

Cosgrave

SOCIAL FORMATION
AND SYMBOLIC
LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

Why should we, in the compass of a pale
Keep law and form and due proportion
Showing, as in a model, our firm estate
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land
Is full of weeds; her fairest flowers chok'd up
Her fruit trees all unprun'd, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars?

(Richard II, Act 3, Scene 4)

This book is about the idea of landscape, its origins and development as a cultural concept in the West since the Renaissance. During that period many Europeans came to see the external world and nature in novel ways, ways that corresponded to new approaches to production on the land. Many studies exist of the changing European use of the earth, the moulding of land by human labour into visibly distinct regions we call landscapes. Others have examined how Europeans have represented their world as a source of aesthetic enjoyment – as landscape. The intention here is to replicate neither of these approaches, but to draw upon, and inform, both of them within a thesis which relates ideas about the cultural significance of landscape to ways in which land is materially appropriated and used.

The argument here is that the landscape idea represents a way of seeing – a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations. Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society; that has its own assumptions and consequences, but assumptions and consequences whose origins and implications extend well beyond the use and perception of land; that has its own techniques of expression, but techniques which it shares with other areas of cultural practice. The landscape idea emerged as a dimension of European elite consciousness at an identifiable period in the evolution of European societies: it was refined and elaborated over a long period during which it expressed and supported a range of political, social and moral assumptions and became accepted as a significant aspect of taste. That significance declined, again during a period of major social change, in the late nineteenth century.

Landscape today is pre-eminently the domain either of scientific study and land planning, or of personal and private pleasure. It no longer carries the burden of social or moral significance attached to it during the time of its most active cultural evolution.

In exploring the history of this way of seeing I have made use of the growing body of contemporary theory concerning the relationships between cultural production and material practice. A cultural concept like the landscape idea does not emerge unprompted from the minds of individuals or human groups. To be sure, individuals can and do find original ways of articulating and expressing the idea, and collectively human consciousness may appear to refine or extend that idea without obvious links to collective material practices. But historically and theoretically it is unsatisfactory to treat the landscape way of seeing in a vacuum, outside the context of a real historical world of productive human relations, and those between people and the world they inhabit to persist. In seeking the material foundations for the landscape idea the obvious point of departure is the human use of the earth, the relationships between society and the land. This is the stuff of historical geography as traditionally practised, and such relationships form a theme of study throughout the book. The evolution of European land practices offers important historical parallels with the period of landscape's cultural ascendancy.

Between 1400 and 1900 much of Europe and the society it founded in North America were progressing towards a characteristic form of social and economic organisation which we term capitalist. Purchase and sale in the market-place of an ever-increasing range of goods and services, including the land itself, determined their social allocation. Labour itself became a commodity, released from the bonds of custom and allegiance which had formerly tied the labourer both socially and spatially. In developing a capitalist mode of production, Europeans established and achieved a dominance over a global economy and a global division of labour which remains a critical determinant of our present social and economic geography. The European transition from societies dominated by feudal social relations and their associated cultural assumptions, to capitalist centrality in a world-wide system of production and exchange is a phenomenon of central historical importance in making sense of our own world. We understand a great deal about many of the fundamental features of the change: its associated demographic trends, alterations in agricultural and commodity production, the political reorganisation of peoples and territories, and the changing

relations between individuals, groups and classes. Whatever the specific focus of historical attention, it is the internal reorganisation and outward expansion of European societies, gathering pace throughout the period, which insistently compels historical enquiry and demands historical understanding. In response to that insistence historians have developed a range of theories which seek to identify the underlying causes of long-term change. Whether basing their explanations on demography, technological innovation, environmental alteration, class conflict or the evolution of human ideas, it is the phenomenon of parallel changes in so many spheres along a single trajectory which forms the common feature of their discourse.

We may regard capitalism in many, not always contradictory, ways: it may be the materially liberating and progressive force implied by the term 'modernisation', or an alienating and exploitive method of maximising the surplus value of human labour and resources. Alternatively, we may see it as an inevitable stage in a structured historical process upon which we are called to make no moral judgements. Whatever our interpretation of the value of such a system of human relationships, it remains the case that the rise of capitalist production has been the basis of European ascendancy. To claim that the transition to capitalism began in the fifteenth century, when the structures of feudalism were clearly weakening in the countries of western and southern Europe, and that it ended in the nineteenth, when those lands lying around the rim of the north Atlantic presented examples of well-established capitalist states, offers therefore a useful shorthand for capturing an essential unity within the historical process while implying no absolute significance for the bracketing dates. Many of the features we associate with the transition (for example, the growth of long-distance trade based on urban centres of mobile capital accumulation, or the breakdown of the manorial system of agricultural production) predate the beginning of the period in certain parts of Europe – by centuries in the case of upper Italy. And by 1900 in Britain the features of pure market capitalism – if such purity ever existed – were distinctly blurred by the intervention of the state in critical areas of production and reproduction: housing, health and education; while in parts of eastern and central Europe those forces that were to give birth to a form of socialist production in the twentieth century were already gaining a powerful momentum. Between these dates the transition itself was differently inflected and paced in the regions of Europe: a 'second feudalism' has been hypothesised in certain eastern and Mediter-

reanean regions of the continent (Wallerstein, 1974). To speak then of 1400-1900 as the period of the capitalist transition is really only to set a context for formulating historical questions, to indicate a theoretical direction rather than to provide answers to those questions or verification of theory. But it is a context which requires us to examine the evidence in an integrated way rather than in terms of discrete and self-contained historical issues. Whether we are following the course of English constitutional debates in the seventeenth century, or of Venetian and Genoese maritime trade; explaining the pattern of migration from the Rhineland to the middle American colonies or the response of French peasants to the *corvée*; exploring the changing structure of the European family or the development of the modern penal system, it is in the context of a fundamental shift in the ways that human beings collectively used their environments and led their lives that we can offer structure and coherence to historical understanding and place our detailed knowledge within a wider perspective.

This perspective offers to historical geography the opportunity to raise its sights from the static reconstruction of past geographies or the detailed but essentially discrete study of field systems, settlement patterns or population distributions and to see these materials and issues as part and parcel of a broader history. The emergence of European capitalism involved radical changes in the social organisation of space at different scales. Europe's position in the global pattern of human affairs changed from being one of a number of cores of high population density, urbanisation and sophisticated technology (Braudel, 1973) to become the centre of what Emmanuel Wallerstein (1974) has termed the 'world system', operating like the metropolis within an urban system with a dependent and hierarchically-organised hinterland of surrounding peripheral and semi-peripheral regions. Within Europe, and North America, a progressive differentiation occurred between on the one hand regions of advancing population growth, in-migration, agricultural transformation, industrial production and urban development, and on the other stagnant or declining regions in which these processes operated more slowly or were reversed. Space was reorganised as nodes were linked and boundaries redrawn to reflect the altered conditions of different regions at all scales. The self-contained universes of manor and parish which we take as the model of the spatial order of feudalism gave way over time to the integrated and structured space economy of the nation state with its urban hierarchy and specialised agricultural

and industrial regions. Its geography is fundamentally different from that of the pre-capitalist space economy and the changing spatial order at all its scales is intimately involved as both effect and cause with the social and economic transition observed by historians.

It is not only spatial order which engages attention in historical geography, nor is this the only geographical dimension of the transition to capitalism. One of the most respected English historical geographers has long insisted upon the significance of that other great geographical theme: the relationship between society and the physical environment, between man and the land. H.C. Darby (1951) noted the significance of three key aspects of the transformation of European land: the clearance of woodland, the drainage of marshland and the reclamation of wasteland and heathland. All of these were ways of creating productive agricultural land. Changes in the way that humans organise to produce their material lives quite obviously result from and give rise to changes in relationships with their physical surroundings. The techniques by which Europeans used the land, altering and exploiting the natural world, underwent accelerating change during the period under discussion (Pounds, 1979). Some of these changes have been the subject of detailed examination in historical geography: the reclamation of the fenlands around the North Sea at the core of the emerging world system, the introduction of new crops from the Americas and of different ways of cultivating traditional ones, the increased productivity of pastoral farming and the enclosure of arable lands, the exhaustion of timber resources in seventeenth-century England and France, and the exploitation of mineral resources. All of these activities predate to a greater or lesser extent the exact period specified here, but within that period they achieved a new scale and pace. The single most telling example of this is of course the subjugation of the whole continent of North America to European modes of material production, its inclusion within the European agricultural economy, the wholesale exploitation of its natural resources of wildlife, timber and mineral deposits, its integration by canal and railroads and its colonisation by farmhouses, towns and cities. We speak often of industrial and agricultural revolutions. They involve fundamental reorganisation of society's relationship with the environment and resources so that, like spatial organisation, the man-environment theme in geography is also elucidated by the context of the capitalist transition.

But this transition was not merely one of human activity. Equally

century. It is enclosed within a rectangular frame, distorting the sphere of the globe according to known and accepted rules of cartographic projection. It includes all the land masses and seas with a locational accuracy which we would regard as superior to the former example. Earth space would be filled with colours and bounding lines showing nation states and imperial possessions and the names of significant landforms and human settlements. Each may represent the world as known and imagined at the time of its production. However, each structures the geography it depicts according to a set of beliefs about the way the world should be, and presents this construction as truth. Both are moral statements: the first explicitly so in its concern to depict the order of divine creation and the place of the human world within it; the second implicitly in presenting the proper order of a British-dominated globe and the relative place of the nations within it. In other terms, both are ideological statements. To understand the meanings of the two maps and the differences between them requires not only a knowledge of the evolution of cartography as a technique for representing spatial relations, a technique whose history is closely related to that of landscape painting (Harvey, 1980; Rees, 1980), but also an understanding of the objective and subjective changes in spatial organisation and environmental relations between the dates at which they were drawn. The first map reflects a material world set within the hierarchy of creation and centres it in the *axis mundi* of Christendom, offering a geography of the natural order homologous to the social order of feudalism; the second presents a secular world focused on a core imperialist state and its dependencies, offering an image of a stable political geography whose claimed objectivity and scientific accuracy of construction legitimate the global structure of British imperial rule. It is one of the tasks of historical geography to make intelligible the changes in the spatial order and environmental relations, both real and imagined, which account for two such different configurations. Each was considered truthful at the time of its making, each would have been regarded as myth by the intended audience of the other. The idea of a transition from feudalism to capitalism offers an anchor which makes their differences intelligible in the light of other historical processes.

The Hereford map and the map of the British empire, for all their differences, are similar in their intention to make the world visible, to present geography to the eye. We accept geographical reality because we can see it. To see something is both to observe it and to grasp it

intellectually. The way people see their world is a vital clue to the way they understand that world and their relationships with it. Between 1400 and 1900 Europeans changed markedly in the ways that they saw. One indicator of the change in their vision is the idea of landscape.

Landscape has two distinct, but in important ways related, usages. Between the early fifteenth century and the late nineteenth century, at first in Italy and Flanders and then throughout western Europe the idea of landscape came to denote the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, the scenery (literally that which is *seen*) which is viewed by a spectator. It implied a particular sensibility, a way of experiencing and expressing feelings towards the external world, natural and man-made, an articulation of a human relationship with it. That sensibility was closely connected to a growing dependency on the faculty of sight as the medium through which truth was to be attained: 'seeing is believing'. Significant technical innovations for representing this truth included single-point perspective and the invention of aids to sight like the microscope, telescope and camera, whose origin and development, as I shall show, can be understood historically by reference to patterns of social and productive organisation we recognise as capitalist. Landscape's second usage is in contemporary geography and related environmental studies. Here it denotes the integration of natural and human phenomena which can be empirically verified and analysed by the methods of scientific enquiry over a delimited portion of the earth's surface. Geographical studies of landscape until very recently denied the existence of common ground between the object of their investigations and the sensibility implied by the artistic usage of landscape. In fact they are intimately connected both historically and in terms of a common way of appropriating the world through the objectivity accorded to the faculty of sight and its related technique of pictorial representation. It is in this relationship that the idea of landscape and its history can direct our attention towards the active role of cultural production in the transition to capitalism, a role that often remains neglected in historical geography.

To substantiate this claim requires initially that we clarify the idea of landscape and the usages to which the word has been put. This is the purpose of Chapter 1. It identifies certain contradictions within the meanings of landscape which require historical rather than logical resolution. It is necessary also to examine more fully the difficulties associated with employing the theoretical constructs implied by the

in seminars at London, Cambridge and Southampton. Anne Taver produced respectable maps and diagrams from inadequate sketches, and David Walker and Christopher Roper introduced me to the mysteries of word processing. Isobel, Emily and Isla gave both encouragement and enormous forbearance as two summers disappeared to the whirr of floppy disks and bouts of near despair. My editor at Croom Helm, Peter Sowden, remained good-humoured about the non-appearance of drafts. To all of them I owe a word of very special thanks.

1

The Idea of Landscape

In geographical usage landscape is an imprecise and ambiguous concept whose meaning has defied the many attempts to define it with the specificity generally expected of a science. While landscape obviously refers to the surface of the earth, or a part thereof, and thus to the chosen field of geographical enquiry, it incorporates far more than merely the visual and functional arrangement of natural and human phenomena which the discipline can identify, classify, map and analyse. Landscape shares but extends the meaning of 'area' or 'region', both concepts which have been claimed as its geographical equivalents. As a term widely employed in painting and imaginative literature as well as in environmental design and planning, landscape carries multiple layers of meaning. Commenting on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's neologism, *inscape*, W.A.M. Peters has commented that the suffix 'scape' 'posits the presence of a unifying principle which enables us to consider part of the countryside or sea as a unit and as an individual, but so that this part is perceived to carry the typical properties of the actually undivided whole' (Peters, 1948, p. 2).

That unifying principle derives from the active engagement of a human subject with the material object. In other words landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience in a way that neither region nor area immediately suggest. Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world. For all its apparent objectivity and foundation in the historical record the landscape described in *The Making of the English Landscape* possesses an affective meaning, it represents W.G. Hoskins's (1955) way of seeing England. It is this which informs his interpretation of