INTERVIEW

Barney Warf



Interviewed in April 2016,
by André Pasti, Melissa Steda and Wagner Nabarro.

During the *I Seminário Internacional Geografia e Finanças*, held in São Paulo between April 6-8, 2016, Barney Warf participated in the discussion "Technical systems, work and bank automation" and ministered the mini-course "Globalization, social theory and economic geography". The geographer from the United States gave us an interview in which we discussed many topics related to his experience as a researcher in Geography.

Boletim Campineiro de Geografia: We've seen on your papers that you have interest for a large amount of subjects. How did you get interested in Geography and how did you choose it as an academic career? Tell us a little bit about your academic trajectory.

Barney Warf: Well, I come from an unusual family. My father was a chemistry professor, so I grew up in an academic environment. And I lived the first seven years of my life in Indonesia, seven and a half, so Indonesian was my first language. Strange, right? And then we moved back to the United States. I was born in Los Angeles, then we moved to Indonesia and then we moved back. So I was almost eight years old and I had never seen television, I didn't know who Mickey Mouse was (laugh) – so I was like "where am I?". It gave me an appreciation of American culture like an outsider. In a certain way, which most Americans don't have.

I collected coins as a child, I read the National Geographic magazine, things like that, and in high school I decided I was going to be a cartographer. Then when I started college I took a cultural geography class. And I said "cartography is boring, human geography is interesting". I had a wonderful teacher and I became a Geography major. I think many people often are affected about what they want to study by having a good teacher. You know, it's really important. At the same time I became a Maoist in Los Angeles — you know, the Communist Party of China — my brother was a communist. That's just kind of strange, I told you I have a weird family (laugh). So I learned Marxism, but outside of school. Although later on that would become very useful for me.

Then I dropped out of the Maoist movement and I became Mr. Positivist. I was going to model everything, I started a love with mathematics, I took calculus and more calculus. And then in my master's program I had a very famous Marxist adviser named Allen Scott, he's one of the world premiere economic geographers and I rediscovered Marxism, but this time from and academic perspective. So I changed my outlook again, became Mr. Marxist structuralist again, and then in my PhD program I discovered phenomenology. I realized Marxism was incomplete, it did not explain human consciousness very well, and I was reading a lot of social theory and something of structuration theory, Benno Werlen is very skilled in this as well. That's how I got into geography and what shaped my intellectual world.

Since I graduated, I have seen many fads and fashions come into Geography over time, I've learned to become more skeptical about them, but I often borrow from ones, you know, I think we don't have to choose sometimes, being a purist is

not a good thing. I was at a conference once and I told an audience this, and someone called me a theory borrower (laugh). I said well, I guess I am, because I borrow from different theories, at different languages, which are useful for different lines of research… So, that's just the short version.

BCG: What do you think about academic Geography in the United States today? What lines of thought seem to be emerging, and how do you perceive that scenario?

BW: It's a really interesting time to be a geographer. Not just in the US but in much of the world. Because there's no one single paradigm or school of thought that is dominating the field. In the past when positivism was supreme, you had to be a positivist, everybody thought the same way. And then Marxism came and you had to be a Marxist. But Geography has become much more diverse intellectually, and I think it has led to a renaissance of Geography in the US and in other places as well. Historically Geography was always a very primitive backwards discipline in the United States. Most Americans still think we're memorizing capitals and stupid things like that.

So, a couple of trends that I think have become very interesting… First of all there's a long ongoing tradition of Feminist Geography, very powerful and still very impressive. It intertwined with Marxism in some ways, and gave rise to other kinds of identity politics, so there has been a lot of interest in race and ethnicity. And a lot of interest in sexuality. In the 1990s and since we've seen an explosion of post-structuralist thought, much of it imported from France. Sometimes I get impatient with post-structuralism because they often write in the most obscure different ways. If you ever tried to read like Deleuze and Guattari, it seems just horrible. But if you can get past though the bad writing, there is actually much of it that is very interesting, some of this I will talk about. The views of society and space as networks. The view of everything as relational. A departure from Cartesian space to relation space. I think that has made geography much more complex and much more diverse.

The debate about a more than human world, the idea that the boundaries between humans and non-humans of any type are artificial boundaries — I actually want to write a book on this if I ever get time — and post-human geographies, saying that social sciences since the renaissance has always put human beings at the center. We've been an anthropomorphic set of disciplines. Disciplines really didn't begin to emerge until the 19th century, so I'm kind of projecting it backwards anyway. So, what would social sciences look like if people were not in

the front of it — and if we took animals seriously… So, there's a very vibrant field of animal geographies today. Human beings are animals. You know, in our impatience to show that animals are not people, we forgot people are animals.

So those I think are some of the most Avant-garde fields. Now, of course there are other things going on in Geography, in areas that I've not been working. GIS continues to march forward, like a robot — it's hugely popular. We did a lot work in human-environment interactions, a political ecology, a cultural ecology, which I think is great.

Their idea of Latin America is people watching sheep in the Andes in Peru, or growing coca or growing coffee, or small farmers. It's a kind of weird romanticized rural vision

Cultural geography has suffered now for a long time under the legacy of Carl Sauer, and still many cultural geographers are Sauerian. I do some work in the conference of Latin Americanist geographers — I have many friends who are cultural geographers who study Latin America. But their idea of Latin America is people watching sheep in the Andes in Peru, or growing coca or coffee, or small farmers. It's a kind of weird romanticized rural vision. I say to people that when I go to Latin America I see cities, banks, the Internet. My vision of Latin America is urban and service-oriented. I'm going to write a paper called "pulling the dead hand of Sauer off of Latin americanist cultural geography". I'm sure that they will get angry with me. But you know, it's like most cultural geography has moved into social theory. The Americans who study Latin America are still kind of backwards and traditional. I call them Dinosauerians — if you get the pun.

BCG: Speaking about the United States, we would like to know if you see possibilities of approximation between the anglo-saxonic geographies and Latin American production of Geography.

BW: Well, building bridges between them has been a long standing dream. And it is not occurring very quickly, right? I think it's because a variety of reasons. Party because Americans are lazy and don't read Spanish and Portuguese. Which is interesting because if you're a Marxist you have to learn French. Allen Scott lived in France for five years and speaks perfect French. There are Americans who speak Spanish and some that speak Portuguese. I have several friends who studied Brazil, and they do field work in Latin America. So the language difference is still there.

Also, there aren't a lot of non-Anglo geographers in the US. There are

Chinese, of course. But there are not a lot of Latino geographers in the US, a few, but not many, and I think that hinders this. However, this has begun to change. Our national association has become more and more diverse over time. For example, they changed their name this year. It's not the Association of American Geographers anymore, it's American Association of Geographers. Because 25% of the members are not Americans. Also the AAG, which is very well managed and has acquired a lot of money because it has a wonderful executive director, has used this money for outreach programs, partly to bring scholars and students from other countries to the US for conferences. So now you go to AAG and there are sessions in Spanish. And of course in many journals the abstract will be in English, Spanish and Chinese. Sorry, not in Portuguese, but i think you can read the Spanish (laugh).

I think this kind of cross cultural linkages are great. It promotes a mutual understanding. It's good for Americans to learn about other perspectives. So much of Geography is focused in the United States. If you look at the literature in electoral geography, it's all about American elections. Well, you know, there are other elections. So I would like to see more work about other countries, and a cross-fertilization between different outlooks. So the potential is there and I think it can be realized but it has been really slow, gradual and haunting.

BCG: You have been visiting São Paulo for the last days. What do you think are the limits and applications of the concept of cosmopolitanism here in São Paulo. How does São Paulo compare to other big metropolises in the world?

BW: Well, I'm not sure what you mean about cosmopolitanism, so I'm a little hesitant to answer your question. Because cosmopolitanism is a very popular term but it means different things. I'm gonna answer your question in two parts. First of all, for me, cosmopolitanism has a very specific meaning. I have written about the Geography of cosmopolitanism. For me, not for everybody, cosmopolitanism is a distinct ideology that has roots in Greece, but can really be traced to Immanuel Kant. I view it as an antidote to nationalism. I'm a militant anti-nationalist and I think cosmopolitanism is a view of the world that does not put the Nation-State in the center. I've written about this. I used cosmopolitanism as a club against nationalism. I don't think that's what you meant in your question, because another meaning of cosmopolitanism is worldly sophisticated, something like that.

BCG: We asked you because you published some articles recently about it and we wanted you to expose your views.

BW: Of course. I find cosmopolitanism useful as a way of breaking down xenophobia and national chauvinism — like "my country is the best". Everybody thinks their country is the best, but not everybody can be the best. Also as a way of recognizing that there's nothing natural about nationalism. It's a historical ideology, it serves some interests and not others. It has been used to divide people and justify war and things like that. If I get started on nationalism I'll never shut up. I intensely dislike nationalism because it exaggerates the differences between peoples and cultures. It tends to engage in this process of othering: "people on the other side of a border are miraculously very different and inferior to us".

So I've actually been quite heartened by the growth of cosmopolitanism worldwide. Now, it's true, nationalism is still by far the most powerful ideology in the world, and there are other transnational ideologies like Muslim fundamentalism for example. But if you look at surveys, there's an international survey of the world values, 20% of the world's population identifies as cosmopolitan. Pretty interesting. Of course it tends to be people that are better educated all over the world. They can see themselves in post-national terms.

So it's much more than being sophisticated. That's my point. It's an ideology grounded in empathy and respect for difference, whereas nationalism is one that holds difference is bad. Nationalism tends to hide the differences within countries. Pretend everybody is the same when obviously they are not. So that's why I'm attracted to cosmopolitanism. You asked about São Paulo. São Paulo is actually obviously quite a cosmopolitanist city in a certain sense. I was stunned by the number of banks here and corporate headquarters and I didn't realize it was such an important commercial city. Not just for Brazil, but I think for much of Latin American. So that's a part of the city that's quite new to me.

BCG: Did you notice the people with Brazil flags here around Paulista Avenue? Nationalism is strong in Brazil now because of the political crisis. Trump is also an expression of nationalism.

BW: Yes, but Trump is many things. He's an expression of the anger and frustration of the American working class, and especially uneducated blue collar men, who have suffered terribly from globalization. Trump has channeled their anger into nationalism and into racism. This very simplistic fascist kind of ideology. But so is Bernie Sanders. Bernie Sanders is an expression of this frustration, but in his case moving to the left. Channeling the anger at the ruling class. I'm amazed by

how popular Sanders has been. I like Sanders, I just don't think he can win.

BCG: As we're talking about politics, with the evolution of the democratic system, there has been a challenge about how to deal with the corruption that emerges from political relations and also interrelate with financial affairs, as we could see with the recent findings of tax havens, like Panama papers. What could be a possible approach to this problem and what could be geographer's role in understanding this political dynamics.

BW: That's a really heavy question. First of all despite set backs I think democracy has made great advances in the last fifty years all over the world. I'm older than you guys but I remember when almost all of Latin America was run by terrible military governments, including Brazil. If you look at societies, let's say the United States. US is a conservative society, but even so, there were civil rights movements, women's rights movement… I'd start it with the blacks movement in the US, but then the women's rights movement, the environmental movement, and then later the gay rights movement. These have succeeded in creating a much more open and democratic society and have been mirrored by similar changes in other countries. Now in Europe and I think in parts of Latin America.



Take the gay rights movement, which years ago everybody thought was about some obscure tiny little unimportant things and then boom! it just like exploded. And amazingly quickly. Now the latest battle is transgender people in the US. I think there has been a rising demand everywhere for democratic freedoms and we see that in the kind of collapse of many military regimes. In the end of communism in Russia. Because communism was always a very anti-democratic ideology. I hope something like this happens in China at some point. I think the long run tendency has been this kind of march towards greater freedoms.

Now, at the same time there's neoliberalism. And neoliberalism is a global force that has elevated conservatives all around the world. In my view of the world conservatives are usually opposed to the expansion of democratic freedoms. We see this in US, conservatives trying to limit voting rights. Trying to curtail freedoms for gays and other people. Creating an environment that is perfect for corporations but not for people. The exposure of things like corruption, like the Panama papers, or

the exposure of State surveillance, like Edward Snowden… every time something like this happens people are shocked. But we all know this has been going on for a long time. There's nothing really surprising about corruption. Most of the world is corrupt. Some more than others. I've actually been doing some papers on the Geography of corruption. And in some places corruption cripples countries. Nigeria, Iraq, Afghanistan. It just make them dysfunctional.

Corruption thrives and corporations like environments that are very secretive. What they don't like is transparency. […]. Democracy is an antidote to corruption and to neoliberalism. So although democracy has expanded, there's a continual war with conservatives who want to make the world safe for corporations.

So Geography is useful at highlighting the local context of corruption and why it's worse in some places than others. International linkages and networks of wealthy individuals and conservative think tanks, or how corporations are hiding money. Corruption thrives and corporations like environments that are very secretive. What they don't like is transparency. I think one tool that progressives have all over the world is more transparency. In countries with a free media we have less corruption than in countries where power is centralized. Democracy is an antidote to corruption and to neoliberalism. So, although democracy has expanded, there's a continual war with conservatives who want to make the world safe for corporations.

BCG: About the media… it seems that nowadays telecommunication networks are being controlled by increasingly concentrated companies. We're thinking about Internet and telephone companies, radio stations, newspapers, conglomerates of media. What is the importance of information flows to capitalism nowadays? Considering the cultural aspects of globalization, how do you interpret this concentration of media and its consequences?

BCG: The concentration of power and the ownership of media is very worrisome. I wrote a paper about this once. I'm terrified about it. And it's true, a small number of companies dominate most of the world's media. My favorite villain is Rupert Murdoch, who is an Australian but lives in US and has an empire in Europe, in US, in China… In television, he owns Fox News… One of several serious consequences of corporate concentration is that it's always conservative.

You never find a liberal concentration of media owners. It also tends to homogenize news and homogenize viewpoints. As I noted in class, it becomes a vehicle for exporting like American culture around the world. In some ways this concentration of media and the American-led globalized neoliberalism go hand in hand with one another. So we can see this corporate-owned media as another vehicle of neoliberalism in some ways.

Having said that, there's an alternative. I think social media and to some extent the Internet provide a different way of obtaining information. The Internet is vast and there are many many sources of news on it. That are not necessarily corporate-owned. So in some sense digital media can be a sort of a balance to this corporate-owned media. I don't want to exaggerate it, as most people still rely on television or radio. But on the other hand, if you look at populations that rely the most on digital media, they tend to be more progressives — in the United States. There has been a big shift to the left among young people. The same people who rely on social media, Facebook, like that, for the news. And for many young people television is sort of obsolete. I can't help but think that it's not a coincidence.

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So one last note. There's a very famous theorist, Jürgen Habermas. Some people don't like Habermas, but he writes about something called an ideal speech situation, which is the notion that truth — because Habermas is still kind of in the enlightenment vision of truth — is what we produce when we come to a consensus with one another. This is quite different from the correspondence theory of truth that I mentioned in class. Truth is what we agree with unfeathered debate, when there are no limitations on people's ability to convince other parts. Of course there's always some limitations. But Habermas offers the idea of speech situation as a kind of metaphor for how we could produce knowledge in a way that is not constrained by class, or gender, or race, or age, or things like that. I think the Internet comes as close to an ideal speech situation as anything we're going to find. And in free debate, when it's not a question of money or authority, progressive ideas will always win. Because I think that at their core, conservative ideas are inherently and inescapably bankrupt.

BW: This concentration of the media also seems to be relating a lot with financial flows, as we can see by the discourses about economics on the main newspapers and the role of credit-rating agencies and finance-

*dedicated TV channels... How can we think about these relations between cultural and economic geography to understand t*his relation between cultural aspects of the media, the discourses of the media, and a more economic geography?

BW: Ironically, I've touched this a little bit on this today… In the last ten years or a little less, there has been a lot of interest of economic geography in culture, it's called the cultural turn. We should see the division between economic and culture as a stupid division. Most of post-structural sciences are trying to get beyond these dichotomies. Global and local, human and nature, cultural and economic. And human an non-[human], for that matter. All of them are kind of misleading. This has led in part to much more emphasis in cultural industries. Traditionally industries like film, advertising, tourism — these were considered stupid and irrelevant. Real economic geography is about automobiles, steel, electronics… that has changed. It changed partly because traditional manufacturing is declining everywhere, they are becoming so capital-intensive that there just aren't that many jobs.

The latest form of capitalism is one that is highly dependent on the commodification of consciousness […]. a world in which symbols and meanings have acquired an unprecedented sort of importance

There's also the recognition that capitalism has shifted. Part of the shift into globalized neoliberalism is the rise of a much more information-intensive capitalism, in which the symbol has kind of acquired an economic importance in its own. So a lot of the French get very excited about this, as Baudrillard… We live in a world of detached signifiers, we live in a simulacrum. The latest form of capitalism is one that is highly dependent on the commodification of consciousness. The competition for attention and the creation of specialized niche markets. A world in which symbols and meanings have acquired an unprecedented sort of importance. And one that almost seems to float away from the economic dimensions.

I mean, you get in the US kids paying six hundred dollars for a very special pair of shoes, or blue jeans that are very expensive, but are torn. It's the symbolism of it that matters. Some people call this cognitive cultural capitalism. It's the capitalism that tries to get as deeply in your head as possible. I think there's a risk of exaggerating this, because capitalism has always tried to be in our head. From religion to other things. Never to this degree. I think in the past, when there were not as much choices in terms of commodities, a few companies advertised on TV.

"Buy our car, buy our beer…" and that's kind the end of it. Now, the symbolic importance has become so critical, and also so many types of labor depends on intellectual labor. In any job that you use your hands for work, you don't make any money. The only jobs that make money are the ones in which you use your head.

It means that all over the world there's been a growth of this relatively well-educated kind of middle class. Much of it are a very globalized middle class and they live in an information rich environment, and they must process information for their job, collect information, analyze, transmit it, share it in different avenues. That's what contemporary capitalism looks like. So it's more than just a kind of creative and artistic industries, it's this heavy emphasis on innovation, the acceleration of product cycles, the intensification of marketing.

BCG: Speaking about the cultural globalization, this cultural change has changed many religions, and even generated strong backlashes with the rise of extremist groups, based on the maintenance of religious traditions, as an opposition against the occidental culture. In this scenario, should Geography pay more attention to religion and its relation to politics, dedicating to subjects like pentecostal churches, the growth of atheism, changes in the Islamic world?

BW: Absolutely geography should pay more attention to religion. As you know, I'm a militant atheist. It's not that I like religion, it's that I recognize it's important. And I think not just Geography, but much of Social Sciences have made a terrible, terrible mistake in dismissing religion. I actually have published on religion, mostly on the context of religious diversity, and how it's created, what is it. I think there are several factors that have led to this terrible error.

Starting with Max Weber, the famous sociologist in the early 20th century. Max Weber made this argument that the development of industrial capitalism would lead to an inevitable secularization of society. He used a very famous metaphor of the iron cage. So the iron cage of rationality, like capitalist bureaucratic, market-based rationality, has been lowered over our society and it would squeeze religion out until religion became only the study of the irrational. Weber had this kind of very dark pessimistic view of the future, he said capitalism began in religion, the protestant ethic, which is a very questionable assertion, and it would end up destroying religion.

Then that secularization thesis became very widespread, especially in academia because many academics are secular. If not atheists, then agnostic. I think many academics kind of decided "you know, there's no point at studying

religion because it's just gonna die, it's just a bunch of stupid people, with this medieval beliefs, why take them seriously, right?". And then boom, at the end of the cold war we find this global explosion of religious fundamentalism. Not just Islam, but in the US there are crazy foaming at mouth religious types and religious fundamentalist Judaism, fundamentalist Hinduism… The growth of the evangelical protestants in the Latin America. Nobody expected this, and it's clear the secularization thesis was kind of wrong. And simplistic.

In the original secularization thesis was that Europe has become a secular continent, and the rest of the world is moving towards Europe. Europe is what the future looks like. But it's not true. From a geographic perspective, Europe is the exception. Religion is the norm in most of the world. We have ignored religion at a terrible cost, and we're unprepared to understand the appeal of fundamentalism in many types of societies. Now that the secularization thesis is gradually dying away, and many people talk about the desecularization of the world, this idea that religion is some leftover vestige from the past that will soon disappear… That doesn't mean [religion] is right. Ideas don't have to be right to be popular.

BCG: Speaking about other countries, countries like China and India have a huge amount of Internet users and a massive traffic in the web, although they sometimes don't access the biggest websites in the occidental world, as Google of Facebook, giving preference to websites like Baidu and Renren. They have a whole different identity in the web that sometimes isn't embraced by occidental analyzes. They have also been increasing their participation in international debates about Internet governance. Considering the implications of the diffusion of the access to telecommunication networks in these countries, what are the possibilities of thinking the Internet in a global way today?

BW: There are many elements in that question, I'm not quite sure where to begin. First of all, many people think of the Internet in a-spatial terms, as if it's kind of popping in clouds somewhere (laugh). But it's not, the Internet is on earth. Which means it's geographic. And I think first of all we need a geographic understanding of the Internet. Cyberspace is a kind of space and like all spaces it is shaped by local contexts, historical trajectories, cultural, local politics, everything from how many people used… Social inequalities are re-inscribed in cyberspace. So we can't see it as some kind of a-political a-social thing up in the sky. The way you framed your question, I would reposition it a little bit, because it implies that China and India are the same, and they are very different.

BCG: Just because of the huge amount of people....

BW: So, 40% of the world are using the Internet now, about 3.2 billion people. That's growing really quickly, like fifteen percent per year. It won't be long until it's more than 50%. It's 50% in China already. Six hundred million people, the single biggest national group. It's twice the population of the US just of Internet users in China. But the Internet in China means something different than the Internet in Brazil or in the United States. When it comes to Internet governance, the Chinese Internet has zero credibility whatsoever. I love China, I love the people, I love the culture and I hate the Chinese government. It is corrupt and it is a fascist dictatorship. It is perhaps the most severe censor of media and the Internet in the world. North Korea is worse, but that's setting the bar pretty low. There hardly isn't Internet in North Korea, so it doesn't really matter.



The Chinese have used censorship of TV, radio, newspapers, books and the Internet in order to keep the Communist Party in power. It keeps the Communist Party in power because small elite of very wealthy Chinese communists run the economy. You talked about the Panama papers. It showed many Chinese billionaires have bank accounts around the world. You are not allowed to read about the Panama papers in China, because they censor any mention of it. They have of course the famous great firewall. If you look on Google Images for Tiananmen square, inside China you see beautiful pictures of flowers, outside of China you see the picture of the man in front of the tanks. Most Chinese never heard about the Tiananmen square massacre because the government has kept it invisible. They have their own internal networks, like Baidu, one of the biggest systems. So my hope is that the great firewall kind of crumbles in China. I don't know if it will. There are attempts to get around it using Virtual Private Networks in China. Some of the anti-censorship software have been developed by groups like the Falun Gong, a kind of Buddhist resistance movement in China. Falun Gong has developed ties to other dissident movements around the world. Falun Gong has helped Iranian protesters get around censorship in Iran for example, and in Saudi Arabia as well. So even in countries with severe censorship there are people who want to get around this problem.

India is a somewhat different story, much more democratic, much lower rates of Internet use, much less censorship. There's a little bit. Most countries in the world censor the Internet a little bit. China is a kind of an extreme of this. But India is the largest democracy in the world, although it has problems. One of the biggest problems comparing to China or to the West is patriarchy. I'm interested in the digital divide, like inequalities in access to the Internet. The digital divide in terms of gender in the United States has disappeared. There are actually more women using the Internet in the US than men. I don't know about Latin America so I can't talk about this context. But in China, it's essentially gone. I mean… Traditionally China was a very patriarchal country, but China has invested a lot on its women, in literacy and things like that. India has not. India is a terribly sexist country. Women's literacy is much lower, women's Internet use is much lower, and then of course if you look at the Muslim world it's a lost cause. I mean… Muslim women have very little access to the Internet, it's overwhelmingly for young men.

Although, from what I've been reading, even this is changing. Because remember, this is an imperative everywhere, it's a massive transformation. In countries like Saudi Arabia, where men and women are not allowed to be together, most men never meet a woman, except their mother or sister, until they get married. Can you imagine? Never going on a date, never having a girlfriend, show up at the wedding, here's your wife and… "Okay, nice to meet you" (laugh). But now they have Internet at cafes in Saudi Arabia, separate rooms for man and woman, but… "Oh… they're talking to each other! It's terrible!" There's an analogy here. When the telephone was introduced in western societies… It started in the late 19th century but nobody could afford it until the 1920s, that's when the middle class began to use it. What happened was young men calling young women on the telephone and talking without a chaperon. Shocking! Shocking! And I think there's something analogous happening even in very conservative Muslim countries.

To understand the impacts of the Internet we have to look at it in its geographic context.

So my point is to understand the impacts of the Internet we have to look at it in its geographic context. The culture, people who are using it, including gender norms, the government policies that shape access and restrict content. There are many kinds of censorship… keeping people off of the Internet, or restricting access to certain websites… This means the Internet means different things in different places. The one thing that is constant is that it's growing everywhere. It's growing much more quickly in the developing world than in anywhere else. The Internet is basically in rich saturation in Europe and in the United States. Most of Europe is

like 85, 90, 95%. We call it a penetration rate. In Scandinavia it's 98, 99, a hundred percent. There's always like one grandma who doesn't use it. In the US it's like 80% because we have a large permanent underclass people who are too poor and especially old people. Everywhere it's old people who tend not to use it the most. There have been relatively little growth in North America, or Europe or Japan or even Korea, but it's growing in Latin America and it's exploding in India, in other parts of Asia, in Africa… And mobile phones have contributed to this quite a bit.

BCG: Exactly… That's why we wanted you to talk about those countries because we almost only hear about the Internet in the western world, so…

BW: My point is that Habermas' ideal speech situation is becoming global.

BCG: Just to finish the interview, a little word about what you think about the most important challenges and objectives for a progressive agenda of thought in Geography and what kind of issues you think should be studied.

BW: First of all, recognize that progressives are not alone. And that there are more progressives in Geography today than ever before. I mean, many social sciences like Geography, Sociology, Anthropology — not Economics — have moved to the left. Recognized their strength in numbers. What used to be seen as a small minority is now the vast majority. There are very few conservatives in Geography. Actually I would like to see more conservatives, hear what they have to say. That doesn't mean that progressives win. Numbers alone are not enough. It takes organization. It takes clear goals — what do we want? And I think often progressives have this very vague nebulous idea — we want a better world. Well, that's nice, what does that mean? So, the progressive agenda needs to be better defined. Not just for geographers but for everybody.

I think we need stronger links between academics and non-academics. Because — I don't know about the Brazilian situation — in the US academics sometimes operate in what we call the ivory tower, like "we are in our own little world, we don't have to interact with other people…" Yes, you do. Otherwise… I spent three years as planner in New York outside of academia, it was actually a wonderful experience. Because I learned a lot about planning and there were many smart people, and one of the things i learned is most people don't think academics are very important. Academics think that academics are the most important thing in the world. But the reality is most of the world think of academics as kind of weird, entertaining, but not really important, you know? There are all these

cultural stereotypes of professors who are forgetting to put on their shoes… It's a caricature, but I think we need stronger linkages between intellectuals of all kinds and the working class. Not a one-way street… This is the mistake Marxists make. "We are the intellectuals, you are the working class. We will show you the way forward. We will be your leaders, just follow us, follow us". What an arrogant view of the world. Again, that's like "I'm well-educated, I'm important", right? We need modesty. It's a two-way street. We learn from working people. We learn from their experiences. What are their priorities? We don't tell them their priorities, they tell us. What is meaningful and important.

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We need professors to spend more time outside of the university. We need to bring people from unions and non-governmental organizations or environmental groups, into the classroom. To make academic teaching and research grounded in the real world. I get impatient with academic research sometimes because i think they lose sight on what is important. I'm editing two journals and you get people submitting papers about the most strange useless trivial things you can imagine. Why are you studying this?! One guy sent me a paper about where do people in Iceland drag dead whales onto the beach. And I said "I don't care!" No, I'm not even going to review your paper, this is ludicrous. It's the product of being in a self-absorbed environment. Academic research should talk about real world problems. Even much of social theory gets to be too carried away. There's a whole journal now on emotions and space. Or the latest trend which disgusts me that is auto-geographies, which is like auto-biography except that in a geographical way. It's like people on Twitter: the world needs to know what i had for breakfast this morning. No, the world doesn't need to know. So it's this kind of very self-absorbed type of work that becomes inconsequential. It loses sight of what's really important.

Part of that process is this annoying tendency to write in the most convoluted style with lots of jargon. Academics write for other academics. "I'm going to

impress people with my sophistication and subtlety and word choice". But that makes it difficult for people to understand. These ideas are difficult enough when are put in simple language. So I have zero tolerance for fancy academic writing. That's how you become prestigious, it's writing things nobody understands. And I'm like "no, that is not what we should be doing". I have tried to make a kind of a little niche for myself. I tried to understand complicated ideas and put it into ordinary language. It's not easy and sometimes I don't succeed. But things like actor-network theory… If you read people like Bruno Latour, or worst of all, Deleuze and Guattari… So let's be humble, let's put things in ordinary language, let's learn from people who are not academics and build bridges with them. Let's produce knowledge that's useful to effective political mobilization. At its heart the world is political and people who ignore politics are naive or stupid.

the problems of a farmer in Malawi or a child in Mumbai are our problems. They are as important to us as the problems in São Paulo or in Kansas. Empathy does not decline with distance.

If we want to combat neoliberalism, if we want to present alternative views in the face of corporate media, we must do so in an ordinary systematic way that does not just come from a few elite ideas. We have to give voice to the concerns of people who do not have a voice. Give voice to the homeless, give voice to the poor. Give voice to indigenous peoples. And to some extent this has happened. Part of postmodernism and poststructuralism is this concern for othering and listening to the periphery, listening the marginalized people, so that's happening, but these voices are still contained in academia, so… Sorry, i get very impatient about that.

Let's make academics into political activists. I mean, it's only the future of the world at stake, you know? And things like animal rights. We have minority rights, women's rights, gay rights, animal rights is part of the civil rights movement and democratization movement. Let's extend our cosmopolitan circle of compassion. Neoliberalism is always about the self. "I'm an individual, nothing else matters. The self, the self, the self. I'm greedy and it's good." Cosmopolitan is the opposite. I'm extending my circle of compassion: not just me, my family, my friends, not just my city or my country, but the world. Let's make our circle of compassion as broad as possible, bring people and animals into it. So the problems of a farmer in Malawi or a child in Mumbai are our problems. They are as important to us as the problems in São Paulo or in Kansas. Empathy does not decline with distance.

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About the interviewee

Barney Warf, geographer from the United States, is currently professor of the University of Kansas. He has a Msc in Geography from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and PhD in Geography from the University of Washington. He has published, among others, the books "Human Geography: A Serious Introduction" (2016), "Global geographies of Internet" (2012), "Encounters and Engagements between Economic and Cultural Geography" (2012) and "The World Economy: Resources, Location, Trade, and Development" (2010).

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