
Awakening the Dead: Who Needs the History of Geography?

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Awakening the dead: who needs the history of geography?

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I want to articulate some doubts I have about the value and relevance of expending energy studying the history of geography as a means of throwing light upon the state of the discipline today. Let me start with a reading of a single remark, unapologetically ripped out of its original context.¹ David Livingstone's *The geographical tradition* (1992) tells of an incorporative discipline always able to assimilate any and all challenges. Towards the end of the book, Livingstone provides an account of the emergence of quantitative spatial science and writes that he cannot provide an adequate treatment of the subsequent criticisms of this project because 'it is still much too early to attempt any rigorous contextual elucidation of these most recent moves' (*ibid.*, 329). This comment crystallizes much of the metaphysics of context which underwrites the recent revival of interest in the history of geography. It can be read as an unwilling admission that 'contextualization' runs aground when it comes to openly and critically addressing the only context that really matters: the contemporary one. It also indicates that contextualization works only on something which is not still changing its shape – on something which is dead – and which can therefore be made into a clearly defined and recognizable object of knowledge. Above all, 'context' seems to be something in which you are definitely *not* inextricably entwined. Squeezing even further meaning from this innocent-looking statement, we can see that contextualization supports a mode of critical judgement that presupposes a position external to the inert context under examination, a safe distance from which one can decide upon the motivations, delusions and relative merits of different actors. Determined in this way, 'context' disqualifies as illegitimate any sort of radical transformative intervention in the contemporary formation of the discipline. The logic is simple: because

spatial science and postpositivist geography are not yet dead, they resist contextualization. Consequently, the adoption of any critical attitude in relation to this field (that is, taking sides) must be suspended indefinitely since it would involve a necessarily *partial* decision. So we are left with the deceptively polite-sounding pluralist formulation by which Livingstone allows that everyone can dance their own step to their own particular tune, just as long as each and every one of them respects the basic house rule – NO TOUCHING (cf. p 345). Despite being unable to take the necessary distance which would support a complete and final evaluation of Livingstone's project, I want to take this opportunity to mark my dissent from this version of the revived historiography of geography and its model of academic responsibility, this being precisely the sort of action which, on my necessarily provisional reading anyway, this version seeks to squash.

The renewal of interest in the history of geography is not exhausted by Livingstone's work. More openly 'critical' work is routinely framed by proclamations about the necessity of attending anew to origins of modern geography in order to understand the contemporary nature of the discipline. But such claims often have a rather hollow-sounding ring to them – connections are more often loudly asserted than convincingly demonstrated. If it is essential to understand the past in order to understand the present, perhaps this is for more mundane reasons than this work might lead one to suppose. All academics have a vested interest in the value of history – professional status, getting published and so on are all organized around discursive axes of historicity which enable us to recognize what is new and different, to judge what is original and to establish where we stand with regard to disciplinary antecedents. Such imperatives make it difficult,

perhaps even scandalous, to call into question the normally unimpeachable value of an historical perspective because to do so is to impinge upon the very constitution of professional identity.

And indeed, the value of *history* in the revitalized historiography of geography remains largely unproblematised. We have learnt to break from the empiricism which characterized previous histories of a taken-for-granted object called 'geography' but an empiricism of the object persists when it comes to the term 'history'. A whole set of assumptions about what history is and of the unqualified value of doing historical work continue to sustain new critical histories of geography. To adapt a formulation of Canguilhem's (1988, 2), the new contextual and critical histories of geography tend to assume too easily that all geography in the past is the past of today's geography, sweeping any questions about the nature of the historical relation under the cover of expanded notions like 'geographical discourse' or 'geographical knowledge'. If the history of geography is going to matter, you have to admit, at least as a possibility, that it just might not. Only by recognizing that much of that history is simply now redundant is one likely to be able to identify just which bits of geography in the past still remain alive and kicking as the past of today's geography.

The closure of this question of the historical is related to the inability of the new work in the history of geography convincingly to account for its own conditions of emergence. When the new historiography of geography comes to account for and justify itself, appeal is consistently made to a series of epic narratives about the last two or three decades in geography, stories which tell all about path-breaking books, pivotal debates and heroic individuals undergoing miraculous conversions. I am slowly becoming aware of how my own entry into academic geography has involved being interpellated into this set of narratives about the recent shaping of the discipline, from which I am meant to fashion an identity as an academic. The historiography of geography has always been about providing certain self-representations of professional vocation, stories about what it is that geographers should do and of the worth of what they do. This is no less the case now than before, although the way in which resurrecting the past is made to legitimize contemporary positions may have altered fundamentally. The resuscitation of disciplinary history, not just in the sub-field of the history of geography as such but also in ongoing discussions

about the 'new' cultural geography or 'critical geopolitics', for example, indicates a renewed tendency amongst a broadly defined community of critical human geographers to disinter the rotting corpses of long-dead ancestors in order to display the acumen with which they can now be reburied even deeper. Names from the past no longer serve as figures of veneration, yet, in a move which perhaps displays a continuing disciplinary parochialism, it seems as if it has once again become necessary to be able to define the newness of the new in relation to identifiable disciplinary pasts. Recourse to such self-confirming narratives of legitimization, in the absence of analysis of the institutional determinants of new research fields, means that the possibilities and limits of working in such new fields tend not to be explicitly addressed.

The historiography of geography has become a vibrant and significant field in ways in which it has not been before. But perhaps we need the history of geography not because of the unquestionable requirement to understand geography's past as it necessarily still bears on the present situation but because that past can easily be made to serve as a convenient arena in which we get to practise with different sorts of difficult theory. This is quite evident if one observes which bits of geography are being favoured by the new contextual and critical histories of geography – there is an overwhelming, although not exclusive, fascination with geography's historical involvements with empire. Bruce Robbins (1993, 204) remarks that today, '[d]isciplinarily speaking, it is better to be complicitous with empire than indifferent to empire'. The point bears on the current return to geography's imperial past, evident in current histories of geography. Given the types of social, cultural and literary theory which are currently dominant in fashioning new interdisciplinary fields, it would be quite disastrous for the theoretically inclined human geographer if their discipline did *not* have a dubious imperialistic past. Geographers are busy grabbing for their share of colonial guilt so as not to lose out on their share of the spoils of the most exciting and innovative realms of contemporary theory. In this way, geography's colonial and imperial past has become a crucial medium through which new forms of interdisciplinary communication can take place. What needs to be underscored is that the reason why these involvements have become the centre of attention again has rather more to do with contemporary pressures determining new forms of

professional affiliation than with any real traces and actual resonances of these moments on the current scene, claims about which tend only to occlude from view those contemporary determinants.

My purpose in making these observations is to suggest that what needs to be most urgently addressed by critical human geographers is not the distant past of geography but a set of questions about what all this theory is doing in geography, how it came to be here and what we can hope to do with it? What possibilities for radical interdisciplinary academic work does it promise? These are the sorts of questions which bear directly upon the contemporary state of the discipline and its possible futures. If it is social and cultural theory that enables new significances to be wrung from geography's past, then the very least one can expect is a more adequate reflection than currently exists on the material processes by which that range of theory is formed and by which it becomes available to us. The newest forms of the history of geography seem particularly ill at ease when treating these contemporary issues, with respect to which they are characterized by either a more or less explicit abdication of responsibility, or by the sorts of accounts which have been rejected as a means of studying the more distant past. Consequently, this new work does not prove very helpful, not to me anyway, when trying to understand the sorts of processes shaping academic practices and my everyday experience of them. More often than not the historiography of geography, however newly 'contextual' or 'critical', just looks like a bit of a diversion. Perhaps the loud insistence that the history of geography must be explored in order to throw light upon the contemporary state of the discipline is a way of avoiding looking in the most obvious places. If you want to understand the institution of academic geography as it is currently constituted, then maybe the best place to start is by actually examining the discipline as it exists in the here and now. When you have done that, the bits of geography's past which perhaps deserve further attention, and the bits which do not, might become a little clearer.

But even this is conceding too much. What I really want to believe is that we would be better served if we simply let the dead bury their dead. In

the hope that we can escape from academic rituals of parricide just long enough to allow something *other* to occur, might it not be possible actively to forget about the past and to act instead with no regard at all for what has gone before? In so doing, we just might find that we invent something which is a surprise, something whose form and content we cannot now fully anticipate and which, therefore, would be something genuinely new.

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Note

1. This does not, of course, amount to reading out of context, as if such a thing were possible. 'Context' has been invoked as a methodological mantra in recent histories of geography as if relevant historical or social contexts just present themselves naturally. This rhetoric of context indicates a search for a ground of certainty, which will secure the meaning of any given text outside of the contemporary work of reading and, as such, marks a disavowal of the active contemporary construction of significance constitutive of all historical intelligibility. Determining contexts for readings always determines the forms of evaluation and judgement to which texts will be subjected. Making explicit rather than dissembling these contemporary grounds for the selection of contexts is the prerequisite for making visible the interests behind any reading, which is the same thing as taking responsibility for those readings.

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