



UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Geography Admissions Test (GAT)

SPECIMEN PAPER B

Part C example essay

Study the passage of text, which is a series of extracts from an address by Halford Mackinder to the Royal Geographical Society in 1887 titled 'On the Scope and Methods of Geography'.

What does Mackinder's address tell us about historical views of the subject of Geography, and how might this be different now?

Your answer should be based primarily on the material in the passage; no additional credit will be given for reference to material outside the passage.

Mackinder's address suggests to us that the discipline of geography has been contested and was once considered sub-par to other, perhaps more scientific, subjects. We can see this in his repeated use of rhetorical questions, namely: "can geography be rendered a discipline instead of a mere body of information?". Hence, it seems that geography was not as well-known as a distinct subject as it is in the 21st century.

Mackinder also emphasises how the precursor to geography was colonial exploration. Societies, like the RGS, were "active in promoting the exploration of the world", and Mackinder names "Stanley" as the person who "revealed" Congo. This reference to notorious imperialist HM Stanley suggests that geography was a project of the nation state – a vehicle for European and North American nations to achieve dominance over the so-called 'Third World'. Therefore, we can also deduce that the multiplicity of geographies of today – including queer geographies, black geographies and postcolonial geographies – aim to contest this legacy of violence and extraction. So, we can see that geography has transformed since its imperialistic "good work" and "great discoveries" in the 'dark

continent' of Africa, towards something which is more inclusive and representative of the world.

Mackinder's statement that "the Polar regions are the only large blanks remaining on our maps" also indicates how 19th century geography rejected the rights of Indigenous peoples. The word "blanks" suggests that an area can only be known and understood if it is "discovered" by European explorers. Now, Indigenous knowledge is widely acknowledged in the discipline as key to protecting our environment from the climate crisis, and researchers tend to work more closely and collaboratively with Indigenous communities. However, Mackinder's reference to "Ordnance Surveys" and the "tales" told by explorers hints that mapping and written accounts were vital to 'teaching' the Western world about 'exotic' communities, which could not be understood through the variety of social media platforms, documentaries and digital technologies which we possess today.

Mackinder suggests that the question of "what is geography?" dominated geographers' concerns in the 19th century, as anxieties about the future arose as "adventures" dried up. One key concern which Mackinder raises is whether geography is "one, or is it several subjects". He appears to divide the discipline into "physical and political geography", "science and history", showing how the divide between physical geography and human geography and concerns over their cohesiveness remain into the present day. However, today many more university-level geographers identify as 'human geographers' than as 'physical geographers', implying that Mackinder's worries that the discipline was not scientific enough have subsided.

Mackinder was arguably ahead of his time by acknowledging the "inherent breadth and mansidedness" of geography, which he described as its "chief merit". Whilst geography today is often mocked for being a low-value degree, or simply all about 'colouring in', academics and students are increasingly collaborating across the disciplinary divide to produce more holistic geographies. However, Mackinder's acknowledgement of concerns that geography is not specialist enough have not persisted, as today the discipline is divided into many components, which some argue has made the subject fragmented and disparate.

Mackinder suggests that 19th century geography was appealing to everyone, be it "the practical man", "the student", or "the teacher". Geography was both "a store of invaluable information" which we can learn from, as well as a tool for "amassing wealth" (by conquering territories and plundering them for natural resources, or through trade). But Mackinder also notes that "to the teacher it would be an implement for the calling out of the powers of the intellect". This confusing phrase – a remnant of the pretentiousness of geography's forefathers – suggests that geography was intellectually rigorous and challenging. However, Mackinder's gendered language throughout the piece also indicates that geography was the preserve of white, middle/upper class, British male "heroes" (like "Greely"). Whilst many UK universities still report a lack of diversity amongst geography cohorts, the subject's inclusion in school curriculums shows how it is more mainstream and moving away from its racist foundations. Geography still "inspires the pupil".

In closing, Mackinder's declaration that dividing "the scientific from the practical" will "ruin both" aspects of geography has been partially realised. Geography is a divided subject now, but it has also morphed into something distant from the money- and status-making practice it once was. Whilst geography now is very different, technologies like GIS could be considered modern versions of "Ordnance Surveys" and geographical societies persist. This causes us to ask: how far has geography moved away from its imperial roots?