

Carl O. Sauer

Carl Ortwin Sauer (December 24, 1889 – July 18, 1975) was an American geographer. Sauer was a professor of geography at the University of California at Berkeley from 1923 until becoming professor emeritus in 1957. He has been called "the dean of American historical geography" and he was instrumental in the early development of the geography graduate school at Berkeley. One of his best known works was *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals* (1952). In 1927, Carl Sauer wrote the article "Recent Developments in Cultural Geography," which considered how cultural landscapes are made up of "the forms superimposed on the physical landscape."

Family and education

Sauer was born December 24, 1889 in Warrenton, Missouri, the son of German-born William Albert Sauer and Rosseta J. Vosholl. As a child he was sent to study in Germany for five years. He later attended Central Wesleyan College where his father served as the school botanist and taught music and French. The elder Sauer was interested in history and geography and felt there was a strong relationship between the two fields of study. His outlook most likely had a strong influence on his son's perspective. After graduating in 1908, Sauer studied geology briefly at Northwestern University and then moved to the University of Chicago to study geography. There he was influenced by geologist Rollin D. Salisbury and botanist Henry C. Cowles. Sauer wrote his dissertation on the geography of the Ozark highlands (published in 1920) and received his doctorate degree in 1915. Sauer married Lowen Schowengerdt in 1913; they had two children.

Career

In 1915 Sauer joined the University of Michigan as an instructor in geography and was promoted to full professor in 1922. While at Michigan he became involved in public land use policy. He became concerned about the clear-cutting of pine forests in the state and the resulting ecological harm. In 1922 he played a major role in the establishment of the Michigan Land Economic Survey.

In 1923 Sauer left Michigan to become a professor of geography and founding chairman of the Geography Department at the University of California, Berkeley. He served as chair for more than thirty years, creating a distinctive American school of geography. Shortly after his arrival he began a program of fieldwork in Mexico that continued into the 1940s. Initially he focused on the contemporary landscapes of Mexico but his interests grew to include the early Spanish presence in the region and the prehistoric Indian cultures of northwestern Mexico. He worked closely with other departments, especially anthropology and history.

The scope of Sauer's work expanded in scope to include investigations into the timing of man's arrival in the Americas; the geography of Indian populations; and the development of agriculture and native crops in the Americas.

Influence

Carl Sauer's paper "The Morphology of Landscape" was probably the most influential article contributing to the development of ideas on cultural landscapes and is still cited today. However, Sauer's paper was really about his own vision for the discipline of geography, which was to establish the discipline on a phenomenological basis, rather than being specifically concerned with cultural landscapes. "Every field of knowledge is characterized by its declared preoccupation with a certain group of phenomena," according to Sauer. Geography was assigned the study of areal knowledge or landscapes or chorology—following the thoughts of Alfred Hettner. "Within each landscape there are phenomena that are not simply there but are either associated or independent of each other." Sauer saw the geographer's task as being to discover the areal connection between phenomena. Thus "the task of geography is conceived as the establishment of a critical system which embraces the phenomenology of landscape, in order to grasp in all of its meaning and colour the varied terrestrial scene" A collection of Sauer's letters while doing fieldwork in South America has been published.

Sauer was a fierce critic of environmental determinism, which was the prevailing theory in geography when he began his career. He proposed instead an approach variously called "landscape morphology" or "cultural history." This approach involved the inductive gathering of facts about the human impact on the landscape over time. Sauer rejected positivism, preferring particularist and historicist understandings of the world. He drew on the work

of anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and later critics accused him of introducing a "superorganic" concept of culture into geography. Politically Sauer was a conservative, but expressed concern about the way that modern capitalism and centralized government were destroying the cultural diversity and environmental health of the world. He believed that agriculture, and domestication of plants and animals had an effect on the physical environment.

After his retirement, Sauer's school of human-environment geography developed into cultural ecology, political ecology, and historical ecology. Historical ecology retains Sauer's interest in human modification of the landscape and pre-modern cultures.

Honors and awards

Sauer received numerous professional awards and honorary degrees.

Works

Sauer published twenty-one books and more than ninety papers and articles.
