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Prog Hum Geogr 2008; 32; 650 originally published online Feb 18, 2008;

DOI: 10.1177/0309132507086883

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History and philosophy of geography: life and death 2005–2007

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Key words: institutions, knowledge, nation state, science studies.

I Introduction

Somewhat serendipitously, in May 2005 I attended a session entitled 'Remembering Torsten Hägerstrand' held at the Inaugural Conference of Nordic Geographers in Lund, Sweden. Hägerstrand died the previous year. About a third of the audience was made up of older Swedes, colleagues, friends, and family including Hägerstrand's widow. They were immaculately dressed, women in smart dresses, men in tailored sports jackets, coiffed silver and white hair. They sat together at the front of the lecture theatre, standing out against the mainly young and sometimes sartorially challenged conference attendees. The high backlit windows of the room, its stark white interior, the nature of the occasion, and our location in Sweden made me think of an Ingmar Bergman movie (and during the course of writing this report he has also just died). Life and death. There is nothing more elemental. That was also the sense in listening to Bo Lenntorp and Gunnar Törnqvist, the organizers, who introduced the session with a gravitas and solemnity that only people with deep Scandinavian voices seem to achieve. The final speaker was Allan

Pred. He talked New York Bronx, however, and in dress tended towards the conference delegates rather than the aging Swedes. It was a brilliant presentation: 'A man dies. A friend is lost. A vacuum is created. And the memories rush in' (Pred, 2005: 328; see also Morrill, 2005; Öberg, 2005; Thrift, 2005). Within 18 months, of course, Pred himself was dead, and in April 2007 his own life was celebrated at a memorial session in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

Perhaps this is too maudlin a start to my first progress report in the history and philosophy of geography. But it goes to the topic at hand, and to a general theme I will emphasize in this as well as in the next two reports: philosophies and ideas are embodied in the histories of the humans who make them, including their finitude. Such histories include *inter alia* places, institutions, lives and personalities, and the circulation of ideas. That is why this series is 'the history and philosophy of geography'. It is not just history, not just philosophy, but both/and. Philosophical discussions are historically entrenched; they are conversations not in

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the Emyrean with the Gods, or in the cave with spectral Platonic shadows, but on the ground, with other people each of whom 'have their exits and entrances' until the 'last scene of all' (Shakespeare, 'As You Like It', Act II, scene vii). But, before that moment arrives, there is reading. The epigraph of the academic: 'please, just one more page'.

II States of geography

Believing my own undergraduate lectures about the end of the nation state (I should have known better), I was initially stunned by the enormous amount of literature in the history and philosophy of geography that upholds the state's importance. And not only in the past, but also in the present. The point is forcefully argued in a special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education in Geography* (2007: 37(1)). Emerging clearly in these essays about different national geographies is the difference that the state makes. National space is never an empty container to be filled with pre-existing, generic disciplinary knowledge. Rather, it actively shapes knowledge by provoking particular kinds of institutional structures, inciting intellectual agendas and practices, and moulding cultures of inquiry. In South Africa, the geography curriculum was entirely reconceived post-apartheid (Mather, 2007). In China and Australia, the discipline was literally written over to meet new state mandates of marketization (Li *et al.*, 2007; Gibson, 2007). In Singapore, the British colonial state, the Malayan state, and since 1965 the Singaporean state have all had a hand in 'shaping the kinds of geographical research and education that [have] take[n] place' in, respectively, Raffles College, the University of Malaya, and the National University of Singapore (Kong, 2007). And in the UK the state's fingerprints are all over the discipline from the establishment of the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 to Panel H's management role within the Research Assessment Exercise in 2008 (Sidaway and Johnston, 2007).

Consequently, the regional varieties of geography, and those of its subspecialties, seem almost as diverse as species differentiation in the insect or plant worlds. In June 2007, I spoke on a panel at the Second Global Conference in Economic Geography in Beijing and there was a Russian, an Australian, an American, a Netherlander, a Japanese, and me, a Canadian. In spite of our best intentions, discourse was all but impossible given our different national conceptions of geography. Further, it became even more difficult during the discussion period when yet more voices were added. Rather than pluralist dialogue (the position I advocated during my 10 minutes), it was a Babel. English was the common language (and I will get to this later), but it was as if everyone, including me, was talking in tongues. I thought of Wittgenstein (1953: 223): 'If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.' For Wittgenstein this was because of the lion's radically different 'form of life'. At my Beijing economic geography meeting, it was because of radically different national disciplinary histories and practices. As Sheppard (2006: 119) puts it, 'knowledge production remains strongly territorial' (see also Agnew, 2006).

As a theme it deeply colours the literature: another country, another kind of geography. So, for Tapiador and Martín-Hennberg (2007: 86), it is the 'fossilized structure of the departments and the tenure process' that produces Spain's conservative geography. In China it was the Qing dynasty that tethered historical geography to the study of a particular governance structure of 'national territories and administrative divisions', *yange dili* (Chiang, 2005: 149). Japanese geography, according to Mizuoka *et al.* (2005), has been engaged since the 1920s in a titanic Faustian battle between conservative and progressive forces for the discipline's very soul (and see also Murata, 2005: 261, on the shockingly neglected treatment of gender and women in Japanese geography—only 8% of Japanese geographical society members are female). In Sweden's

long history of geography, according to Buttimer and Mels (2006: 6–8), there has been not only Faust, but also Phoenix and Narcissus, pioneering, emancipating and reflecting the national geographical project. Fall's (2007) elegant, slyly funny essay is about a country that typically does not make it into the national disciplinary pantheon: Switzerland (also barely mentioned even in Martin's (2005) otherwise encyclopaedic, state-based histories). Focusing on the Francophone Swiss political geographer Claude Raffestin, Fall's essay is about how ideas fail to travel across borders – in this case, across even the adjoining boundary between Switzerland and France, because of an entrenched Gallic disciplinary tradition and internal social hierarchy.

Raffestin had the seeming advantage of writing impeccable academic French. But, as it turned out, maybe he would have fared better had he written in English which, according to some, has become geography's hegemonic *lingua franca*. It is the language to be heard in, and even more importantly, to be read in. This is one of several paradoxes of the discipline's growing internationalization. There is more awareness than ever within English-language geography of differences in national disciplinary cultures as a result of both the publication of the kinds of papers I have just reviewed and the holding of international conferences (such as the one I attended in Beijing, but most spectacularly the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers which has become the *de facto* global meeting of geographers). This seems all to the good. Who apart from xenophobes would be against internationalism? But the very medium making this possible, a generalized speaking and writing in English, appears to be changing the very differences that it allows to be represented (a version of the Heisenberg effect?), and further raises the question of whether it is internationalization at all. Desbien and Ruddick (2006) make the first argument, and Paasi (2005: 769) in his fine examination of the highly skewed

geography of journal publishing points makes the second, suggesting that what pass as 'international forums are in fact narrowly Anglo-American' (for the counter-position, see Rodríguez-Pose, 2006).

III Institutions of geography

Paasi's (2005) essay is one of the few written in geography concerned with an institution vital to geography, but rarely receiving even passing mention: publishing. After all, the discipline is what it writes and reads. But it is assumed that books and journals exist at hand, or on the university library shelf, and are read simply as written. In neither case is this true – not now, not in the past. Books and journals are a consequence of specific institutionally geographical circumscribed forms of production and reading. Mayhew (2007) uses the term 'materialist hermeneutics' to upset any kind of textual fetishism, while Livingstone (2005; 2006) deploys the term 'the geography of reading' to appreciate the material travels and different performances that books put on in different places (see also Withers, 2006). Keighren (2006) makes the point in his wonderful case study of *Influences of geographic environment* by Ellen Churchill Semple. With Sherlock Holmes' astuteness, Keighren (2006: 525, 532) tracks down the geography of the varied reactions to the book, and which are varied indeed (and in deed): from the *Glasgow Herald's* a 'monument of erudition and arrangement' to the anonymous Oxford undergraduate's (or maybe School of Geography staff member's) scribbled marginal comment, 'bunkum!'

A second of geography's entangled institutions is the military. Much has been written in the past about its role both during the late nineteenth century when geography was first institutionalized, and also around the first world war and its immediate aftermath (Isaiah Bowman was America's geographer at the Paris Peace Conference; Smith, 2003). But little exists on the military's subsequent relation to the discipline. This now appears

to be changing. In part, it is the result of the contemporary security environment of militarization, aggressive surveillance and war alert, and acutely described by Gregory (2005; 2006; 2007) in a series of compelling, passionate, up-to-the-moment, empirically and politically trenchant essays (see also the collection *Violent geographies* edited by Gregory and Pred, 2007). In addition, Woodward (2005) in a comprehensive review of military geography also thinks it is time to stop snubbing the topic. Military geography is too important to be left to the military.

So, a new military geography is being produced. Woodward (2004) has made her own contributions, and a small body of work about the military and geography in the mid-twentieth century is emerging. Clout (2003; Clout and Gosme, 2003) recently explored the role of Clifford Darby within British military intelligence during the second world war, and more generally the involvement of British geographers in the production of the Admiralty Handbooks. Farish (2005; 2006), Kirsch (2005), and Barnes and Farish (2006) are beginning to make similar explorations across the Atlantic in Canada and the United States both during the second world war and later the cold war. What emerges is just how much geography changed in its encounter with the military. It was 'mangled' (Barnes and Farish, 2006); that is, it became refashioned as a science through entering the war machine, and which further continued during the 1950s and 1960s within the military industrial complex. Of course, there were holdouts in North American geography – people like Richard Hartshorne, who maintained his prewar ideographic position (Barnes, 2006; Harvey and Wardenga, 2006). But by the mid- to late 1950s at the height of the cold war inordinately large sums of money were made available in the United States for *scientific* research. It was seemingly irresistible. Much money went to the earth sciences (Doel *et al.*, 2006), including geology and physical geography. For example, Arthur Strahler

at Columbia funded all his PhD students, including Richard Chorley, on Office of Naval Research funds (Barnes, 2008). But a small portion also found its way into human geography, particularly at the Universities of Washington and Iowa, and helping to establish the quantitative revolution in human geography (Barnes and Farish, 2006).

IV People of geography

The relation between geography and the military in the mid-twentieth century partly turns on the lived lives of particular geographers, such as a Clifford Darby, a William Garrison, or even a Dick Chorley. But there is not a lot of work written by geographers either on biography or autobiography (Smith's 2003 biography of Bowman is an exception). Consequently, often the history of geography is presented as disembodied; or, when there are bodies, it is a stiff-upper-lip version of history in which private lives are hidden from public ones (for more discussion on this point, see Lorimer and Withers, 2007). Such exclusions, though, make it difficult to tell the history of geography in the making, and instead it becomes one of geography ready-made (Latour, 1987: 4).

Johnston (2005; 2007) and Driver and Baigent (2007) debate the biographies of geographers as they appear, or not, in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Their arguments turn on, first, who counts as a geographer (does a surveyor, or a 'controversialist'? Johnston, 2005: 653), and, second, the acid-test question, who should be included. The responses sometimes reminded me of Nick Hornby's novel, and later Stephen Frears' film, *High fidelity* – 'what's your all-time top ten list of geographers born in Britain and who died before 31 December 2000?'. While I am sympathetic to the problems raised, and even have secret fantasies about drawing up such a list (all right, I have already done so), I am not sure that they do much in addressing the methodological problem of integrating biographies into intellectual histories. That would be the list worth seeing:

the top ten approaches for bringing together biographies of people and ideas.

Castree and Gregory's (2006) *David Harvey: a critical reader* does not provide such a list either, but the essays illustrate a gamut of possible approaches from, in this case, treating Harvey's body as a machine for producing books to an empty vessel to be filled by an outside historical context. Predictably, perhaps, Harvey's (2006) own contribution does not help, saying almost nothing explicit about his life and work, instead being the entry on 'space' that Raymond Williams might have written for his book *Keywords* had he not died in 1988.

Other geographers given a biographical treatment included Hilda Ormsby, a London School of Economics' lecturer, who Maddrell (2006) suggests epitomizes the ordinariness and small stories that make up the discipline but that are rarely publicly articulated. At the other end of the spectrum is Keighren's (2005) study of John Kirkland Wright. In spite of the personal details, including information about Wright's childhood and a lovely colour photo of him in New Hampshire shortly before he died, Keighren's (2005) paper is curiously short on historical context (although Lowenthal, 2005, fills in some of the gaps in his essay on the American Geographical Society where Wright worked). Laying somewhere between the ordinary and the extraordinary is Edgar Kant, the Estonian political refugee who ended his career at Lund, was a mentor to Hägerstrand, and who for Peter Gould at least was one of the brains behind geography's quantitative revolution (see Buttimer, 2005, and other essays in the special issue of *Geografiska Annaler* – 2005: 87B(2)). My favourite biographical piece, although it was not conceived in that genre, is Denis Cosgrove's (2006) Hettner Lectures, containing his illustrated autobiographical essay on 'trans-pennine geography'. Partly about a familiar region and place, partly about childhood and memory, and partly about the discipline, the essay brilliantly conjures a life and a geography

in the making; nothing for Cosgrove is ready-made, even the ready-made.

V Ideas of geography

Finally, there are the ideas, which seem to stream unrelentingly from the discipline, circulating and eddying, marking its vitality, dynamism, and vigour, but also raising issues of disciplinary coherence, direction, and boundaries. Geography's problem never seems to be one of coming up with new ideas, and which it seems to do on a daily basis without breaking sweat, but holding on to the ideas that it already has.

One of those new ideas is around science studies, the body of work that first emerged in the 1970s to provide a socially critical account of the practices of science and the object of its investigation, 'nature'. I have been an admirer for some time but did not realize quite the extent to which both the rest of the discipline was as well, and also how researchers from that field were now publishing in geography journals (John Law alone during the period had three papers: Callon and Law, 2005; Mol and Law, 2005; Sheller and Law, 2006). Moreover, the interest is not only among human geographers but physical geographers too (Bracken and Oughten, 2006; Bracken and Wainwright, 2006; Clifford, 2007; Couper, 2007). It will be a deep irony if science studies, which began life excoriating the false unity of science, ends up bringing unity to the discipline of geography.

While science studies has been used by historical geographers to understand geography's own history of science (see Powell's 2007 excellent review, and as a substantive example the collection edited by Livingstone and Withers, 2005), its deployment has been much more widespread. It is behind, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, what Bakker and Bridge (2006: 5) call 'the "re-materialization" of human geography ... [the emphasis on] the way that the "material" and the "social" intertwine and interact in all manner of promiscuous combinations'.

Bakker and Bridge's immediate concern is with resource geography, but a similar sentiment is expressed by posthumanism (Castree and Nash, 2006; Franklin, 2006; and the collected papers in *Social and Cultural Geography* 7(4), 2006). It also emerges in some of the work on relationality, especially in Murdoch's (2006) book, in Smith's (2005) editorial on 'joined-upness', and Harrison's (2007) musings on the non-relational.

There are even traces of science studies' influence in Massey's relational approach to space and place (Massey, 2005; 2007a: for commentaries and a reply, see Clifford, 2007; Sparke, 2007; Massey, 2007b), as well as in the debate that never seems to end, the one on scale and provoked by Marston *et al.* (2005) (Collinge, 2006; Hoeffle, 2006; Jonas, 2006; Escobar, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2007; Leitner and Miller, 2007). That said, clearly there are other philosophical influences within the discipline, although the vast majority derive from a Continental European tradition. They include old favourites like: Agamben (Elk, 2006; Minca, 2006), Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida (Barnett, 2005), Foucault (Crampton and Elden, 2007), and Heidegger (Elden, 2005). And just on the cusp of general recognition are Badiou, Blanchot, and Levinas (Barnett, 2005; Harrison, 2007), again all Continental Europeans. Not that I have anything against that tradition. It is one of the sources of the discipline's continued vitality and renewal. But it does seem slightly odd that philosophical inspiration is so geographically and intellectually constricted. This is another geography of philosophy that might be explored.

VI Conclusion

Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary about her book *Mrs Dalloway*: 'I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.' While I began this progress report with two deaths, the life of geography came quickly breaking in; indeed, those deaths were catalysts for further life.

The literature on the history and philosophy of geography is full of life (even when it is about people who are dead). It is the history part that conveys vitality, I think. The twentieth-century American analytical philosopher Willard Quine once said: 'There are two kinds of people who enter philosophy: those interested in the history of philosophy and those interested in philosophy.' For Quine, only the latter should be taken seriously because it is there that his concerns of logic, reason, rationality and analysis are found. But there is not a lot of life. In contrast, I prefer Hannah Arendt's statement: 'I have always believed that no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear there are incidents and stories behind them which at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell, the full meaning of whatever we have to say. Thought itself ... arises out of the activity of incidents, and incidents of living experience' (quoted in Friedlander, 2004: 329). It is the history of living experience to which we should attend; that is where life, including the life of the history and philosophy of geography, lies.

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