commitment to five local sites within the spatial orbit of urban centres. Since the late 1950s I have revisited these sites whenever possible. I have talked to people I have come to know. I have looked for buildings I appreciated. I have sought the food stalls whose smells and fare tempted me. Thus, I have five sites in which I have tried to measure the local in relationship with the changing global.

1) Ban Chan, about 15 kilometers outside Bangkok, was a rice growing village adrift on a lake of water with very few contacts with the city in the early 1960s. Today, it is a suburb, the ricelands turned into suburban developments, industrial estates and golf courses. But the *wat* (temple) is still important and the way of life still focussed on the *klong* (canal) is still vibrant. 2) Georgetown was a densely packed Chinatown in Penang State, Malaysia, in the 1960s. The streets were crowded with vendors and food was displayed everywhere. As you walked through the town, you occasionally saw a vista of mosque or a Chinese clan temple. Today, it is a city with cleaner streets, regulated markets. As a secondary city, its built environment has not yet been torn apart and the historical layering of colonial architecture still remains. 3) Kampong Baharu was a Malay settlement in the heart of Kuala Lumpur surrounded by Chinese shophouses. It was at the interface between these two ethnic communities where the worst violence of the 1969 ethnic riots occurred. But in the early 1960s, it was a peaceful inner city suburb dominated by the calls of the muezzin, the greenery of banana trees and dominantly poor Malay community. Today it is distinctly middle class with large houses, new cars in the streets and high fences. 4) In the 1960s, Bugis street was a colonial vestige in the heart of Singapore. An open door nightclub, a street full of foodstalls, transvestites, prostitutes and raucous drinking. It was a routine visit for a night in the town. It was also routine that it should be destroyed to be replaced by a subway station as Singapore modernized. My most recent visit to my surprise found it reconstructed as a sanitized version of its former seediness with beer gardens and nightclubs but no transvestites.

Finally, 5) the paradise island of Bali. When I first went to Malaysia in 1958, I visited it every chance I had. Tourism had barely begun and the culture and rich texture of the island's landscape of terraced ricefields, temples and enclosed houses captured you completely. Bali, of course, had been implanted in the global consciousness already, but it was just about to be marketed as the "tropical escape". From the 1960s onwards, the Indonesia government encouraged the growth of tourism; by the early 1990s, more than one million tourists arrived each year. Bali has become the Florida of Australia and the bars of Kuta beach now advertise direct TV transmission of Aussie football and of course Australian beer. Other parts of the island have also been developed; Ubud as the cultural center, Sanur beach and Nusa Duta as new upper market beach resorts. Together with related services, tourism now generates some 60 percent of the island's G.N.P. Agriculture is declining. Denpasar, the capital, contains 30 percent of the population of 2.7 millions. Its urban fabric is fragile and pollution is increasing. Yet Bali's distinctiveness as a rich Hindu cultural enclave in the dominantly Muslim state of Indonesia still remains. And ritual and religion still dominate the local. Two images come to mind to capture this seeming contradiction. The first is a picture of two Balinese women taken in the 1930s. Their breasts are uncovered as was traditional. This picture was used to capture the global image of closeness to nature — a "Rousseauan" paradise. The second is a picture taken from an advertisement in a 1993 issue of *Vogue*. A half shot of a white female clothed only in a bra is shown against a lush background of tropical palms. This is an advertisement for a bra with the tradename of Bali. In some mysterious way, the local has been reconstructed in the global.

Of course, some may argue that I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in this ongoing longitudinal encounter with the local-global dialectic. An opportunity that is not presented to all geographers. But this does not prevent geographers from seizing upon more accessible sites of global-local interaction and using them to raise questions concerning the process of development. In the end, my nostalgia for these places as I first knew them saddens me as I see the impact of development. It conditions and shapes my memories of underdevelopment, but I also think it sensitizes me to the processes of development. I have to accept that the material conditions of people in these sites are better. I do not have to accept that the quality of life is better although it may be different. It is only through a continuing dialogue between the experience of these places and the macro-processes of development that I can explore the complexity of development. Thus, the commitment to the local is a fundamental part of development geography.

CLOSING THE CIRCLE — REINSERTING THE GEOGRAPHY INTO THE GEOGRAPHY OF DEVELOPMENT

I would argue that the brief capsule description of sites of global-local interaction gives us several clues into how to reinsert geography into the geography of development.

First, the case of Bali does support the view that the concept of the local-global dialectic is useful in trying to understand how Bali is inserted into a global system of relationships. There is certainly no doubt that Bali has become a *global tourist site* which has been accomplished by a collaboration between local and national elites and international tourist companies and marketing agencies which is now part of that global consciousness which Appadurai would label an ethnoscape and perhaps an ideoscape. At the same time, the Balinese have negotiated a protective shield around certain facets of their culture, particularly that pertaining to religion and ritual which, while undergoing considerable pressure, remains persistent and strong. Despite the fact that over one million tourists visit this island every year, this invasion has not destroyed the locality. Indeed the "local specificity" of Bali is absolutely crucial to tourism. If it did not exist, it would have to be manufactured as Singapore has discovered in the case of Bugis street.

Secondly, it may be argued that exploration of the longitudinal roots of the formation of local specificity in these scenes is crucial to an understanding of the local-global dialectic. This may be an anathema to many who support the ideas of post-modernism. As one author has commented «Most post-modernists considered nothing existed until it was discovered last Wednesday». But it seems to me that this historical approach shows all the sensitivities to multiple interpretations, the deconstruction and unearthing of power relationships that post-modernists consider to be part of their 'œuvres'. Indeed, I would argue that the regional tradition of geography represented by works such as Vidal de La Blache, Bowen and many others exhibits all these features. In the same way, the

work of historians such as Braudel on the Mediterranean and Reid on Southeast Asia are absolutely crucial to the understanding of the contemporary development of each of these regions.

Another facet of this local-global dialectic approach to the study of development is that it involves what I call the artisan approach to geography. Some would argue that the geographer is an artist and geography is an art. For some geographers, this may be true; for the majority, the idea of an artisan as someone who crafts particular objects after gaining the skills and a deep understanding of the properties of the materials that are used is more appropriate. This is certainly true of the best regional studies of geographers and of a strong component of development geography. Most of the critiques of the post-modernists of this work : Eurocentrism; mega-theory, and lack of concern with the "hidden agenda" have been part of good geographical research on the local.

Most geographers concerned with development want to interrogate the development from within the modernist project which lays great emphasis upon the positivistic tradition and the liberal belief that good research can provide workable solutions. I see no evidence that this tradition is showing signs of erosion. In particular in three areas, geographers are making major contributions. First, the long established geographical focus on the interaction of society and environment is central to the present concern with "sustainability", "environmental deterioration", and "resource depletion" and arguments on management and conservation. Secondly, the emphasis upon the geographer's concern with the "roots of place" is crucial to the survival of local regions and the resistance of local peoples to forces of globalism. Thirdly, geographers can make a considerable contribution to the study of networks and flows which are part of globalism. Finally, many development geographers will still concern themselves with the "central" issues of development — gender inequality, unequal distribution of income, welfare hunger and disease.

This vision of development geography returns it to the roots of geography as a humanistic discipline, in which the geographer becomes the artisan of local-global interaction. I began with a filmmaker's vision of the one part of the Mediterranean. Let me conclude with another example from the same region.

In her portrait of Corsica, Granite Island, Dorothy Carrington travels the island seeking the roots of its character. All the different layers of peoples and cultures are explored...

It is a sense of place, an understanding of character which can only be constructed by linking places to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place. (Doreen Massey, 1993, p. 156)

The future of geography will be more secure if we emphasize our role in exploring the character of places rather than in entering into theoretical debates

about the "in-between world". A development geography firmly embedded in commitment to the local place is the only answer.

NOTE

In the spirit of this issue of the *Cahiers* devoted to The Future of Geography, I have endeavoured to write this as an opinion piece. The ideas are very much the result of interaction with a vigorous group of graduate students pushing a reluctant professor in directions which were not always comfortable. Scott Macleod, George Lin, Mark Wang, Tamiko Kurihara, Rex Casinader, Shahal Hasbullah, Rajesh Chandra, Andrew Marton, Gisèle Yasmeen, Nick Georgopoulos, Charles Greenberg, Philip Kelly, Deirdre McKay, Lisa Drummond, Kerry De Musz, and Catherine Griffiths have much to answer for in this respect. They would, of course, in principle be opposed to any of the ideas of this essay. A second point about this piece is that it is written largely from the perspectives of Anglo-American component of global geography which some of us believe makes up only a small part of global geography. For example, even if one took the published research of the geographers of China and India which focuses on themes concerned with development geography, it would far exceed the volume of work produced in North America in the field of development geography over the last 10 years. Much of this research is inaccessible to all but a few Western geographers because of access and language difficulties. It may be argued that a number of geographers from the Third World have made major contributions to the field. Milton Santos' (1979) work on Third World urbanization, Alun Mabogunje's (1968) studies of urban development and Kamal Salih's (1988) discussion of regional closure are all major contributions. But essentially, the debate about development theory in geography has been a dialogue conducted within the developed countries. Finally, as this essay is appearing in a French language publication, one might question the exclusion of the very considerable contribution of French language geographers to development geography. This is a topic that I hope will be taken up elsewhere.

REFERENCES

- APPADURAI, A. (1990) Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Public Culture*, 2(2) : 1-24.
- ARMSTRONG, W. and McGEE, T. G. (1985) *Theatres of Accumulation: Studies in Asian and Latin American Urbanization*. London, Methuen.
- BROWN, L. (1988) Reflections on Third World Development: Ground Level Reality, Exogenous Forces and Conventional Paradigms. *Economic Geography*, 64 : 255-278.
- CASTELLS, M. (1989) *The Informational City*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- CORBRIDGE, S. (1989) Marxism, Post-Marxism and the Geography of Development. In R. Peet, and N. Thrift (eds) *New Models in Geography*. Winchester (Mass.), Unwin Hyman, pp. 224-248.
- DICKEN, P. (1992) *Global Shift : The Internationalization of Economic Activity*. London, Paul Chapman Publishing.
- DIRLIK, A., ed. (1993) *What's in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*. Boulder (Colo.), Westview.
- ESCOBAR, A. (1992a) Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development Social Movements. *Social Text*, 31-32 : 20-56.
- (1992b) Reflections on Development: Grassroots Approaches and Alternative Politics in the Third World. *Futures*, 24(5) : 411-436.
- HARRAWAY, D. J. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : The Reinvention of Nature*. London, Free Association Books.

-
- HARVEY, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity : An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- KAMAL Salih *et al.* (1978) Decentralization Policy, Growth Pole Approach, and Resource Frontier Development : A Synthesis of Response in Four Southeast Asian Countries. In F. Lo and Salih Kamal *Growth Pole Strategy and Regional Development Policy*. London, Pergamon, pp. 12-45.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- LINGE, G. J. R. and WALMSLEY, D. J. (1995) *Global Transformation and Social Development : An Australian Perspective*. Canberra, Academy of Social Sciences, Occasional Paper Series, 2/1995.
- MABOGUNJE, A. L. (1968) *Urbanization in Nigeria*. London, University of London Press.
- MASSEY, D. (1993) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- McGEE, T. G. (1976) The Persistence of the Proto-Proletariat, Occupational Structures and Planning for the Future of Third World Cities. In P. Haggart (ed.) *Progress in Geography*. London, Edward Arnold, pp. 3-38.
- (1978) Invitation to the Ball — Formal or Informal Dress? In P. Rimmer *et al.* *Studies of Food, Shelter, and Transport in the Third World : Challenging the Unconventional Wisdom*. Canberra, A.N.U., Department of Human Geography, Monograph A.N.U., pp. 121-153.
- (1986-1987) Domains of Analysis — Perspectives on the Study of Inequality in Malaysia : A Review Article. *Pacific Affairs*, 60(1) : 655-664.
- (1987) Joining the Global Assembly Line. Malaysia's Role in the Global Semiconductor Industry. In T. G. McGee *et al.* *Industrialization and Labour Force Processes : A Case Study of Peninsular Malaysia*. Canberra, A.N.U., Research School of Pacific Studies, Research Papers on Development in East Java and West Malaysia, n° 1, pp. 35-70.
- (1991) Presidential Address. Eurocentrism in Geography : The Case of Asian Urbanization. *The Canadian Geographer*, 35(4) : 332-442.
- PEET, R. (1990) *Global Capitalism : Theories of Societal Development*. London, Routledge.
- PRED, A. and WATTS, M. (1992) *Reworking Modernity : Capitalism and Symbolic Discontent*. New Brunswick (N.J.), Rutgers University Press.
- SACKS, W. (1992) *The Development Dictionary : A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. London Zed Books.
- SANTOS, Milton (1979) *The Shared Space : The Two Circuits of the Urban Economy in Underdeveloped Countries*. London and New York, Methuen.
- SCHURMAN, F., ed. (1993) *Beyond the Impasse : New Directions in Development Theory*. London, Zed Books.
- SLATER, D. (1992a) Theories of Development and Politics of the Post-Modern — Exploring a Border Zone. *Development and Change*, 23(3) : 283-319.
- (1992b) On the Borders of Social Theory : Learning from Other Regions. *Environment and Planning D. Society and Space*, 10 : 307-327.
- THRIFT, N. (1994) Inhuman Geographies — Landscapes of Speed, Light, and Power. In P. Cloke, *et al.* *Writing the Rural : Five Cultural Geographies*. London, Paul Chapman Publishing.
- WALLERSTEIN, I. (1974) *The Modern World-System*. New York, Academic Press.