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The 'Omega Affair'^{*}

Disciplinary Vulnerability and the Discontinuance of the University of Michigan Department of Geography (1975-1982)

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Abstract: The University of Michigan Department of Geography was discontinued in 1981, after a grueling review process that saw the discipline's identity and institutional role very publically called into question. Unlike the well-known case at Harvard, these events (and most other department closures) have gone largely unexamined in histories of the discipline. Despite the fact that Michigan's department was central to most of 20th-century academic geography's major intellectual movements, it was also the first in a rash of closures throughout the 1980s that also claimed departments at Pitt, Columbia, Northwestern, and Chicago. We find that fiscal austerity

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followed gradual disinvestment throughout the 1970s raised the question: which disciplines were least essential to the university? At least several influential actors at Michigan had been prepared to answer 'geography' since the mid-1970s. This answer was at the ready for reasons that had a great deal to do with the department's self-defense (and its misalignment with its actual practices). We draw on oral histories and archival research at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library to trace the events surrounding the closure. We see this study as the first in a series of necessary histories that begin from the discipline's deinstitutionalization rather than its growth and development (what we call 'breakdown historiography'). Such an approach, we argue, guards against simplistic explanatory frameworks that exaggerate either the agency of individual scholars or our convenient disciplinary defenses.

Introduction

At 10:00 AM on June 19, 1981, the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan voted unanimously to discontinue the Department of Geography effective June 30, 1982. This decision marked the close of a grueling public review process by the executive committee of the college that lasted almost six months, raising questions of faculty governance, due process, disciplinary legitimacy, and how institutions of higher education should respond to fiscal austerity. John Nystuen, the geography department's chair, said after the regents meeting that "the University is attacking its own body in a way that is most disgusting" (Chapman 1981b, 13). Vice President for Academic Affairs Billy Frye, discussing the university retrenchment process in general, struggles to predict the precise character of the ensuing pain: "it will hurt [...] but I don't know what that really means until I drive the nail into my foot" (Peckham 1994, 330). An undergraduate is quoted in *Michigan Alumnus* magazine, arguing that "amputation is a poor treatment for obesity" (*Michigan Alumnus* 1981, 16).

Whether from the mouths of administrators, faculty, or students, images of bodily harm abounded. Such images, alongside the closure's conspicuous coincidence with the Reagan revolution, could lead one to argue that geography at Michigan was a casualty of austerity and the dawn of neoliberalism at a public institution whose coffers were highly correlated to the fortunes of the auto industry. Howard Shapiro, after all, then the President of the university, was fond of invoking a rust belt aphorism: "As goes GM, so goes the world" (Peterson 1982, 8). In parallel, one might be tempted to say that as went G.M., so went the University of Michigan Department of Geography.

Such an analysis, however, would fail to answer the question: why was the geography department more vulnerable than other departments? Geography's appeal

to the would-be trimmer of institutional fat is remarkably consistent. The list of disciplines with a similar record of institutional vulnerability would be vanishingly short; what other discipline can claim to have seen its presence at Harvard (1948), the University of Pennsylvania (1963), Stanford (1964), Yale (1967), the University of Michigan (1981), the University of Pittsburgh (1983), Columbia (1985), Northwestern (1985), the University of Chicago (1987), and Howard University (1991) not just diminished but formally terminated (Koelsch 2001)? And this list (unfairly) excludes departments in less conspicuous, elite institutions that face ongoing threats.¹

We note that the time of the closure, geographers had already been sounding the alarm over the perceived faltering of the geographical enterprise. Thomas Wilbanks and Michael Libbee wrote a prescient opinion piece for *The Professional Geographer* in 1979, which began: “The bad news is that geography may not survive the next several decades as a subject that is taught in most American colleges and Universities.” (Wilbanks and Libbee 1979, 1) Indeed, a year before the Michigan proceedings would begin in earnest, this article outlines precisely the line of argumentation articulated by Michigan administrators in favor of discontinuation.

The argument is as follows: in an time of retrenchment brought about in part by declining enrollments and failing support for public education, University administrators will be faced with difficult decisions. Either make broad, across-the-board cuts to program budgets or fully discontinue programs seen as less essential to the University while maintaining or increasing funding levels for flagship departments. Given such a choice, they argue, many will choose the latter. Under such conditions, departments that remain after “essentials” are accounted for will be targeted. “We shall refer to these departments as ‘pigeons.’ Next comes the pigeon shooting.” (Wilbanks and Libbee 1979, 2)

We ask how geography became the pigeon at the University of Michigan in order to better understand how it is that geography becomes the pigeon with some frequency. Michigan presents an especially compelling case study for the simple reason that its closure was followed by a rash of subsequent closures (see list above). Haigh (1982) remarks that the significance of the elimination of Michigan geography was a “disaster” of such a “magnitude” that “it is difficult to explain” (187): one that came only a few short years after the department celebrated its 75th anniversary (Deskins et al. 1977). And yet much of our discipline’s self-diagnostic

¹In November 2018, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point announced that it was discontinuing its major in geography. The major and minors in geography at Eastern Kentucky University were threatened with discontinuance in 2016; though they survived the review, they are now being “redesigned to be more marketable and efficient.”

documents are conspicuously silent or cavalier, to the point that a 1986 essay entitled “The Geography of Geography in the Great Lakes Region” makes no mention of the closure of Michigan’s department, focusing instead on the disciplines “continuous intellectual renewal and growth” (Dickason 1986, 109). At the very least, this suggests that we must expand our study of closures beyond Harvard yard and move past the Crimson chip on our shoulder if we are to arrive at a realistic assessment of our own precarity.

The paucity of serious empirical scholarship on departmental discontinuances other than the Harvard case enables slippery ahistorical arguments that place closures within comfortable disciplinary narratives and mythologies, regardless of how well (or poorly) they align with the historical evidence. Two examples of mythologically-rich accounts will serve to illustrate this point.

Barnes, for example, relies on a combination of the Harvard closure and a familiar story about the ascendancy of spatial science. He asserts in passing, that “[closures at Michigan and Chicago] occurred directly from the closure of geography at Harvard in 1948,” and that they were the “result of key faculty who practiced spatial science leaving Chicago and Michigan for elsewhere” (2012, 34). To assert that Michigan follows directly from Harvard is to substantially overstate the case. While the absence of geography at Harvard was sometimes invoked during the course of the Michigan proceedings, it was hardly a determining argument. And while both Waldo Tobler and Gunnar Olsson did, indeed, depart in 1977, Tobler’s loss was analyzed by administrators primarily in terms of lost research productivity, not lost epistemic validity. Furthermore, Olsson’s departure was seen as by many in the department and in the administration as shedding a source of friction, not, pace Barnes, as the dimming of a “truth spot”.

The other is drawn from our recent experiences discussing this project with our colleagues. We are often asked, “was the department too radical?” The answer is, “no.” Our presentist tendency to imagine critical/radical geography “steamroll[ing] across the world, crushing native intellectual traditions” (Barnes and Sheppard 2019, 2), is an image that does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Closure and criticality are equally contingent. At the time of its closure, Michigan had not been steamrolled. It is true that Lauria et al. suggest in a recent history of radical geography in the Midwest that “Michigan was ground zero” for radical geography, implying that we might productively speculate about what this meant for the discipline’s position in the state’s flagship University (Lauria et al. 2019, 262). But the examples given to support the claim don’t support such speculation: Warren and Bunge’s Detroit geographical expedition had no Michigan affiliation (Warren, Katz, and Heynan 2019). While it is true that the radicals descended on

Ann Arbor for the AAG in 1969 after that year's conference was relocated from Chicago to protest police brutality at the Democratic National Convention (Peake and Sheppard 2014), it seems unlikely that the arrival of the troublemakers would so affect administrators that it would doom the discipline over a decade later. Lauria et al. suggest that Gunnar Olsson and Barney Nietschmann were radicalizing forces in the department (Lauria et al. 2019, 262–65). But Nietschmann and Olsson were no Marxists and they decamped in 1977. Their departures, along with that of Tobler, were seen as a catalyst of the closure, not a retardant (though an honest account of the discontinuance must recognize that some were glad to see Olsson go, as we discuss below). The extant archival records, corroborated by the scholarly work of department faculty, lead us to refute the notion that the approximate coincidence of the Michigan closure with the radicalization of geography was anything but coincidental.

We seek to complicate these persistent myths. To do so, we build on a large body of work (Barnes 2001; Berdoulay 1981; Capel 1981; Livingstone 1993) concerned with the institutionalization of geography, especially that work attuned to “the political, economic, cultural, and social contexts in which knowledge is created, and to the importance of professional practices, networks, aspirations, and ideological allegiances” (Monk 2004, 2). However, we take a somewhat less traveled road and discuss geography's institutionalization (Dunbar 2001; Koelsch 2001; Johnston 2000; Ron J. Johnston 2004b; Ron J. Johnston 2004a; Johnston 2019) in light of its deinstitutionalization in the United States. We're specifically interested in how departmental discontinuances have (or have not) been written into histories of geography.

We frame our discussion with a critical discussion of several prominent studies of departmental discontinuance: namely, those of Smith (1987), DeVivo (2015), and Lahiri-Dutt (2018). We are deeply indebted to Neil Smith's 1987 study of the closure of the geography department at Harvard University. However, we take this piece as a first step, as a work preparing the ground for a necessary project of wider remit. Historians of geography have only intermittently followed Smith in writing the Harvard closure “as part of a broader history.” (1987, 156). We also build on the work of DeVivo, who offers one of the only recorded accounts of the Michigan discontinuance. However, we see his central thesis—that chair “leadership” determines the success or failure of the discipline in academic institutions—as unfounded and oversimplistic, suggesting pointless psychological scrutiny of individuals rather than situated and sociological studies of geography-in-place. Finally, we examine the recent work of Lahiri-Dutt on the closure of the geography department at Australian National University. We are critical of her call to embrace a

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vision of the discipline based on the synthesis of human and physical geography—or, as Reynaud (1974) call it, “the myth of the unity of geography”—as a rearguard against the declension of the field. The lesson we garner from our analysis of the fall of geography at Michigan is not that to invoke the myth of unity is “good” or “bad”; rather, the appropriate question is whether such a myth is *realistic*. The work of a department under scrutiny should, at a bare minimum, appear consistent with the justificatory discourse invoked in its self-defense. As Glick (1983) notes in passing, “the Michigan case underscores the necessity for facing the unity myth head on, in order to evaluate the intellectual bases of the field, past and present” (94). In advocating for geography, it “remains important to critically evaluate the impacts and associations of any particular effort to promote geography” (Ruez, Strawser, and Hutchins 2019, 118).

We ultimately turn to an empirical account of the events leading up to the discontinuance of Michigan geography. Our reconstruction of this history is based on archival research conducted at Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, two folios of documents related to the discontinuance given to us by John Nystuen, and oral-historical interviews with Michigan faculty emeritus Ann Evans Larimore and Nystuen. We conclude with summary remarks that outline the rationale for and necessity of historical scholarship on geography’s institutional precarity, and briefly discuss how a history of geography’s institutional vulnerability might proceed.

Departmental Discontinuance and Geographic Thought

While histories of geography are not silent on the closure of academic departments, such discussions often appear only briefly as anomolous episodes in the story of geography’s growth and development (DeVivo 2015; Fink 1979; Murphy 2007). This scholarship is furthermore often limited to Ivy League institutions (Wright and Koch 2009) Columbia (Debres 1986), Yale (Martin 1988, Osofsky 2007), and—especially—Harvard (Augelli and Patton 1988; Burghardt 1988; Cohen 1988; DeVivo 2017; DeVivo 2015, 83–92; Glick 1989; Martin 1988; Smith 1987). Smith’s (1987) work on Harvard is groundbreaking, and we share his conviction that only historical scholarship can dispel the “heavy surrounding fog of mythology,” becoming “grist for subsequent, less defensive and more general histories of American geography”. Smith hoped that geographers would come “to see the Harvard affair not as an isolated event but as part of a broader history” (156). However, since its publication over three decades ago, there have been few serious attempts to write that history.

Abler (1987) suggests that the loss of Harvard geography provides a convenient,

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élite focal point for “our collective fetish with our alleged inferiority” (515). This fetish is one of our discipline’s storied qualities, traces of which can be found throughout its history (Schulten 2002; Barrows 1923; Davis 1906; Fenneman 1919). But we agree with DeVivo, when he argues that “lamented far too frequently is the matter of the Harvard demise” (2015, 176). The relative silence concerning departmental closures outside the Ivy League is meant to protect geography by keeping the pervasiveness of its institutional erosion from public view. And this anxiety is often

Given the range of statements available to the historian of geography’s anxiety as to its objects (Fenneman 1919; Sauer 1925; Hart 1982; Schaefer 1953), it is unsurprising then that Natter and Jones (1993) note that “an anxious tone frequently accompanies pronouncements regarding geography’s field,” because of the discipline’s “fear of incorporation, of being dissolved by adjoining disciplines, or of losing its center” (196). Anxiety breeds silence. Following Smith (1988) we see this “self-conscious reluctance to [...] expose any linen at all to public gaze” (160-161) as damaging. As a corrective, Smith offers the following:

Speaking from my own experience at Columbia, a more honest public discussion of the abilities and failings of geography, both as a discipline and within the department, may well have assisted in deflecting the misgivings of administrators who were more dismayed than heartened by superficial proclamations of rosiness. A more realistic recognition of our widely perceived failings would have lent credence to our positive claims. A washing of the dirty linen would have given us something clean to hang out; it would have been a sign of strength, potentially cathartic internally, a challenge externally (161).

Instead of needlessly rehearsing geography’s inferiority complex (Abler 1987), or dubiously citing the continued strength of the field at a handful of institutions, we should do “quite the opposite; the linen is to be washed, not wallowed in” (Smith 1988, 161).

We recognize that it’s not uncommon for “constructions of ‘the past’” to be “fashioned and mobilized as cultural resources, enabling and constraining individuals and institutions to operate in certain ways” (Driver 1988, 499). Histories are performative, but even as they may enable scrutiny of the discipline, they will also enable significantly more realistic auto-critique. Osofsky (2007) reminds us that “each individual closure of a geography department was driven by reasons grounded in institutional context,” even if they “also reflected broader weaknesses

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in the discipline” (431). If context really does matter, then it seems foolish to use the closure of Harvard geography, or its decline in other east coast elite institutions, as the universal point of reference in conversations regarding assaults on the field. As Roberts contends, “it is dangerous to generalize about the university,” because “there is a great variety of institutional forms of higher education in the U.S.” (Roberts 2000, 230). We therefore provide a case study of discontinuance in an institutional setting more akin to those in which American geography has generally flourished; namely, a midwestern public university, albeit one of the so-called “Public Ivies”.

One of the few scholars to allocate substantial ink to the Michigan discontinuance is Michael DeVivo (DeVivo 2015) who blames the chairs of the Michigan department for its discontinuance. He argues that the program “was characterized by lackluster leadership” and furthermore that...

...the climate of the department, marked by the acceptance of *laissez faire* leadership attributes, which were established early in its history, would present far reaching ramifications for the future of geography at Michigan (39).

DeVivo further pursues this point by dubiously asserting a parallel between closures at Michigan and Harvard, arguing that “Harvard’s demise largely came as a result of Whittlesey’s *laissez faire* leadership[,]” and “there is not real evidence to indicate that in Ann Arbor a similar situation did not occur” (169).

Argumentum ad ignorantiam: the absence of evidence isn’t, itself, evidence. Furthermore, there is evidence that the Harvard case had quite a lot to do with both the nature of the discipline and an internecine conflict that was bound up with mid-century homophobia, neither of which can be collapsed into overbroad generalizations about leadership styles. We are therefore compelled to disagree with DeVivo’s analysis for at least those reasons given by Johnston (Johnston 2016). Without considering Michigan’s leadership near the end of its tenure, which DeVivo does not, his conclusion seems to assume a degree of historical continuity in departmental leadership that is very difficult to sustain (Gould and Pitts 2002; Kish 1981). Even if we were to grant that Whittlesey’s leadership doomed Harvard geography – which we categorically do not – DeVivo provides no reason to believe that Michigan was similarly deficient, satisfied instead to sacrifice precision and realism to the gods of simplicity. We are reminded of James’s observation that “neat conceptual structures are [...] carefully protected by their proponents from the impact of deviant

facts, as when a mathematical geographer removes the deviants from his scatter diagram to make the results look more convincing” (James 1967, 23).

DeVivo’s insistence “that it was not at all the esoteric nature of the discipline that sparked failings in academic departments” (3) fully collapses under the weight of empirical evidence which suggests that disciplinary vulnerability—not deficient leadership—haunts our discipline. With all of this in mind, we follow Murphy’s (2007) lead in recognizing that while the closure of American geography departments could be blamed on “the actions of unsympathetic administrators or on internal problems[,]” focusing on these reactions is a distraction from the more existential (and more realistic) concern: that the justificatory structure of the discipline itself merits scrutiny for the part it has played and continues to play in establishing geography as “a dispensable subject in institutions of higher learning” (124).

To substantiate the importance of attending to disciplinary considerations, we can extend Smith by turning to more recent work on the closure and diminishment of geography departments outside of the United States (Chan 2011; Kong 2007; Sidaway and Johnston 2007; Lahiri-Dutt 2018; Wainwright et al. 2014). Lahiri-Dutt’s (2018) recent work on the elimination of geography at the Australian National University recognizes “a point of difference” between the subject of her analysis and the American context, noting that “Smith’s article” on Harvard geography “has not entirely been matched in Australian universities” (4), before listing those points of departure (4-5). The institutional differences between national traditions are not banal or merely cosmetic, but are directly related to the rise and fall of geography in varied academic landscapes (Dunbar 1986, Fall 2008, Johnston & Sidaway 2004).

Despite points of agreement, we disagree with Lahiri-Dutt regarding how best to respond to threats facing geography, particularly her point that “successful departments must have both physical and human geographies together.” Lahiri-Dutt’s reasoning is that “when under attack, ‘physical geography often provides the first line of defense’” against the marginalization of academic geography (16). As such, Lahiri-Dutt is emphatic that “geography cannot be fractured into physical and human, and we must embody that those two together make us what we are” (17). Finally, she claims that “we know that geography is more than one singular body of knowledge; it is at once a discipline and a disciplinary bridge that translates place and space into languages and meanings that are significant to scholars trained in other epistemologies” (15).

Here, we are reminded of what Reynaud identified as “the myth of the unity of geography.” Reynaud, an American-born French geomorphologist, outlines this fantastical story of disciplinary scope in his *La géographie entre le mythe et la sci-*

ence (1974)². In coining this phrase, Reynaud referred to the notion that geography is inclusive of all knowledges that come into contact with the surface of the earth. Reynaud made the argument that such an expansive claim was contrary to the form of institutionalized social science in the United States. United States geography, after all, emerged during a period of rapid natural- and social-scientific specialization. Glick followed Reynaud in arguing that this divergence between specialization and the generalism of geography's self-justification would lead to an academic discipline of "self-proclaimed universalists who, in spite of their protestations, were ever more confined to their own ghetto" (Glick 1983, 92).

Glick further argues that "it is clear that one result of the unity myth is that other social scientists find it difficult to believe that geography can encompass any and all other disciplines, and thus the consensus that geography cannot exist apart from other disciplines is not surprising." This consensus makes it "difficult to justify a freestanding geography program with any conviction." Turning to Harvard, Glick writes that "the integrating function" championed by those who came to the defense of the geography department "was what bothered the [Harvard] Committee [on Geography] most, because it seemed to imply that a human geographer had also to be a specialist in another discipline" (54).

For an almost self-parodic enactment of the "unity myth", We can look single conspicuous instance in which our discipline was given the opportunity to build a University in its own image. When geographer Wallace Atwood became president of Clark University in 1921, he sought to consolidate the scientific project, writ large, into his "Great Geographical Institute", terminating faculty and graduate programs along the way. The natural sciences, to Atwood, were properly geographic and to study them on the terms of other disciplines was both redundant and reductive (Koelsch 1980). Indeed, on the occasion of Atwood's inauguration, John Finlay, then Associate Editor of the New York Times and former president of New York University, concluded his paean to Atwood as follows: "[President Atwood and his corps of explorers and students] will be able to tell the Lord about this wonderful earth of his and perhaps tell Him how to 'arise and amend it'" (Clark University 1921, 56).

Of course, such a justification is not intrinsically damning. When asked about the success of the department at Clark, Cohen responded by praising as quite successful the disciplinary promiscuity of geographers:

...that the systemic approach is something that characterizes the work of most of us in the [School of Geography at Clark University]. [...]

²*Geography between myth and science*

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Our inter- and multi-disciplinary character makes for a unique department. At this moment, for example, on our geography faculty, we have an economist, an engineer, and historian, a forester and a planner. We've reversed the situation where we hear from the outside: "Well there is no need for Geography to have a separate identity. Send a geographer to work with the historians to teach them a little about the spatial aspects of life; send them to the political scientists." We've reversed that trend (Dow 1988, 108)

Just as the unity myth can prove problematic to the institutionalization of geography, so too can it be nurturing, depending on its institutional home and historical context. It is frequently argued that, for example, "if geography among its several roles is to serve as a bridge between physical and social sciences, geography departments should make every effort to maintain both physical and human geography" (Augelli and Patton 1988, 146); we simply note that a great deal is asked of the initiating "if". While there are certainly cases where this syllogism might very well fit, we contend that there are many cases in which it does not. Our disciplinary histories must be responsive to those cases where such a syllogism is "cruelly optimistic": Lauren Berlant's term for attachments that impede flourishing (Berlant 2011). In geography, as with other institutional forms built to hold disciplined knowledges, "positionings are often temporary" (Wainwright et al. 2014, 415). Histories of the discipline must account for the contingency of these positions.

Place-based institutional histories militate against unrealistic justifications and hazy nostalgia, not least because they remind us that there is no era that precedes geography's heterogeneity. Kwan (2004) notes that geography has always been characterized by its pluralism, and that "attempts to create a unified identity for geography based on a singular and purified vision seem to be untenable projects" (757). Agnew (2012) makes a similar point, arguing that the discipline "has never had much intellectual unity" (322). Peck and Olds (2009) argue that we ought not waste time dreaming of new "monism", even if we ought to locate an axis along which to orchestrate a "collective endeavor". Vigilance against hazy nostalgia and convenient mythologies is necessary and for the good; geographers have ably demonstrated that nostalgic images of a bounded discipline are always exercises of discursive power. As Cockayne et al. (2018) remind us, the question of what is "central" to a discipline has a way of raising the question of who articulates the terms on which the center is articulated. However, even as we militate against hazy nostalgia, we must also militate against unrealistic justifications. Generic "bridge" discourses and unity myths cannot serve as substitutes for realistic assessments of

the geographical enterprise as it occurs within specific departments; as we find in the case of Michigan, these bridging defenses can be not only inadequate but instrumental to decisions to close departments.

Johnston (1997) argues that we must construct “a formal response – a disciplinary defense - [...] at an institutional [...] scale” (353). This requires that we strategically attend to the changing spatiality and temporality of the university. As Findlay and Werritty (2010) insightfully suggest, “if the academic place of the discipline is to be secure, then it continually has to be made and re-made [...] through pro-active engagement with the place-based institutional contexts in which geography finds itself located” (228). Moreover, there are “a variety of meanings and geographies” had by the discipline which depend on “institutional settings, collective actions and individual strategies” (Sidaway and Johnston 2007, 75–76); if the development of new disciplinary orientations is placed in distinctive heterotopic locales (Barnes 2004), so too must be the erosion of geography’s institutional security.

We see this is a matter of some historiographic importance as well. As has been demonstrated by both media theorists and geographers, much can be gained by taking “eroding, breakdown and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points”, as Jackson puts it (Jackson 2014); as Jackson, as well as Mattern (2018) and Graham (2009) emphasize, focusing on breakdown allows the researcher to see the habitual acts of maintenance and patterns of investment that sustain the appearance of stability. We understand this work on breakdown and repair to apply equally well to matters of historical concern, suggesting something like a “breakdown historiography” for the history of geography; rather than spinning more tales of geography’s growth and institutionalization, we instead focus on its erosion in American institutions of higher education, asking how “geography” has been maintained by unity myths... and by what has happened when these convenient mythologies fail. As we take Withers and Mayhew (2002) to suggest, such historical inquiry “can surely encourage us to [...] generate new modes of self-reflection, [...] which expand our vistas about what the discipline can be by freeing us from misapprehensions concerning what the discipline has been about” (26).

We now recount the story of the Michigan department, with an eye to examining *both* how the department’s closure was catalyzed by the rapidly shapeshifting political economy of higher education in the 1970s-80s *and* how the “unity myth” and other discourses deployed in the department’s self-justification fractured and failed. These fractures and failures complicate both the oversimplistic narratives of geography’s demise and the oversimplistic rhetoric that has poorly served a discipline in need of defense.

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“The Omega Affair”: Discontinuing Geography at the University of Michigan

On January 25, 1981, chair of the geography department John Nystuen was summoned to the office of Associate Dean Bob Holbrook under the pretense of a conversation about changes in departmental funding. On arrival, Holbrook informed Nystuen that Dean John Knott wanted to be in on the meeting, walking the chairperson over to the Dean’s office. The promised discussion of departmental funding took place, but with an edge rather more existential than anticipated; Knott informed Nystuen that the college was initiating proceedings that would review the department for possible discontinuance. Despite the chair’s protests, the deed was done; the University Vice President for Academic Affairs John Frye had already approved the decision, an announcement had already been delivered to the University’s Information Services department; the information would be made public in a matter of a few hours. When Nystuen arrived back at his office, he found a letter that had been delivered to all LS&A chairs informing them of the discontinuance proceedings (Hunt 1981).

Professor George Kish recalls the shock of the day several months later:

At 10 o’clock on January 27 [sic], 1981, I went to meet a class. At 11 o’clock, I was met by my chairman, who at that time had just returned from the office of the dean to be informed that discontinuance proceedings were established, instituted against the department. We found out after the news, the radio, and the television heard it. I think the best reaction was from the son of our first chairman, John McMurray, teaching in Waterloo, Ontario, who called me that night and said he was out on a field trip with students, he had his radio in his car, he heard it, and he barely avoided the ditch. It was incredible. (Kish 1981, n.p.)

When asked by the *Michigan Daily* why the announcement of discontinuance proceedings astonished him, Kish responds: “because we are a department that has had an existence since 1915 in connection with geology and since 1923 as an independent department. That’s a very long time. That’s first. Second, because in the 41 years I’ve been a member of the faculty, I know of only one instance when a department was discontinued. That was in the public health school” (Parrent 1981, 1). He refers to the closure of the Population Planning Department, which in 1977 had occasioned the creation of formal University procedures for initiating departmental discontinuances (Melchiori 1982; Peckham 1994). He also argues that the department might count on the protection of “the department’s standing



Figure 1: John Nystuen breaks the news to graduate students.

nationally,” as “one of the top 10 among over 150 - or close to 200 - departments in the United States and Canada.” (Parrent 1981, 1) Finally, he argues—maybe most implausibly—that “geography as an independent department is an established fact of university life all over the world and in North America” (Parrent 1981, 1) and that geography cannot be dissolved because it is a “discipline as old as any - going back to the days of Alexander in the Third Century B.C. It has had an independent existence. It does not lend itself to absorption particularly well” (Parrent 1981, 2). John Nystuen, the department chair, did not share Kish’s optimism. “We can’t get rid of chemistry or history, those are central to the college,” he said. “We will have a hard time convincing our colleagues that we are central.” (Benet 1981, 7)

Students of the department and alumni at the time were also inclined to making arguments in terms of disciplinary identity. Gunther Folk, an alumnus of the department’s M.A. program, was surprised by the e.g., Kish’s surprise. (Volk 1981) Writing an op-ed in the *Daily*, Folk asks: “is there something inherent in the make-up of this discipline that dooms it to extinction? Looking at the field of geography today, the casual observer is overwhelmed by a bewildering hodge-podge of sub-disciplines that bear as much resemblance to the geography of Herodotus... as a bull-drawn cart bears to a Cadillac” (Volk 1981, 4). This fragmentation of the discipline was, to Folk, responsible for the prospect of geography’s “unjustified and unnecessary death”.

Daniel Gaskill, another graduate student in the department, writes a warning

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to members of fellow small departments: never send to know for whom the bell tolls. (Gaskill 1981) James Akerman and John Oppenheim, graduate students in the department, write in the *Daily* that they “wonder if the administration really understands what modern geographers are academically involved in at Michigan. No we are not a discipline of map and place-name experts.” It embraces “a broad spectrum of knowledge and techniques,” and has a “long academic tradition.” However, they are pessimistic that despite their department’s merits, “the decision to initiate discontinuance proceedings seems pre-planned and biased in favor of the administration’s position” (Akerman and Oppenheim 1981).

This pessimism is borne out in the record; there is much to suggest that the fate of the department was more or less sealed by the time discontinuance proceedings were announced. In a meeting with students held much later, after the department review was released, committee members heard from one unfortunate undergraduate junior, Daniel Shevrin. Shevrin had transferred to Michigan from the University of Colorado after state cutbacks at that institution had led to a faculty exodus. Having been chased from department to department by austerity with a taste for geography, we can understand why he argued that it wasn’t the fault of the department, but of its misalignment with educational priorities (Inglis 1981d). A cartoon submitted by graduate students to the *Michigan Daily* and published on February 14, 1981 was more or less correct to suggest that by the time administrators took their seats around the table, the geography department was already carved for consumption (Geography Department Graduate Students 1981).

Even at this early date, and the designation of the committee’s activities as a “review”, there was reason to believe that the department’s chances of survival were slim. First, and most obviously, questioning the merits of a department’s continuation in public does immediate reputational damage. A department operating under the cloud of discontinuance proceedings is a department whose ability to hire new faculty, recruit new graduate students, and secure support from its institution is entirely crippled. A contemporary article in the *Ann Arbor Observer* takes note of this: “administrators were not about to let a college’s executive committee inflict severe damage on a department and possibly on the University’s reputation by announcing discontinuance hearings unless they were reasonably confident that the department would, in fact, be abolished.” (Hunt 1981, 30). Indeed, Vice President Frye approved the review only after “extensive” private discussions with Knott who had explained in detail his rationale (Hunt 1981). Clearly, the Dean of LS&A was, at best, pessimistic about the ability of the department to survive review.

However, these one-on-one discussions are less decisive than the fact that the LS&A Executive Committee had already voted in private and unanimously that

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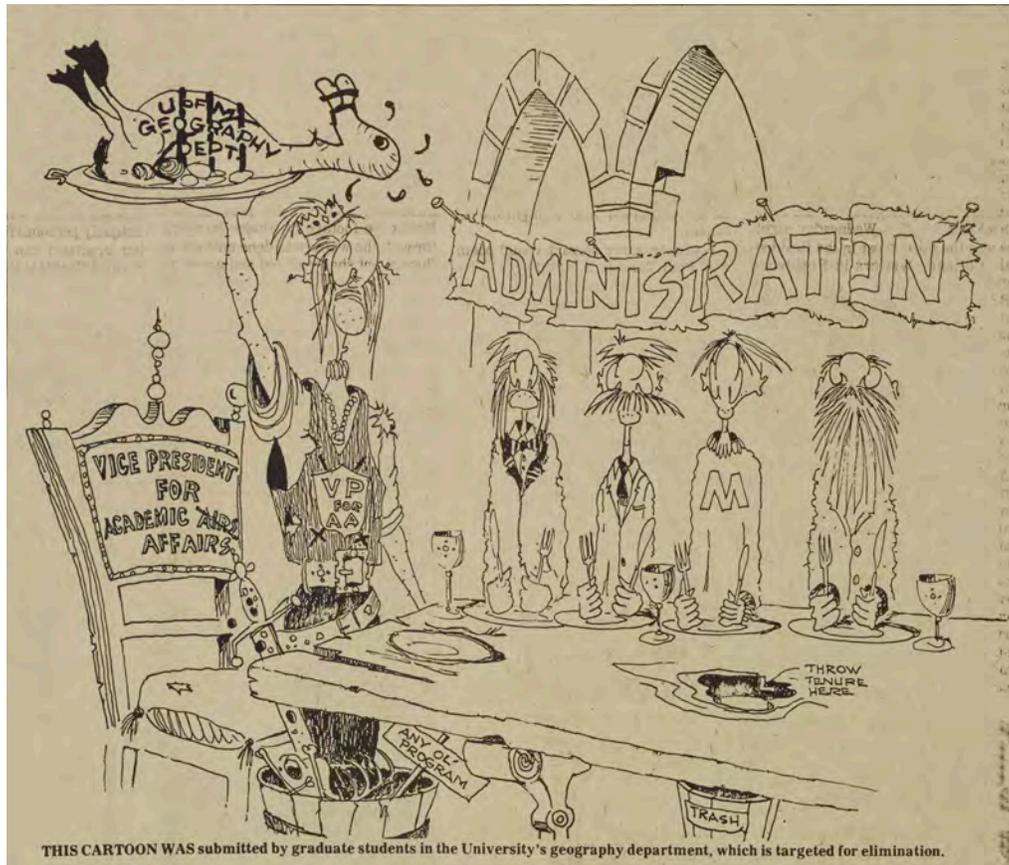


Figure 2: Cartoon submitted by graduate students in the Department of Geography to the Michigan Daily

the geography department should be put forward for discontinuance; this took place after extensive and secretive discussion in the fall of 1980. At the same time, the Faculty Senate Assembly was being briefed on the University's discontinuation policy (Peckham 1994). John Nystuen was not far off the mark when he claimed that the members of the department would ultimately be "judged by our accusers" (Hulik 1981b, A-7). The same executive committee that had marked geography as the sole candidate for discontinuance would also be responsible for evaluating the results of the formal review process and making recommendations to the Board of Regents.

The prospect of discontinuance was formally proposed by Professor Eric Rabkin, then-Associate Dean for Long Range Planning in the College of Litera-

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ture, Science, and the Arts. Since the late 1970s, it had been agreed-upon strategy among college administrators that under conditions of retrenchment, across-the-board cuts should be minimized even as more severe cuts were imposed upon marginal academic units. This would permit salaries to remain high and faculty support to remain strong among departments deemed exceptional. It was Rabkin's job to identify candidates for discontinuance; he landed on geography for several reasons: many of its faculty were not terribly productive; numbers of undergraduate concentrators were low; and faculty could be easily relocated. Though the department had been targeted for possible discontinuance since the mid-1970s, it was Rabkin who, in August 1980, proposed to the Executive Committee that the department be discontinued to the Executive Committee (Hunt 1981).

In a manner of speaking at least. Instead of identifying the department, in August 1980 he presented the Executive Committee with a description of an anonymized department, dubbed "Department Omega". This was the geography department, though Knott and Rabkin had modified the enrollment numbers and the number of tenured faculty to make "Omega" appear slightly higher-performing and difficult to disband than the Geography department. The identity of "Department Omega" was revealed to the executive committee on December 4, 1980, at which point committee members protested: shouldn't they profile other departments in the college to ensure that the selection be fair? Knott presented a range of similarly anonymized departments at the following meeting on December 11. On January 8, 1981, almost three weeks before members of the department were notified, the LS&A Executive Committee came to the unanimous conclusion that if any department was to have its future very publicly called into question it would be geography (Hunt 1981). After these earlier decisions became public some time later, those sympathetic to the faculty took the title "Omega" as an honorific, referring to the entire proceedings as "the Omega Affair." (Nystuen 2016) "Survivors" of the affair identified themselves as the "Omega Society" (Rice 1982).

Given this pre-history, we shouldn't be surprised when we read Dean Knott hardly striving to appear objective in his January 27, 1981 letter giving direction to faculty on the review committee—Sidney Fine (History), Harvey Brazer (Economics), and Albert Cain (Psychology). "Our preliminary assessment aroused doubt about the present quality of the department and its prospects for improvement [...] We also question whether the discipline is sufficiently coherent and central to the mission of the College for us to continue to support it by means of a departmental structure" (Knott 1981b) Questions of quality; questions of coherence;

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these played into an initial assessment taking place well before formal proceedings were announced.

And more practically, questions of relocatability: the correlate of a lack of coherence is a surfeit of flexibility. Discontinuance, as draconian as it may appear, was never understood by the University Administration to be a threat to tenure. Any discontinued department would need a new home for its faculty in order to not touch the academy's third rail. Geography, partially by virtue of its adherence to a self-articulation based in interdisciplinary "bridging" discourse looked uniquely well-suited. "Our assessment of our ability to relocate the tenured faculty entered into the decision," said Knott (Benet 1981, 1) in an early interview with the *Michigan Daily*. The practical correlate of the unity myth is relocatability.

The department pushed back. Writing on behalf of the faculty of the department, John Nystuen takes procedural issue with the manner in which the discontinuance proceedings were initiated: first, at no point were faculty of the department consulted during the evaluation of "Department Omega", only becoming aware of the deliberations after the damage was done. He cites the Regents' Guidelines for Discontinuance, established in 1979 after the controversy erupting around the University's first departmental discontinuance (as noted above, the School of Public Health's Department of Population Planning in 1977). These guidelines require prior faculty consultation and an "independent assessment... by a peer review." This was seen as a serious breach. (Nystuen and Knott 1981)

Second, the department objected to how the review committee was named. This committee was named and announced before consultation with the department; the committee was entirely social scientists, despite the geography department's claim to sit between social and physical scientists; the committee members were from large departments (history, psychology, economics) and would thus not be sympathetic to arguments in support of numerically smaller departments; and finally, two committee members—Sidney Fine and Harvey Brazer—were members of a 1975 College Priorities Committee that had raised doubts as to the necessity of the department. No members of a subsequent Social Science Program Evaluation Committee that reviewed the department favorably in 1977 were named to the review committee. In Nystuen's assessment, "this does not strike us as a completely impartial choice of membership" (Nystuen and Knott 1981). The first of these concerns was addressed by the addition of Arnold Kluge, a zoologist, to the committee. The latter two were dismissed as impugning the impartiality of fellow faculty. Brazer, in an interview with the *Michigan Daily*, said that his participation in the 1975 committee shouldn't be taken to indicate that his mind and that of Sidney Fine were made up; rather, it had acquainted them with the review process;

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“we are capable of making rational judgments” (Clark 1981, 1).

Reviewing Geography, 1975-1977

The 1981 review came on the heels of a series of three reviews carried out over the course of the 1970s' latter half—as George Kish groaned in his address to the East Lakes AAG, “oh there was internal review, there was external review” (Kish 1981). These reviews were carried out by variously constituted Program Evaluation Committees, and given to e.g., the College Priorities Committee tasked with recommending “difficult choices” as the effects of inflation and a floundering domestic auto industry were felt by Universities in Michigan.

In fact, the University of Michigan had begun experimenting with active re-trenchment in 1970. Following a budget shortfall at the state level, a 1% cut to state appropriations was passed down after the annual budget was already approved. This was followed by a 3% cut in 1971-72. Conditions did not improve the following year: state appropriations fell \$11 million short of expectations, on top of another 2% retroactive cut in 1973-74. In that same year, 1973, geopolitics conspired to worsen the fiscal outlook: OPEC imposed an embargo on nations that had supported Israel during the the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War, driving domestic auto prices up and domestic auto sales down, eroding the Michigan tax base and causing University energy costs to rise dramatically (Peckham 1994).

The University pursued a strategy of making up for these shortfalls through increases in student tuition. Between 1971 and 1980, University tuition would almost triple. By this same year, the university would have the dubious honor of charging the highest tuition of its peer institutions. By the end of the 1970s, the University's form had changed radically in a manner consistent with broader structural changes in the funding of higher education, albeit taken to the extreme—from a broadly accessible public institution to a research-focused University sustained by exploding tuition and private giving (Fabricant and Brier 2016; Peckham 1994). Where previously, the state of Michigan had been a unusually stalwart supporter of higher education, by 1980 it had fallen to 35th out of 50 states in rankings of higher education expenditure per capita (Peckham 1994).

It was in the context that the University began seriously considering program discontinuance; university administrators struggled to locate colleges were tasked with evaluating their own programs and establishing priorities. The geography department would be reviewed first in 1975 and again in 1977, well before the 1981 Special Committee report that would result in discontinuance. Each provided

argumentative fodder for subsequent reviews; each also gives us the benefit of an image painted of our discipline by external parties.

The first of these reviews was conducted by the Program Evaluation Committee for Social Sciences chaired by Jan Kmenta (Economics), Daniel Levine (Journalism), Warren Norman (Psychology), Bradford Perkins (History), and Maxwell Reade (Mathematics) (1975). It's worth noting that of the reviews to follow, this was the only one to review geography alongside other departments: anthropology, economics, history, journalism, political science, psychology, and sociology.

The review is lukewarm, if not damning. It notes that the American Council on Education (ACE) ranking of the department had slipped to the ninth position in the 1964, to recover second position in 1969. However, outside evaluators from the discipline (who remain unnamed) raise "quite emphatic" doubts as to whether the same rating would hold in 1975, "contending that, in recent years, Michigan's reputation [had] already begun to slip." (39) They explicitly acknowledge what they refer to as the Department's "selective pluralism", suggesting that it may be leading to a "department pushing only a little in each of too many ways". They cite teaching overload, and an increase in student credit hours per faculty which diminished research output and prestige even as it contributed to "exceedingly cheap teaching".

Disciplinarily, however, the assessment is relatively rosy, stating that...

Geography as a discipline, is still in a period of relatively vigorous growth with the newly created and/or expanded universities of the 1960's as well as junior and community colleges continuing to create demand. But the sharpest increase in demand arises from government and the private sector, especially in the fields of urban, regional, and resources planning. The department at Michigan is responding to these changes in societal demand, but seems cognizant of the potential dangers in following contemporary trends too closely and wholeheartedly. (42)

This report was taken up by the College Priorities Committee, who issued a subsequent report, which was used by the college to dictate priorities for resource allocation—this was the body that included Brazer and Fine, who would later become contentious additions to the 1981 committee. This group very selectively read the 1975 report, choosing to emphasize the negative assessments of faculty productivity and research programs proffered by outside reviewers. Additionally, the CPC chooses to note that "many distinguished Universities do not have Geography departments and raise the question as to whether this university must have

one” (Brazer et al. 1975, 54). Despite positive disciplinary assessment by the PEC, the CPC read the absence of geography at major institutions as an indictment of its necessity, if not necessarily its merit. These reports did not damn the department. But by providing arguments that could be selectively excerpted, they contributed to an eventual evidentiary body that could be used by later evaluators. This is especially true for a generally positive 1977 evaluation, which would prove to be the penultimate evaluation faced by the department before its discontinuance.

The year 1977 would prove somewhat decisive; a new Social Science Program Evaluation Committee (SSPEC) was tasked with evaluating the geography department in particular (Goldberg et al. 1977). This new committee comprised chair David Goldberg (sociology), Donald Eschman (geology), Gerald Kline (Journalism)—who had also served on the 1975 SSPEC committee—and David Krantz (psychology). They were instructed to “discern the direction of the field in general, to put [their] fingers on the pulse of the department, and to develop a set of recommendations to the College for a strategy that could range from increasing the Geography budget to recommending deletion of the department” (1) In 1977, discontinuance was very much on the table, in the context of looming fiscal problems in the state and at the University.

The committee declared that they were “puzzled” by both their task and by the range of possible outcomes they were to consider. How, they ask, could a report on one department inform the development of priorities for the college? Relative to what, exactly, should the department be prioritized? They were also puzzled by the choice of geography, as “normally, one might anticipate the the choice of a unit that was of poor quality or has little relevance” (1)—nothing suggested that this described the geography department. They note the high ranking granted by the ACE in 1969, the department’s low ratio of student credit hour per dollar invested, recent increases in enrollment, and the presence of strong core faculty.

The committee seemed to think that it was left to speculate about the reasons for the examination. They note that the department lost three senior faculty through resignation—Waldo Tobler, Gunnarr Olsson, and Barney Nietschmann. This is true, and even slightly narrow. Melvin Marcus, a physical geography and glaciologist, had also left in 1974. They note that Tobler was a special loss, his analytical work being seen as on the cutting edge of the disciplinary vanguard. The committee and, it would seem, many in the department saw Olsson’s departure as “the elimination of a destructive, certainly divisive element. Olsson’s work and teaching had wandered from his earlier important contributions and he had become, in the minds of almost all department members, an ‘organizational’ problem, contributing to Departmental difficulties.” It is not difficult to imagine how Olsson’s move

from his early work on “spatial theory and model building and the role of these concepts in the specification and testing of a priori statements” (Olsson 1968, 115; see also Olsson 1969) to the social-theoretical terrain of his later work, concerned with semiotics and the cartographic rhetoric of “the Land of Thought-And-Action” (Olsson 1998; Olsson 1991) might seem jarring.

They also assume that their task followed from the negative report of the 1975 College Priorities Committee, which dwelt on the possible inaccuracy of the ACE ranking, and the fact that prestigious institutions often went without geography departments, listing Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. This latter fact in particular “[kept] cropping up in discussions and earlier documents” and therefore required comment. “We react to this in a few ways: 1. The few departmental deletions that occurred are rather old history at this point in time. The deletions took place when the field was different. Each of these places has many geographers. 3. What is to be gained from dispersal of a department faculty to several other departments?” (3)

They do note familiar disciplinary heterogeneity. Despite the fact that the Goldberg committee characterizes recent changes in geography as “fairly normal for the development of most social science disciplines,” and even maintains that geography is “a growing discipline of increasing importance” the Goldberg committee notes that it “has some serious internal divisions” that were not resolved by the emergence of computation and nomothetic approaches. Modeling, though, dressed in the clothing of Elijah, had also failed to make the other schismatic disciplines of the social sciences coherent: “the expected theoretical messiah from mathematical model-building has not emerged as it has not emerged in Sociology, for example.” Writing on behalf of the committee, Goldberg suggests that what is unique to geographers is an absence of substantive discernment: “there is a group who cannot discern the appropriate substantive questions for the discipline—that is, they are crippled by the fact that Geography is not Psychology, Sociology, Economics.” Goldberg concludes, “so what do I do?” (4)

Broadly, the assessment of the 1977 committee is that the department is performing in a manner fairly normal for comparable departments. They dismiss as absurd the notion that they might recommend its deletion or absorption into other academic units. They recommend strengthening the department by bolstering productivity, and hiring new faculty, namely “another mensch on the floor,” a “translator-mensch.” “We don’t think it matters what the field is. This person must be fully literate in the ‘new’ spatial-mathematical dimensions of the field but he must be smart enough to recognize that the new ‘theory’ won’t be anything but a game or a toy until it is hooked into the real world problems of geographers.” (6-7) After such a colorful description of one needed faculty line, it is almost a letdown to

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read the same committee recommend that the department also needs, prescribed in two words, an “analytic cartographer”.

In retrospect, the 1977 report was seen as an attempt to gather evidentiary support for department discontinuance. The Department of Population Planning had been discontinued only months before (Melchiori 1982), and this report was relied upon by the committee responsible for program discontinuance in 1981, as well as those responsible for evaluating “Department Omega” in Fall 1980. Much of their concern had to do with the departure of the department’s most productive faculty members, a concern which would be exacerbated by the departure of Thomas Dewtlyer in 1978 and by the unfortunate death of Everette Bannister, who was killed in a car crash in 1979. The paper trail left by a series of evaluations that could be selectively read became existential when fiscal austerity, a reality in higher education since the early 1970s, became acute in the early 1980s following the implosion of the domestic auto industry and the cataclysmic disinvestment of the American Rust Belt (Harvey 2007).

Austerity Arrives

Despite the faltering economy, particularly in Michigan³, it initially appeared as though the fiscal climate would improve for Michigan universities come 1980. In January, the state governor, William Millikan, proposed a 9.5% increase to higher education appropriations. Fiscal winds would change rapidly. The state legislature

³On January 16, 1979, the people of Iran overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah. The Ayatollah Khomeini quickly moved to cut Iran’s oil production, sending energy prices skyward. Domestic auto sales, already diminished by the energy crises of the previous decade, were decimated. The domestic auto industry, on which the State of Michigan relied for tax revenue, imploded. Chrysler workers were forced to make concessions amounting to \$1.1 billion; 200,000 auto workers were fired or laid off in 1980. Ford closed 9 factories between 1980 and 1982 and cut production by 1 million units. Sales of Ford vehicles dropped 47% between 1978 and 1982, shedding 46% of its hourly labor force (affecting 100,000 workers) over the same period. Between 1980 and 1981, G.M. alone laid off 200,000 workers (Cutcher-Gerschenfeld, Brooks, and Malloy 2015; Sawyers 1996).

Alongside the contraction in the domestic auto market, the United States Federal Reserve, led by Paul Volker, was presiding over an enormous change in U.S. monetary policy. An adherent of the monetarist tradition, he understood the stagflation and swelling unemployment of the 1970s as the inevitable outcome of the Keynesian consensus that had previously governed U.S. monetary policy; Volker argued that by pursuing full employment as a primary policy goal, the Fed had created the conditions for inflation without end. Therefore, the Federal Reserve policy shifted to restrict money supply and increase interest rates. This policy change (called the “Volker shock”) was implemented in October 1979. It would drive widespread disinvestment in the domestic manufacturing sector that acted alongside oil price volatility and automotive layoffs to further cripple the American rust belt (Blyth 2015; Harvey 2007).]

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approved a 4.7% increase; however, by June Millikan had changed course and was attempting to further diminish the increase in state expenditure. The University, needing to set salary and tuition levels, passed a budget in June, well before the state government gave the final word on appropriations; this budget anticipated a 3% increase, with a baked-in contingency plan for a 0% increase. These would prove insufficient. Come November 1980, the state passed down a 5% decrease, leading to an immediate \$9.6 million budget shortfall (Wolcott 1981). These budgetary negotiations were dire, especially so because they were taking place in an exceedingly volatile monetary climate. While a 5% budget increase sounds favorable, this was in an economy characterized by inflation rates of 13.3% (1979) and 12.5% (1980), respectively. A 5% budget increase would still have represented a major proportional decrease in spending power, and a 5% cut was devastating.

These rapid budgetary contractions catalyzed a series of especially austere years in Ann Arbor, during which Harold Shapiro served as president of the University. Shapiro, who had assumed the position on January 1, 1980, was an economist who previously had chaired the LS&A budget priorities committee and served as Vice President for Academic Affairs. He had first gained notoriety as Vice President of Academic Affairs, in which position he turned back tenure promotion cases, then an unwelcome novelty among University of Michigan faculty (Peckham 1994). He advocated a plan of “smaller but better”, which eschewed “shared poverty” and across-the-board cuts in favor of targeted cuts to weak units. These were the conditions that found the geography department facing discontinuance.

Controversy and Contention

The report of the committee assigned to review geography would be released on April 7, 1981. This followed a long, contentious eruption of faculty support for both the department and the review committee, playing out over the course of specially convened faculty meetings (Inglis 1981b; Inglis 1981a).⁴ It recommended discon-

⁴The Dean of LS&A, John Knott, made his case for discontinuance public speaking before a faculty meeting on February 3, 1981: “I’m calling for an effort to make the hard choices,” arguing that shared poverty was a “sure road to mediocrity.” (Inglis 1981a, 1) Discontinuing the department would save upwards of \$200,000 per year. Faculty response was apparently mixed. The *Michigan Daily* notes that some praised the executive committee’s “courageous step”, though these faculty remain unnamed. Named, though, are the dissenters. David Goldberg, who had chaired the 1977 Social Science committee (and called for a “translator-mensch”) was mystified, wondering how it was that the department had come through two reviews unscathed, only to have the issue reemerge. The meeting also heard a rare statement from a member of the executive committee that had reviewed “department Omega.” Harold Jacobson, a political science professor, argued that secrecy

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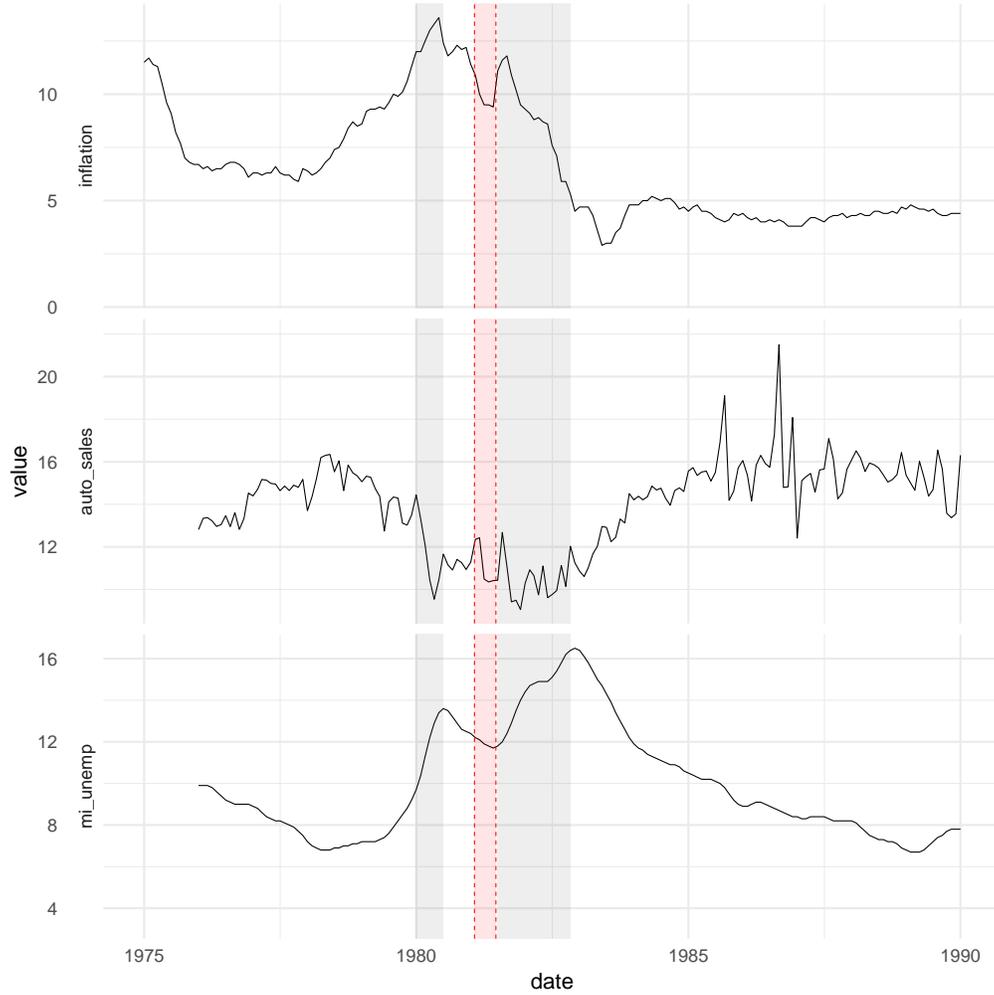


Figure 3: Inflation rate, domestic auto sales volume, and the unemployment rate in the state of Michigan. Red lines represent (right-to-left) the initiation of discontinuance and its approval by the Board of Regents. Grey boxes represent recessions. Data from the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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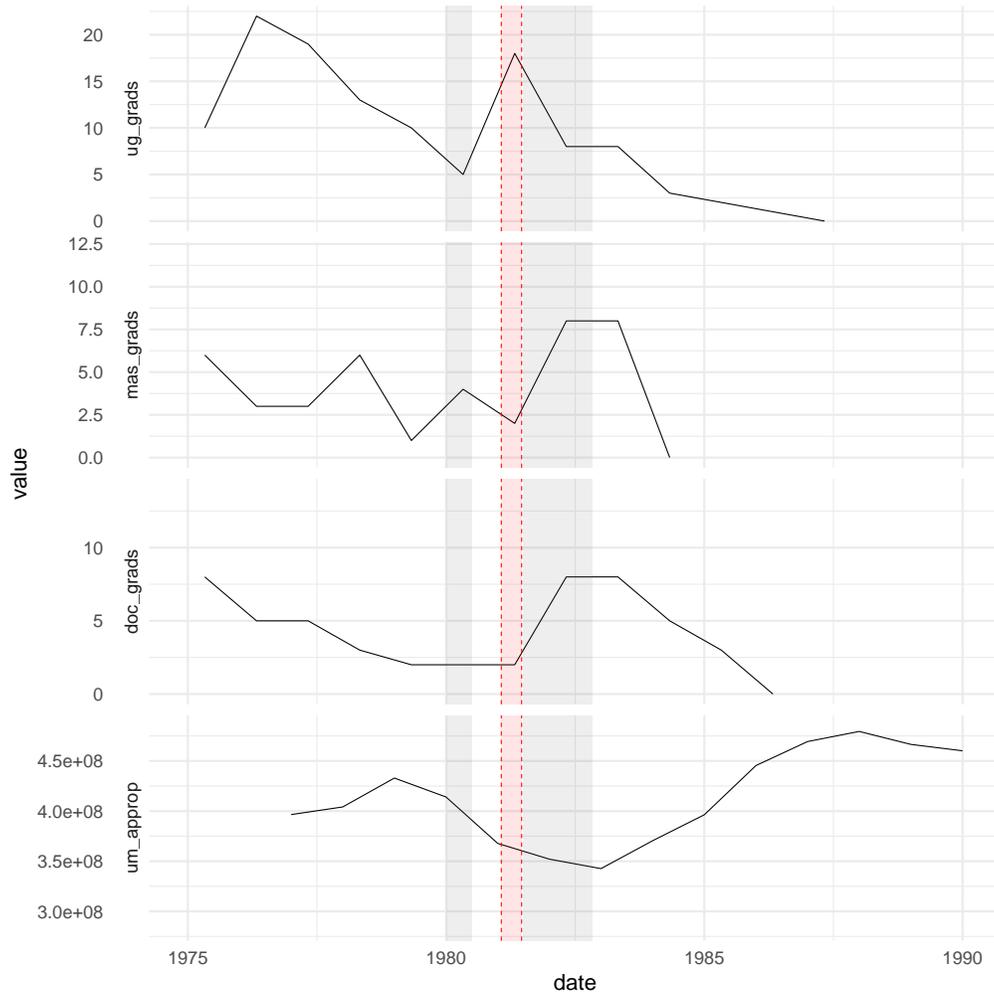


Figure 4: Undergraduates graduating with a degree in geography at Michigan; master's students graduating with a degree in geography; doctoral students graduating with a degree in geography; inflation-adjusted state appropriations to the University of Michigan. Red rectangle represents the initiation of discontinuance and its approval by the Board of Regents. Grey boxes represent recessions. Data from the University of Michigan Office of the Registrar and the Michigan Higher Education Institutional Data Inventory (HEIDI).

tinuance in dire terms: “we are unanimously agreed that the department of geography cannot be continued in its present form. We believe that to do nothing at this juncture would be a grievous mistake. [...] The Department has obviously suffered serious losses that, under present or foreseeable budget circumstances, cannot be repaired. Nor can the Department be expected to function effectively, let alone flourish, as long as its faculty and students believe that its activities are likely to be subject to continuous criticism. [...] We are convinced that decisive action must be taken.” (Brazer et al. 1981, 33) The committee recommends either complete discontinuance or, at the very least, the elimination of the program in cultural geography. Perversely, the very action of reviewing the department (subjecting it to continuous criticism) is taken as a justification for the most drastic possible outcome of that same review.

One of the committee’s primary concerns was that exactly those arguments made in favor of the department’s continuance—the unity myth, that geography bridged the natural and social sciences—in practical terms argued for the opposite. The discipline claims interdisciplinarity: the committee note that “it seems clear that geography is a pluralistic discipline, one that straddles the natural sciences, the social sciences, and, some would say, the humanities. The breadth of the discipline is seen as one of its great merits by those who emphasize the importance of its role in bridging the physical social sciences.” (11) An endorsement of the unity myth in the abstract, though, does not imply that the argument proves helpful in the

was kept with good intentions. “One of our prime concerns was not to injure the department,” he says, arguing that “if we chose to not open the case, we feared that we would have irreparably damaged the department” (Inglis 1981a, 1). It’s worth noting Jacobson’s implication: that the damage caused by the announcement of discontinuance proceedings was already irreparable.

Professor of mathematics Wilfred Kaplan introduced a motion to suspend the procedure until debates over the legitimacy of the executive committee’s procedure had been resolved—had the executive committee erred in not conferring with members of the department before declaring the possibility of discontinuance open? Procedure conspired against an immediate answer; faculty could not vote on a motion during the same meeting in which it was introduced (Inglis 1981a).

An answer would come in well advance of the next regularly scheduled meeting. Over 100 faculty members signed a petition calling for a special meeting on February 17 to vote on Kaplan’s resolution. Over 250 faculty attended the meeting; ultimately the resolution would be “narrowly defeated”, though we cannot locate a specific tally of votes. This was not a faculty memorandum on geography, but on the continuance of discontinuance, as it were; should the proceedings be stopped pending the clearance of the executive committee of any wrongdoing? The remarks of Bert Hornback, a professor of English, do merit examination. He suggests that, though the fiscal justification for discontinuance is dubious, “If they want to abolish geography because geography itself isn’t any good, isn’t worth studying on its own, then we could argue that on principle” (Inglis 1981b, 1). Disciplinary dubiousness was granted a legitimacy that fiscal exigency was not.

context of sustained review. The committee also notes, damningly, that “although lip service is paid to the commonalities among physical and human geographers, there appears to be only limited professional interaction between them. The very arguments that speak in the abstract for the importance of the discipline [...] appear to have little applicability here.” (30) In other words, the gulf between the unity myth and the actually-existing work of geography departments was taken as evidence of the department’s frailty and the discipline’s invalidity.

While there were other concerns, including declining graduate enrollment and the productivity of department faculty members, the committee was persistently vexed by the discipline’s (lack of) coherence and its conspicuous absence at elite institutions of higher education. They note studies in the history of geography which point out the great difficulty with which the discipline established a foothold in American academe. The committee notes that not only do elite institutions not maintain departments, but that this does not even mean that they have difficulty employing geographers. “Harvard University does not have a Geography Department, but its faculty does include four or five geographers. [...] Quality of institution aside, the model four-year college and university in the United States does not include an independent department of geography.” (14) The closure of Harvard geography isn’t cited as a precedent—Harvard may as well have never offered geography; it is the *absence* of geography at Harvard that is noted, not its discontinuance.

On the matter of discipline coherence, the committee sought outside help. Three geographers were recruited to provide perspective on the viability of the Michigan department: Julian Wolpert (Princeton), a regional scientist and locational theorist; John Borchert (University of Minnesota), a resource geographer; and John Rayner (Ohio State), a physical geographer and atmospheric scientist. Certainly this interdisciplinary make-up had something to do with their suggestion, invoked by the committee, that “cultural geography has diminished in significance as a field within the discipline.” (13) Indeed, they quote Wolpert as suggesting that “the physical and urban specialties should be the mainstay of the training of majors and graduate students.” The disagreements between trained geographers regarding what constituted legitimacy within the discipline contributed in a very pragmatic way to the devaluation of the department’s work: selecting three prominent geographers was no certain way to obtain a synthetic or generous view of the discipline. We might remember that in Smith’s telling, Isaiah Bowman’s indifference towards the Harvard geography’s research output (and his disgust at Whittlesey’s relationship with Kemp) played a role in ensuring its demise (Smith 1987). If the 1975 report notices the department’s “selective pluralism”,

the 1981 report notices the discipline's composition by a "loose alliance among individuals".

Finally, in several existing historical accounts of the department's closure there is an allusions made to the departure of senior faculty in the years leading up to the discontinuance proceedings (as did the 1977 review). Certainly, the loss of Marcus, Olsson, Tobler, Nietschmann, Detwyler, and Bannister did not help the department's case. However, their departure was exacerbated by the fiscal situation at Michigan; the department received authorization to make a only small number of junior appointments. Perversely, this was seen as a failure of competitiveness when it came time for the evaluation.

It is something like a twist of the knife to see the committee write that "it is our understanding that programs other than geography will also be selected for review, we do not believe it incumbent upon the committee to demonstrate that Geography is or is not the weakest department in the College" (4). The committee was given its task and understood that other departments might be evaluated as well. Knott eventually discloses that such a comparative review was never planned; indeed, it had arguably already happened when the executive committee singled out Department Omega for review.

Faculty were given the opportunity to vote on the report of the Review Committee on April 13, 1981. Sue Inglis of the *Michigan Daily* calls it "one of the most turbulent faculty meetings in the history of the University" (Inglis 1981c, 1; see also Hulik 1981a) The meeting proceeded in many ways as one might expect a contentious faculty meeting to proceed. Harvey Brazer, member of the Review Committee opened the special LS&A faculty meeting with a prepared statement, introducing a motion to "approve" the report ("Minutes of Special LSA Meeting" 1981). The motion was seconded by Sydney Fine, a second member of the Review Committee. Many raised the by-now familiar objection that both of the men who introduced the motion and secred on the had also served on a negative 1975 report, biasing them towards dire conclusions. David Goldberg argued that the review was excessively focused on a rough patch and that a long-term decision was being made based on short-term performance. Many criticized the university for not making resources available for hiring new faculty, noting the perversity of a situation in which a department was being punished for not successfully recruiting faculty using faculty lines that the University refused to make available.

But ultimately, the meeting was dominated by semantic confusion: the report put foward two alternatives (complete discontinuance and discontinuance of cultural geography); which would an "approval" of the report signal faculty support for? To address this confusion, professor Bradford Perkins moved to substitute the

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word “approve” with “accept and refer to the Executive Committee”. This drew subsequent procedural ire: the faculty were expressly asked to render a judgement. Approving or rejecting “acceptance” evaded this task. At the close of discussion, the amended language was defeated 104-110, as was the original motion: a count of 80-138 with 22 abstentions. The faculty had voted to not “approve” and not to “accept and refer”: certainly a vague outcome.

In response to frequent accusations of bias by Brazer and Fine, Knott writes a letter to faculty, that the earlier committee in question, negative though it may have been, it “did not recommend that the department of Geography be abolished.” Rather...

...it posed a question that it made no attempt to answer: “We note that many distinguished universities do not have Geography departments and raise the question as to whether this university must have one.” The present Geography Review Committee has considered this question at great length and has offered answers.(Knott 1981c)

The salient fact about e.g., Harvard was not the discontinuance of geography, but its absence. The new committee was only taking seriously for the first time a question raised in passing by the earlier committee. And this suggestion would be passed along. Following the faculty rejection and despite ongoing contention, the LS&A Executive Committee formally recommended the discontinuance of the department to Billy Frye and President Shapiro on May 7. In an accompanying letter, Knott dismisses the unity of geography as a myth that did not match its institutionalized reality: “although the study of the relationship of people to their physical and social environment is important to the mission of the University and should continue to be encouraged, we do not find the Department of Geography to be the central focus of such studies in the University” (Knott et al. 1981). Frye and Shapiro announced their support for discontinuance on June 16, passing the final vote on to University regents (Chapman 1981a).

The morning of the Regents meeting, the *Michigan Daily* conceded its support of discontinuance. The editorial staff were persuaded that the discipline of geography “endured as a kind of all-encompassing educational grab bag” and that “it would be relatively simple for students to gain geographic knowledge in other, overlapping subjects” (*The Michigan Daily* 1981). Though the university should have applied preventative measures earlier to insure against departmental decline—it’s hard to criticize a department unable to improve itself by using funds the University

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refused to allocate—“economic realities” conspired with disciplinary eccentricity to make the department disposable, and legitimately so.

This editorial came a week after a holding a final open meeting in which Knott gave perhaps the most revealing testimony that appears in the available record. In his prepared address to this open meeting, Frye regrets that so much discussion focused on fiscal matters and procedural minutiae instead of more fundamental questions about “the nature of the field.”

The nature of the field itself has received little attention in public discussion and we regard this as unfortunate, since it was a significant consideration for us. [...] We find geography a remarkably fragmented discipline, the parts of which bear less relationship to each other than is usual in a department. [...] We believe that the discipline is vulnerable [in times of retrenchment] because it is not as coherent, and not as essential, as many others. (Knott 1981a)

For reasons more disciplinary than fiscal, the discontinuance of the department was a product of a vulnerability brought on by its incoherence. Indeed, the relationship of its parts—the physical and social sciences it purports to bridge—is read as fragmented, not holistic. This statement also gives us pause, in the midst of writing an essay for publication on the discontinuance of a major center of academic geography: Knott cited Libee and Wilbanks’s *Professional Geographer* piece (“pigeon shooting”) as evidence that all but the most blithely unaware geographers must have seen their demise coming.

Closure

We end where we began; on June 19, 1981 around 10:00am, the Regents of the University of Michigan unanimously declared that the department would be cease to exist come July 1, 1982. The meeting took place over two days, beginning on the 18th at 1:00pm. Billy Frye reiterated the arguments made by the review committee. The University was riding fiscally turbulent waters; the department suffered for excellence; and the department was not central to the educational mission of the University (University of Michigan Board of Regents 1981). Nystuen begged for the lesser of two evils: elimination of cultural geography, which Knott refuted on the ground that it was not a separate program with a separable student body. Though the executive committee had recommended such selective discontinuance as a viable, and perhaps preferable, option, Knott confirmed that it was never seriously considered.

If one was inclined to believe an economic account of the closure, one would be surprised to read that Regent Sarah Power, a Democrat who voted in favor of discontinuance, found “the financial argument for geography discontinuance to be the least persuasive” of the rationales presented (Chapman 1981c). In the final analysis, during the meeting which closed the department on account of hard times, the financial justification was not what made up the mind of at least one voting member of the Board of Regents. Rather, it was arguments about centrality and disciplinary necessity; geography had not made its case. Nystuen had attempted to preempt this, writing a letter to the Regents on May 28, 1981: “to non-geographers, these sound like different disciplines and leads to uninformed criticism of lack of cohesion or cooperation. It is true there is not much joint research across these topics but there is coordination in training at both undergraduate and graduate levels. [...] We know the subprograms of the department augment one another” (Nystuen 1981). This failed to convince.

In the wake of the closure, tenured faculty were, ultimately, relocated (Hinds 1981; Witt 1982), though no two professors were appointed in the same department. Non-tenured faculty were not afforded the same treatment—all three left the academy. The formal study of geography lasted only a few more years, as the students who had already begun their studies brought them to completion. The final master’s degree was awarded in 1982-83. The final PhD in 1984-85. The last undergraduate degree in geography was awarded in 1985-86.⁵

Conclusion: A Matter of Discipline

Several months after the closure of Michigan geography was announced, George Kish gave a plenary address at the annual meeting of the AAG East Lakes Division (cited briefly above). His topic was, in his words, “about today and tomorrow and not for the ages,” a “low-brow topic”. Having witnessed the long and bruising closure of his home department over the previous year, Kish was moved to give a talk about “public relations. More than that [...] it is about survival: the survival of our discipline.” (Kish 1981, n.p.)

Kish’s was both diagnostic and prognostic, in the manner of a doctor for whom the disease had become rather personal.

We’ll do the best we can. We’ll try to keep geography alive as a discipline, as a word that should be part of the University, as an established

⁵These years are drawn from the University of Michigan Office of the Registrar.

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field of teaching and learning. It's going to be a lot harder now than it would have been some years back. My only hope is that no one will think that it could only happen once. That no one will think that Michigan was a freak accident. [...] I come back to this same notion: the geographer? What do you do? What is it? Just what is it that you do? We have fallen as a profession down very severely. We have a tremendous job before us. Michigan may be an isolated case. I hope and pray it is. But that hope and that prayer is not based on any realistic assessment of the situation. We have to look into our own hearts, we have to look at what we have done with a degree of honesty that one reserves for oneself, so that, I hope, that what happened in Ann Arbor is not going to happen in other places. (Kish 1981, n.p.)

Kish reached into recent history, recognizing that while the discontinuance might have come as a shock to the outside observer, it was by some measures a long time coming:

Seven years ago, a committee of the College of Literature Sciences and the Arts, [...] made the following statement: "Harvard does not have a geography department." I hear that once more in the lines that follow: Yale doesn't have a geography department. Stanford doesn't have a geography department. Why should we have one? The same statement could be made in other places. The arguments to conquer that do not come easily. The strongest argument that all of us can provide is to, one, make sure one that people know who we are, what we do, two, that we know where we fit in. (Kish 1981, n.p.)

Many of Kish's suggestions for the preservation of the discipline were written up and published with Robert Ward and published in the *Newsletter of the AAG* (Kish and Ward 1981). Many of them come down to securing support for the discipline from those with access to the purse strings:

We, my dear colleagues, we need our students, we need our administrators, we need our legislators, we've got to tell them who we are, what we do, what we aim for. [...] in the vernacular, [...] "we ain't got no image." We just haven't. I'm dead serious. (Kish 1981, n.p.)

As we've demonstrated in our study, the discontinuance of geography at the University of Michigan is not reducible to dire financial straits. These, of course,

were catalytic. What was decisive, though, in the University's decision to discontinue geography was not austerity, but centrality; not economics, but cohesion. The case against geography was made before austerity came to Ann Arbor. When austerity came, as in the Harvard case, the case for geography was not strengthened by outside geographers; in fact, these were skeptical of Michigan's promise and position. Geographers have been vulnerable, in part, because we fail to fulfill the promises we have made while defending ourselves; if our discipline has tended to justify itself with recourse to the notion that we "bridge" the natural and the social sciences, it has also failed to make this purported "unity" more-than-myth.

One could point to recent innovations in, for example, critical physical geography (Lave et al. 2014) as a way forward in bridging the physical and human sciences. Even still, our position is that the unity myth is not a generally effective defense, especially when the actually-existing activities of a department do not suggest "unity." For example, the discipline is not well-represented at American liberal arts colleges (Aschmann 1962; Bjelland 2004), even in light of the fact that "the geographer's use of diverse methodologies and training in both the natural and social sciences offers a path to the integration to which a liberal education aspires" (Bjelland 2004, 329–30). Understanding this curious absence requires that we attend to the contingency of social life in our institutions because "unclear about the identity of geography and unable to neatly squeeze it into established divisions of social sciences, natural sciences, or humanities, administrators seem more comfortable creating interdisciplinary programs that reinvent aspects of geography under new labels" (333). Sometimes not even an institution that is structurally and philosophically receptive to a particular vision of the field can guarantee that geography flourishes. This has nothing to do with geographer's lackluster explanatory skills (Archer 1995)—even in the absence of hostility, the unity myth is limited when it comes to rendering geography institutionally legitimate. The same could be said of Kwan's (2004) reliance on notions of hybridity as a means to redress the polarizing tendency in discourses of disciplinary identity. For example, Webster (2004) explains that Birmingham's storied department of cultural studies and sociology was eliminated because the administration "got cold feet about the hybrid department [...] and wanted a return to a perceived orthodoxy" (848). As Glick (1984) writes, the "continuing struggle to find coherence, Capel deems irrelevant to the actual shape of the field: academic geography has not been kept together by shared cognitive positions so much as by reason of institutional strategies" (278). Sometimes a bit of elbow grease or politicking is needed; and, as this case demonstrates, effective politicking demands meticulous histories of past failures. Our success, as much as our survival, depends on it.

This is not a prognosis borne out of ideological commitment; rather, it is a prescription that follows from rather crude institutional pragmatics. We agree, broadly, with Kish that the absence at the center of geography that he calls our “image”, doomed Michigan’s department. It is our wager that by attending to these histories of discontinuance, we can begin to articulate why three basic questions—“what is geography?”, “what is geography’s history?”, and “why geography?”—have been so intermingled in the American university. Our past, in retrospect, has depended on doing so; it does not seem outlandish to suggest that so might our future. Unity myths recur and return. So too do institutional challenges to the legitimacy of geographers and geography as a discipline. It is our hope that this serve as a stimulus to further projects explicating the convenient myths—of unity, of bridging—that break down under scrutiny. There is no shortage of discontinuance case studies; it is by examining these acute moments of disinstitutionalization that historians of geography might contribute to the articulation of realistic lines of defense, grounded in the history of geography’s fractured and fractious place in academic discourse.

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