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Notes on a geographical canon? Measures, models and scholarly enterprise

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Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to the theme issue by placing recent discussions about the geographical canon within scholarly debates about canonicity. Geographers have been generally silent about canon but, to the contrary, possess a sophisticated grasp of related concepts such as tradition and paradigm. It is argued that there is no clear canonical conception that geographers should adopt, but that further attention towards the canonical is nevertheless merited. Engagement with the geographical canon is not prescriptive. Rather, its construction will be a personal choice that involves engagement with a broader community of scholarship. In doing so, though, productive avenues are created for consideration of the texts, habits and practices that identify geography. It is concluded that debates about canonicity provide much for considerations of historiography and pedagogy by geographers.

Keywords: Canon; Canonicity; History of geography; Intellectual history; Tradition

> Except when the true ecclesiastical canons are their topic, people who use the word 'canon' usually have in mind quite practical issues. They may, for example, be stating that there is for students of literature a list of books or authors certified by tradition or by an institution as worthy of intensive study and required reading for all who may aspire to professional standing within that institution. Or they may be disputing the constitution of the canon, or even the right of the institution to certify it. Frank Kermode, 1986.[1]

> It is perhaps worth emphasizing that our disciplinary forbears were neither fools nor heroes, but intelligent and sophisticated people who were writing – as do we – to advance human knowledge and understanding, not to provide conveniently packages modules for future use in teaching the history of the subject. It would be an admission of our own ignorance, not theirs, to fail to take their works with the seriousness they deserve. Tim Ingold, 1986.[2]

The problem with canons is that they provide more questions than answers. The language of canons is common but uneven across the humanities, social sciences and, to some extent, the natural sciences. Geography, typically, has had an ambivalent relation to its canon. Many geographers would dispute that there is, or ever was, a geographical canon. Historical geographers, if they have talked of canons at all, have tended to do so only in ironic terms.[3] On the other hand, members of affiliated fields, such as historians of cartography, have had no problem discussing, for example, the recent 'redefinition and expansion of the canon of early maps.'[4] This theme issue presents a collection of papers that investigate this situation and consider why it has become so controversial. In order to examine these issues with any seriousness, it is first necessary to understand the divergent and contested definitions of canon. A central argument that I wish to make is that there is no single concept of canon against which to measure the geographical

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[1] F. Kermode, The argument about canons, in: F. McConnell (Ed), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, New York and Oxford, 1986, 78–96, 78.
[2] T. Ingold, *Evolution and Social Life*, Cambridge, 1986, x–xi.
[3] For example, see Newcomb's invocation of 'feasting' as central to the 'canons of this group of historical geographers' when discussing an early international meeting of the 'Commonwealth' group in 1983. R.M. Newcomb, CUKANZUS '83 at Oxford, *Journal of Historical Geography* 9 (1983) 396–401, 397.
[4] D. Woodward, Preface, in: D. Woodward, G.M. Lewis (Eds), *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 3: Cartography in Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, Chicago, 1998, xix–xxi, xix.

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canon. There is no superior notion of canonicity that geographers can import, and then use to (re)generate a set of canonical texts. Geographers cannot simply 'find' their canon by excavating the writings of past geographers. Rather, by examining conceptions of canonicity, an opportunity exists for the revivification of discussions around the purpose, identity and practices of geography.

By our canon you shall know us?

The Ancient Greek term *kanôn* referred to a straight rod or bar used by a carpenter or weaver as a measure. Later, canon became an accepted term for a model used in the law or in art. The earliest known application of canon to describe written text was that by Dionysius of Halicarnassus around 20 B.C. to describe the writings of Herodotus.[5] It was in this sense that the early churches adopted each of their rules, or laws, as canonical. It is this theological conception of the canon that has been the most influential, and therefore it deserves our initial attention.

The roots of the Christian canon lie in Judaism and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.[6] After this point, Judaism became a religion of the Book, and thus the Jewish canon of 39 Hebrew scriptures was fixed around the end of the first century.[7] The set of Roman Catholic canonical texts contains 80 books, including what are known as the Apochrypha, and part of Luther's critique was about the sanctity of their canonicity. The origins of the Protestant Reformation were thus centred on textual criticism, and the eventual 'Protestant canon' contained 66 books, including the 39 books of the Judaic 'Old Testament' and the 27 books of the 'New Testament'. In the Roman Catholic Church, canon has been used to refer to church law, as well as to the individuals (*kanonikós*) who form and construct it. These individuals are then supposed to teach the canon to others. With the development of the Lutheran and Calvinist movements, these churches created their own canons, but in a looser sense, as did other later ecclesiastical movements. In common ecclesiastical usage, then, the canon came to refer more generally to the doctrine of the *specific* faith. More recently, the Bible, or in the Greek *Biblia* (little books), has been understood by some theological scholars as itself an anthology, composed by a process of evaluation and selection.[8] Since the 1980s, there has been significant growth in this field of scholarship, which has become known as *canonical criticism* and has drawn further attention to the vagaries of canonicity.

The important point here, then, is that there is significant divergence even within the ecclesiastical understandings of canon, although they are linked by the notion of their relative fixity as a matter of doctrine. But it must be remembered that the Protestant revelation is more centrally textual in a way that the Catholic one is not. This problematizes ideas of the inherent *textuality* of the canonical. *Torah* refers to 'authoritative tradition.'[9] Ecclesiastical history derives from a tension between the history of the book and the history of its interpretative communities. In this sense, it is important to try to capture the *dialectical* relation between canon and tradition.[10]

This means that, as theologian Delwin Brown puts it, canons 'are inherently polyphonic and plurivocal.'[11] Brown argues that the features of a canon are their boundedness, normativity, contestability, contemporaneity, curatorial character and existential nature. For our purposes, the final of these is the most important; the canon functions as a dimension of identity formation. Even in contemporary debates in theology, then, the notion of the canon has been stretched beyond a set of scripture: 'Canons are complexes of myths, stories, rituals, doctrines, texts, or institutions; and usually they are combinations of these.'[12]

At this point, even the sympathetic historian of geography may ask: so what does this mean for the geographical canon? The important point here is that, even if we were to aspire after Kermode's 'true ecclesiastical' model for geography's canon, the choice would still be complicated.[13] At root, there are competing conceptions of the canonical.

Canons for whom?

Notwithstanding this discussion, my sense is that geographers might be more comfortable with ideas of a post-theological canon. Notions of a *secular* canon, in the sense of a list of approved authors that any educated individual ought to read, date from the mid-eighteenth century and the European Enlightenment. This was never articulated in the specific language of canonicity, but the parallels with modes of theological instruction are obvious. The distinguishing feature of the secular canon is its *permeability*. New works can be added and recovered, or old works neglected and excluded, to an extent not permitted in any non-secular variant.[14]

The earliest known application in English of the word 'canon' to secular works is the reference to 'the Platonic Canon' in the 1885 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*.[15] It seems that a particular variant of the secular model of canonicity, that is the canon as a group of endorsed practitioners, can be seen in development of the related concept of *disciplinarity* in the late nineteenth century. Higher education in Europe, since around the middle of the century, was beginning to relax some of its prescriptive, ecclesiastical requirements and become generally more secular. Each of these new disciplinary approaches, such as the sociological or anthropological, was attempting to identify and bound emergent, scholarly communities of practice. In doing so, advocates were trying to codify the best examples of past practice and the criteria for future membership. The later decades of the nineteenth century were therefore critical in the decisions taken about canonicity across the disciplines. Canonicity was a matter of professional identity.

In literary studies, there has been perhaps the most extensive development of discussions of the canon. The contemporary resurgence of scholarly interest in canonicity is often dated to the 'canon

[5] Herodotus was thus being deemed to provide the best available model, or canon, of Ionic historiography. See G.A. Kennedy, The origin of the concept of a canon and its application to the Greek and Latin classics, in: J. Gorak (Ed), *Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, New York, 2001, 105–116.

[6] In Islam, notions of canonicity are less significant, but have nevertheless been influential. See B.M. Wheeler, *Applying the Canon in Islam: The Authorization and Maintenance of Interpretative Reasoning in Hanafi Scholarship*, Albany, 1996. The recent debate surrounding the translation of the 'Library of Arabic Literature' has attempted to deploy the term *corpus* rather than canon. See P.F. Kennedy, These books shouldn't just hide on a shelf, *Library of Arabic Literature Blog*, New York (9 July 2013), Available at: http://www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/2013/philip-kennedy-these-books-shouldnt-just-hide-on-a-shelf/. Last accessed 25 March 2015.

[7] F. Kermode, Canons, *London Review of Books*, Volume 6, Number 2 (1984) 3–4; F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and Hamlet*, Chicago and London, 1985.

[8] F. McConnell, Introduction, in: McConnell (Ed), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (note 1), New York and Oxford, 1986, 3–18.

[9] D. Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, Albany, 1994, 16.

[10] Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations* (note 9).

[11] Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations* (note 9), 72.

[12] Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations* (note 9), 114.

[13] Kermode, The argument about canons (note 1), 78.

[14] Kermode, The argument about canons (note 1).

[15] Kennedy, The origin of the concept of a canon (note 5).