

**“TEACHING THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHY: CURRENT CHALLENGES  
AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS”**

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## **Forum**

### **Teaching the history of geography: current challenges and future directions**

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#### **Abstract**

Drawing upon the personal reflections of geographical educators in Brazil, Canada, the UK, and US, this Forum provides a state-of-the-discipline review of teaching in the history of geography; identifies the practical and pedagogical challenges associated with that teaching; and offers suggestions and provocations as to future innovation. The Forum shows how teaching in the history of geography is valued—as a tool of identity making, as a device for cohort building and professionalization, and as a means of interrogating the disciplinary present—but also how it is challenged by neoliberal

educational policies, competing priorities in curriculum design, and sub-disciplinary divisions.

**Keywords**

history of geography, pedagogy, curriculum design, disciplinarity, teaching

## **I Introduction**

More than three decades ago, Avinoam Meir reported in *The Professional Geographer* the results of a survey on the provision of undergraduate teaching in the history and philosophy of geography in the United States and Canada. Meir's (1982: 7) survey revealed a 'gloomy prospect'—a concerning gap being evident in the provision of such teaching. As Meir (1982: 6) noted, courses in the history and philosophy of geography were evidently 'not desired by the majority of...geography departments or faculty members'. For Meir, these findings represented nothing less than an existential crisis for geography: a threat to the discipline's sense of self and to its ability to produce critically aware and well-rounded students. In offering a diagnosis for the parlous state of pedagogy in the history and philosophy of geography, Meir pointed to two factors: first, the problem of curriculum design based upon apparent consumer demand; second, educators' and students' persistent doubt as to the value of looking back on the discipline's development rather than looking forward to its progress.

A later survey—conducted in the mid-1990s by Martin Phillips and Mick Healey in the context of the United Kingdom—noted educators' uncertainty in determining whether undergraduate teaching in the history and philosophy of geography should exist as a stand-alone course or be distributed across the curriculum. Phillips and Healey (1996) also noted how more general changes in pedagogy, including the

emergence of student-centered learning and an emphasis on the development of transferable skills, presented additional and particular challenges for teaching the history and philosophy of geography. Such challenges notwithstanding, Phillips and Healey's survey revealed that more than three-quarters of responding departments offered some form of teaching on that subject—a somewhat less-gloomy prospect than was revealed by Meir in the context of the United States and Canada.

Taken together, the work of Meir and of Phillips and Healey highlights a number of questions to do with student expectation, curriculum design, and pedagogical approach which remain significant and worthy of sustained reflection. This is particularly true given the perception that such teaching is often unpopular with students or is under threat from institutional administrators. The Economic and Social Research Council-sponsored, multi-agency *International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography* (2013: 11) identified 'some decline in...the teaching of courses in the history and philosophy of geography (often previously required courses)'. Castree (2013: 727), moreover, has noted that such courses are 'rarely popular with students' and that individual departments have been encouraged to make them 'more palatable (where they remain a degree requirement) and/or optional' as a consequence. Reflecting on his own institutional experience, Michael Watts has commented that not only has the history of geography 'fallen out of fashion', but that 'the vast majority of our undergraduate and PhD students at Berkeley—who are without question exceptional in

all regards—graduate...with little or no knowledge of the history of the discipline’ (Elden, 2015).

Against this context, it is noteworthy and perhaps encouraging that the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2014: 8) has included in its proposed revisions to the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography* an explicit indication of the importance of students’ understanding of the history of geography, outlining a specific statement of principle in this respect:

Geographers [should] have a critical understanding of the history of the subject and are aware of how changes in the subject itself have influenced its development. A historical perspective of geography portrays it as a dynamic, plural and contested intellectual subject. This requires an appreciation of the diverse approaches to geographical investigation and of the subject’s changing relationships with related fields of inquiry in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities.

Geographers [should] possess a critical awareness of the distinctive contribution they have made, and continue to make, within and beyond academia.

Whilst it is evident that the disciplinary crisis which was predicted to emerge from inadequate provision of teaching in the history and philosophy of geography has neither been as rapid nor as total as Meir feared, it is nevertheless clear that teaching in

this area, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, presents a number of seemingly persistent challenges. These challenges are to do with satisfying and subverting student expectations, with communicating the intellectual value and practical relevance of reflecting on geography's historical and philosophical contexts, and with positioning that teaching appropriately within the wider curriculum.

This Forum emerges from a panel session held at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, organised as a miniature state-of-the-discipline review of teaching in the history of geography and as an opportunity to envision its future possibilities. Contributors to that panel were asked to reflect on the pedagogical and practical challenges associated with such teaching: Where in the curriculum should it be placed? Should it be compulsory or optional? What is its role in the 'making' of a geographer? Alongside such questions, panellists were encouraged to consider how pejorative perceptions of teaching in the history of geography—as boring, dusty, and irrelevant—might be challenged: How can innovative pedagogical strategies revivify the subject and make its relevance clear? How can geography's multiple and contested histories be properly conveyed? How can students learn to *love* learning about the discursive and disciplinary history of geography?

In the commentaries which follow, the panel's contributors respond to those questions, focusing, in turn, on the role and significance of such teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and offering a series of prompts as to future

development and innovation. Franklin Ginn and Simon Naylor examine, with specific reference to the UK, how questions of curriculum design are negotiated with respect to student choice and compulsion, and how measures of student satisfaction impact upon the provision of ‘challenging’ teaching. Jeremy Crampton, Scott Kirsch, and Audrey Kobayashi examine, with specific reference to the United States and Canada, the role teaching the history of geography plays in the professionalization of graduate students (who have often been trained in a diverse range of undergraduate disciplines) and how particular pedagogic approaches are employed to encourage a critical engagement with geography’s disciplinary and discursive histories. Finally, Jörn Seemann draws upon his experience of geographical education in Brazil to present a series of prompts to educators to think creatively about the strategies they employ to teach the history of geography and to inspire students’ interest.

Notwithstanding the different national and institutional contexts these commentaries describe, taken together they point to shared aspirations and common concerns. For the contributors to this Forum, teaching in the history of geography matters to the disciplinary present—not because it offers a neat and Whiggish explanation of how things came to be as they are now—but because it functions as a whetstone against which students’ critical thinking is honed. At its most effective, such teaching offers insight into the making and breaking of ideas, into the complex social circumstances which govern the production, circulation, and reception of knowledge,

and into the ways in which questions of race, gender, and class permeate and inform all we do. It is precisely the messy, nonlinear, and conflicted nature of geography's history that provides its most valuable and transferable lessons. As these commentaries point out, however, perception as to the value of teaching in the history of geography is often divided along sub-disciplinary lines. The subject is too often considered, by both students and academics, to be the exclusive preserve of human geography. For the value of such teaching to be fully realised, it is vital that it incorporates academics, and enthuses students, irrespective of their sub-disciplinary affiliations. Whilst the future of the history of geography and its pedagogy is uncertain, and indeed precarious in certain institutional contexts, this Forum is unashamedly enthusiastic in arguing for its enduring value and relevance.

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## **II Confronting student choice and multidisciplinary in teaching the history and philosophy of geography**

One recent afternoon a student knocked on my door. They wanted to talk about one of their courses, 'The Nature of Geographical Knowledge'. This course, compulsory for third-year undergraduates, examines historical and contemporary episodes in the

production, circulation, and consumption of geographical knowledge. The course sits in students' penultimate year (the Scottish undergraduate degree being four years long) and underpins their final year of studies and independent dissertation research. The course—co-taught with a physical geography colleague, who delivers two of the ten lectures—argues that geography is a fractured discipline, with multiple epistemologies shifting in influence through time and place. This student, like the majority, had found the material challenging; they also belonged to the somewhat smaller cohort who found the course rewarding, if not exactly enjoyable. Towards the end of our discussion the student delivered an insight that struck home: 'If knowledge is historically and geographically contingent, why do we not look more at the way the university is today?'

The student was right. We should teach the history and philosophy of geography (hereafter HPG) with our reflexive disciplinary regard turned as much toward to the contemporary conditions which shape geographical knowledge as toward those of the past. Contemporary conditions are characterised by neoliberalisation: student fee regimes, audit culture, casualization of employment contracts, research governance, and competitive league tables, among much else. These processes are neither uniform in impact nor in distribution. Moreover, many of us retain freedoms to challenge the conditions of knowledge production. Here I focus on two elements which challenge teaching HPG in the UK: the student-as-consumer and the rise of multidisciplinary geosciences. The second is especially germane to a number of UK institutions, including

my own, where geography now sits within larger science units. These elements threaten HPG teaching, but more constructively I argue that responding to them can animate HPG teaching, and I offer principles that might inform course design accordingly.

The goal of recent changes to higher education in England and Wales has been to ‘put students at the heart of the system’, and to offer greater variety and flexibility of provision in order to train a more employable, albeit debt-burdened, youth—similar processes are active, if less brazenly so, in Scotland and Northern Ireland (BIS, 2011). Student choice has become sovereign (Collini, 2012). Universities have responded: fretting over *National Student Survey* feedback; hiring lecturers on teaching-only contracts; measuring performance with new metrics. In this context, timeworn gripes about content and modes of presentation (too dusty, too narcissistic) coalesce with fears of negative student opinion to erode the appetite for teaching HPG.

In contrast to the mantras of individual choice and satisfaction, HPG invites students to join a community of knowledge by inheriting—and challenging—a disciplinary history. This is one of HPG’s strengths, and should be reflected in course design. Following recent approaches, a course should emphasise the practices (such as fieldwork, book culture, peer review), concepts (such as positivism, empiricism, objectivity), and biographies of individuals and institutions that shape geography. In Edinburgh, ‘The Nature of Geographical Knowledge’ takes an episodic approach to history, and remains non-canonical in its animating personalities (more Tupaia than

James Cook; some Ellen Semple, plenty of Latour and Haraway). The course draws links from earlier generations of Edinburgh students and their teachers to the present day.<sup>1</sup> We juxtapose, for example, the strictures placed on students' dissertations in the 1940s and 1950s (they had to produce a regional study of a 100-square-mile section of Scotland (Withers, 2008)) with today's licence to roam. HPG confronts students with geographical knowledge as produced through provisional conversation—conversations which arc into the past and include both the silent and noisy dead. HPG's key message is that students inhabit this history whether they like it or not. Emphasizing such communality counters the idea that individual student choice is central, which gives HPG welcome political bite in today's climate.

A second key challenge to HPG is that global 'grand challenges' increasingly dominate UK research funding, with an ensuing preference for inter- or multi-disciplinary research. Conventionally, inter-disciplinarity proposes an additive approach to knowledge: blocks of understanding stacked one atop the other until climate change is mitigated, global health achieved, or environmental sustainability realised. Geographers have been particularly alert to the risks of epistemic hierarchy, whereby the natural sciences set upstream parameters and social sciences work downstream on the human dimensions, usually resulting in anaemic accounts without serious understanding of power or politics (Barry et al., 2008). In this context, moreover, many funders and academics see disciplines as anachronistic. This has implications for

teaching. Many faculty colleagues want teaching to relate to so-called real world problems, not history and philosophy. The problem is especially acute where geography has sacrificed autonomy under a geo- or earth-sciences banner. Here, natural scientists can perceive learning about the provisionality, fallibility, and situated nature of knowledge as a risky undermining of scientific authority and academic certainty.

While this era of multidisciplinary challenges our teaching of HPG, it also offers opportunities for invigorating courses. ‘The Nature of Geographical Knowledge’ historicises the emergence of earth systems science and remains sceptical of the unifying potential of nature in academic inquiry. One lecture reflects on the epistemic politics of combined social and physical science projects. By addressing the politics of the emergence of multidisciplinary, ‘The Nature of Geographical Knowledge’ aims to inculcate healthy appreciation for epistemic multiplicity. The need for multiple approaches to knowledge is, after all, a lesson that geographers are taking to integrative studies of global environmental change (Castree et al., 2014).

HPG can also respond to the accusation that it is irrelevant in the face of grand challenges. The obvious response that relevance should be no arbiter of pedagogy may feel satisfying, but is unlikely to hold sway in committee meetings. The key principle is that HPG—when conducted as part of a sustained module of enquiry, rather than as fragmented information-imparting—produces critical students who appreciate the contested practices, histories, and politics behind how they know what they know. One

lecture in ‘The Nature of Geographical Knowledge’, for example, reflects on how the wider political economy of research has been reformatted by various neoliberal processes over the last two decades, focusing on research funding and audit culture. At its best, then, HPG teaching inculcates something of what Said (2000) called a pedagogy of wakefulness, a mode of intellectual labour that rejects the idea of knowledge abstracted from its conditions of production and divorced from history or politics.

Two elements associated with the ongoing neoliberalisation of universities—student-centred choice and the rise of multidisciplinary research—offer challenges and opportunities for teaching HPG. HPG courses should help students understand that they participate in a communal but contested history, and that this fact shapes their knowledge and their studies. Our teaching should also show the discipline as a field with multiple, often incommensurate, ways of knowing. While HPG teaching should continue to turn its regard back through time, I suggest that the best way to retain and revivify HPG is for courses also to confront the current conditions shaping the nature of geographical knowledge.

Franklin Ginn

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### **III Reflections on curriculum design and sub-disciplinary cooperation**

At the institution at which I work—the University of Glasgow, in Scotland—I convene, and contribute to, a course entitled ‘Geographic Thought’. I am both an obvious and an unusual choice for this role. On the one hand, I am a historical geographer with research interests in the historical geographies of science, exploration, technology, and knowledge: interests that clearly lend themselves to the teaching of the history of the discipline. On the other hand, I do not think of myself as straightforwardly a historian of geography. In fact, I tend to think that too much emphasis is placed on the teaching of a narrow history of the geographical discipline. But more on that later. In what follows, I reflect on curriculum design and the means by which my colleagues and I have attempted to define the relevance of the course.

‘Geographic Thought’ is a core—in other words, mandatory—component of our Geography Honours programme. It runs in the first semester of our students’ third year of study (their degree programme taking four years to complete). The course is taught through formal lectures (two hours a week) and a parallel set of tutorials. In turn, ‘Geographic Thought’ is part of a wider suite of core teaching provided to our third-year students—a suite that also includes training in various geographical techniques and methods, research design, ethics, health and safety in the field, dissertation preparation, and an overseas fieldcourse. Within this context, three closely related justifications are put forward for the teaching of the history and philosophy of geography: 1) that a

working knowledge of the various theories and approaches in geography will help students to design and implement sophisticated, critical, and reflexive dissertation projects; 2) that the course will allow students to situate and engage critically with ideas encountered in their chosen third- and fourth-year option courses; and 3) that the course will allow students to develop a keen, historically-sensitive appreciation of what it means to be a geographer.

As with similar courses elsewhere, 'Geographic Thought' has suffered from something of an image problem. Criticisms and concerns about the course have come from both staff and students, most notably from BSc students who self-identify as physical geographers, as well as from some physical geography staff. A common complaint from the BSc student cohort has been that the course is simply not relevant to them—that it is overwhelmingly concerned with the development of human geography and that questions of philosophy have little bearing on the conduct of science. In turn, some physical geography members of staff worry about the compulsory nature of the course and the apparent haemorrhaging of students to our earth science degree programme. These concerns led us to carry out a review of the course in the summer of 2013 and to implement some changes in course design and content for the 2013–14 academic year. It is on this process of reformation that I should like to reflect here.

The revised course now has two opening lectures: the first provides a justification for the consideration of the histories and theories of the geographical

discipline; the second examines the commonalities and differences between scientific and social scientific and humanities approaches to the study of geography. While the fragmentation of geography into discrete sub-disciplines is discussed in this context, this lecture emphasises more particularly the preoccupations and concerns that can bind different aspects of the discipline together, such as environmental change, the region, the study of spatial organization, and approaches to dealing with issues of uncertainty and contingency.

The remainder of the course is organised into three blocks of six lectures. The first block considers the history of geography up to around the 1970s. In doing so, the block follows a trajectory that has been helpfully mapped out by Tim Cresswell (2013) in *Geographic Thought*. The block's first lecture examines attitudes to the study of geography in the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance worlds, addressing the work of Eratosthenes, Strabo, and Ptolemy. The second lecture considers the effects of early ocean-going exploration on European understandings of global geography and natural history, while the third covers eighteenth- and nineteenth-century geographical thought, from Kant, Humboldt, Ritter, Darwin, and Lamarck, through to Ratzel and Davis. The block's final two lectures take the course's chronological focus into the twentieth century, covering contemporary approaches to place, region, and environment and addressing spatial patterns, relations, and laws. One of the key points of this block is

that, for most of its history, the study of geography was in no way defined by its exclusive preoccupation with either social or natural processes.

The first block's final lecture on spatial science is picked up again in the course's second set of six lectures, which concentrate on the history and philosophy of physical geography. The first lecture in this sequence provides an introduction to the history of physical geography, using Chorley's (1978) seven phases of methodological development: teleological, immanent, historical, taxonomic, functional, realist, and conventionalist. These phases are then used as broad framing devices for the remaining five lectures. The second lecture returns to the quantitative revolution in geography and considers the effects that new technologies—from satellites to dating and analytical equipment—had on changes to the way in which landforms were studied and understood. The lecture also, relatedly, considers the close connections between physical geography and the military-industrial complex in the post-1945 world. Examples touched on include military funding for research into coastal geomorphology, oceanography, palaeomagnetism, and bathymetry during the Cold War. Lecture three explains the concepts of paradigms from a broadly Kuhnian perspective and applies the idea to the history of plate tectonics. Lectures four and five discuss inductive and deductive approaches in physical geography, and the final lecture in the block considers reactions to positivism in physical geography, the limitations of observation, the

difficulties of generalization and scaling, and the challenges of determining explanations for observed processes.

The final block of six lectures turns to the history of human geography since the quantitative revolution and, in doing so, returns to what might be considered familiar territory for these sorts of courses. Lectures one to three deal with the various responses to the quantitative revolution in geography, including Marxism and structuralism, together with humanistic approaches, feminist, and postcolonial geographies. Lectures four and five deal with postmodernism and poststructuralism and lecture six with recent developments in relational and more-than-human geographies. One of the two concluding lectures uses relational and more-than-human geographies to present new opportunities for working across the discipline, while the other provides a course summary.

In designing and implementing the course in this way the hope of the course convenors was that we would engage our BSc students more fully and persuade them that this was not just a course for human geographers. We were also trying to move away from an exclusive focus on the history of the geographical discipline and instead to emphasise wider processes of geographical knowledge formation and histories of geographical practice. The argument that geography students should study the history of their discipline because it helps them to understand and situate their work in the present is a reasonable, but not always compelling, one. One example, here, is spatial science

and the quantitative revolution, which to many human geography students (in the UK at least) seems to have little practical relevance to their studies, given the general predominance of qualitative approaches in geographical curricula. (To be clear: I am not suggesting that quantitative methods should not be taught as part of a human geography degree programme.) It is also the case that inter-disciplinarity has diluted the significance of a clear disciplinary heritage—a fact that is perhaps clearest in the teaching of physical geography, where it now seems more likely than not that lecturers did not, themselves, study geography as undergraduates. As an alternative model, a compelling history of the inter-disciplinary influences that shaped geography can be told. Whilst I am not suggesting that we should jettison the teaching of the history of geography, I do support the widening of the remit of such courses to encompass the history of geographers' involvement in wider events and processes, and also to pay attention to the development of geographical knowledges and practices that may have no immediate relation to the geographical discipline as it is currently constructed.

Simon Naylor

*University of Glasgow, UK*

#### **IV Teaching the history of geographic thought as the history of the present**

At the opening plenary of the 2014 Annual International Conference of the RGS-IBG, Patricia Noxolo, in addressing the conference theme of co-produced knowledge, argued that we encounter knowledge as always already co-produced. This does not mean that knowledge is therefore everywhere equally around us, but rather that it is produced in centres, and, furthermore, that it is produced under specific political and spatial conditions, and at specific historical moments. I would like to explore here the implications of Noxolo's remarks for the teaching of the history of geographical thought, as well as to draw on recent summaries of the subject by Barnes (2014) and Powell (forthcoming). My basic argument is that these authors provide useful approaches to such teaching because they each understand it as a historical genealogy, or, as Foucault put it 'a history of the present' (Foucault, 1977: 30–31).

There are two elements of genealogy invoked by Noxolo that speak to how I teach the history of geographic thought. First, a historical genealogy does not trace the origins of ideas through their development and their context, but rather looks at how and why previously unquestioned issues became a problem. Why and when does 'nature' as wilderness become an issue of concern, for example, and how does that relate to interventions in environmental policy today around issues such as sustainability and resilience and their respective histories (Cronon, 1996)? Second, what are the connections between past and present, and how is the past relevant to the present? As Livingstone (1992) has indicated, this is perhaps partly a case of us having epistemic

modesty in light of other work, some of which may have been marginalised and contested. There is a common saying about history, perhaps best expressed by Chomsky: 'It is normal for the victors to consign history to the trash can' and normal 'for victims to take it seriously' (Chomsky, 2011).

Approached in this way, then, the history of geographic thought becomes a toolbox for resisting the reduction and exploitation of geography for other purposes today. Powell argues that geography has often been misunderstood by the public and in popular accounts such as those by Diamond (1997) or Kaplan (2012). These accounts appeal to environmental determinism or a naïve political realism in order to make arguments that, at least in the latter case, 'leave out of the picture the grid of inequality and the related issue of the relations between states and corporations' (Kearns, 2013: 138). A grounding in a history of geographic thought can, I suggest, resist such reductions, because such a grounding can complicate the story by accessing contesting voices. In the case of environmental determinism for example, here at the University of Kentucky it is possible to consult the personal papers of Ellen Churchill Semple, and to see her own struggles as a scholar, and, thanks to her obsessive collection of news clippings about her lectures and publications, how her work was received (Keighren, 2010). Semple is often branded as the arch environmental determinist (and, therefore, a baddie). Contextualizing Semple complicates this narrative.

If doing the history of geographic thought (whether as a research project or in the classroom) is an opportunity to recover voices at the margins, then what is our public responsibility here? How do we as geographers ‘translate’ disciplinary histories to the public—or to each other? In light of public misunderstandings of geography, to what degree do we share responsibility for those misunderstandings? Finally, would teaching the history of geographic thought as a history of the present make a difference in addressing those misunderstandings? Powell, Barnes and Farish have used the way geography ‘travels’ outside its disciplinary confines to explore these questions, particularly during World War II and the Cold War (Barnes, 2014; Barnes and Farish, 2006; Powell, forthcoming). Here we learn how geography has been exploited for other purposes, sometimes at the hands of geographers themselves, such as Walter Christaller (Barnes and Minca, 2013). We might, therefore, ask how and what sorts of geography are traveling today, especially with regard to their uptake by counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency doctrines; questions already being asked within anthropology (see, for example, Price (2011)).

These ideas are instilled in the approach I take in teaching a graduate-level seminar—‘Development of Geographic Thought’—at the University of Kentucky, a required first-semester course for incoming graduate students. What this means in practice is that we (the graduate students and I) take a piece of contemporary writing on a topic and explore how that issue was problematised historically. The learning outcome

is that students see how their work today, far from being a purely contemporary question, enters a conversation—a struggle—over how something becomes a problem.

Take, for example, the history of GIS. We *could* start with the inception of GIS and trace out its developments and relationships with digital mapping and the current proliferation of online mapping technologies and services known collectively as the ‘geoweb’. This would certainly provide a ‘history of ideas’ as Foucault (2001: 74) put it, somewhat pejoratively, meaning a brute history of what happened. But in the seminar we approach it as a history of cartographic reason (Olsson, 2007; Pickles, 2004). As such, we investigate why GIS and digital mapping were developed, how the technologies and services were put to work and travelled outside their sites of development. In such histories of mapping, problems were raised to which various aspects of the development of mapping are then proposed as responses. A history of mapping and GIS in these terms would be a history of these problems. Why, for example, was a certain kind of thematic mapping now very popular developed in early nineteenth-century France as a response to the problem of understanding the country as populations, more or less educated, more or less conducive to criminal acts (Crampton, 2009)? And how did these mappings constitute people as certain kinds of subjects?

Teaching the history of geographic thought in this way—what Foucault calls ‘the history of the way people begin to take care of something’ (Foucault, 2001: 74) can take us a long way to connecting up our current concerns with those of the past.

Jeremy W. Crampton

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## **V Who needs disciplinary history?**

I was pleased to encounter Audrey Kobayashi's (2012) President's column in the *AAG Newsletter*, which affirmed the value of critical histories of geography, including major articles then forthcoming in the *Annals* on Nazi spatial science and debates over geographical warfare in Vietnam (Barnes and Minca, 2013; Bowd and Clayton, 2013), just as I was preparing to teach a course on 'Geographic Thought: History and Philosophy of Geography'—a mandatory one-semester course for first-year graduate students in our program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Kobayashi's statement of the relevance of disciplinary history, even (and perhaps especially) when that history can be an uncomfortable one, would, I thought, be helpful for initiating a discussion of course themes, and I placed it on the reading list for the seminar's first meeting. I paired the text with an older, considerably more pessimistic reading of the history of geography by Clive Barnett (1995)—a commentary which, responding to a different moment in the history of geography's historiography (following the publication of Livingstone's (1992) *The Geographical Tradition*), had raised the transgressive question of 'Awakening the dead'. 'Who needs the history of geography?' Barnett asked (see also

Driver et al., 1995). If, for Kobayashi, recent work unearthing forgotten or little-known parts of geography's history has served to highlight our understandings of the contexts in which geographical theory have taken shape, then, for Barnett, cautioning against interpretations that might limit the effects of 'context' to past disciplinary transformations, the implicit value of disciplinary history was called into question as a means of shedding light on the present. For the purpose of promoting discussion of how (and whether) to value disciplinary history, and for putting the issues 'up front' for students who had, in effect, already been told that *they* needed the history of geography, the pairing of readings made sense. Yet, even though I had personally found the history of geographical ideas to be enormously stimulating (at times) during my graduate education and afterwards, and have continued to find it useful for both teaching and research, perhaps my choice to pair the readings also reflected some lingering doubts about who *needed* history of geography. Did I, I wondered, agree with Barnett?

Barnett does not explicitly consider teaching (or learning) in the history of geography in his brief commentary; rather, he takes aim at those he sees to be mobilizing disciplinary history as a means of practicing difficult theories on friendly turf. But while he does raise important questions, the portrayal of geographers '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' (Barnett, 1995: 418), turns out to have been too cynical, at least if we are to remain open to the history

of science, ideas, and knowledge making practices as valid intellectual projects. Certainly, scholarship produced in the ensuing two decades on the history (and historical geography) of geographic thought, institutions, and practices ought to quell concerns that disciplinary history was to become chiefly a testing ground for contemporary social and cultural theories, as reflected in a spate of deeply researched, historically and analytically engaged works.

Such work has contributed not just to histories of geographers and geographic knowledge *per se*, but equally called attention to the work that geographical knowledge does in the world, and to the changing place of professional geographers inside and beyond disciplinary and academic boundaries they inhabit. I would like to suggest, moreover, that some of the value of history of geography is realised precisely in its pedagogy. In North American departments, this comes largely by virtue of the place of disciplinary history in graduate education where, despite sometimes struggling against negative perceptions of dustiness and irrelevance, classes like this have continued to provide a forum for engagements with changing theory, methods, and contexts in geographic thought for students from diverse intellectual backgrounds, and for facilitating serious conversations about these issues. At their best, disciplinary history courses thus do a certain amount of critical work for the disciplinary present, constituting a unique, and, for many, memorable component of graduate coursework, persistently helping to (re)make the history of geography as a living concern.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, we are able to offer ‘Geographic Thought’ every year by requiring it among a suite of three core courses in the graduate curricula, which typically puts enrolments at about ten students (sometimes including graduate students from other disciplines and advanced undergraduate geography majors). This requirement in some ways means dealing with a ‘captive audience’, which does present certain challenges for teaching, but these are not insurmountable—it is a course, after all, which seems to offer sparks of relevance for nearly every geography graduate student; for some, it is the last or even the *only* historical course they will ever take. One recurring snag has been a tendency for physical, ecological, and other modelling-oriented students to interpret the course as being solely one of *human* geography or as a domain of social theory; this despite, in my case, dwelling at length on Humboldtian science, evolutionary thought, and Cold War laboratories, among other emphases on the natural sciences in the formation of the modern discipline. A reticence to distinguish a historical approach to geography from other contemporary approaches can thus become an obstacle to learning, but this also poses new opportunities for critical engagement with method and philosophy. At the same time, the need to make the course relevant as part of a core graduate curriculum, along with the desire to make it interesting, drives ongoing, iterative efforts to revise the course and, though I have benefitted from supportive colleagues, this dynamic does render the nature, content, and design of the course a valid matter of concern for the faculty as a whole.

Responding to the institutional role that the course plays in our program, I recently experimented with a somewhat less *literal* approach to *history* of geography by stressing continuities (and disjunctures) in key concepts and approaches. For example, reading about the recent American Geographical Society ‘Bowman Expeditions’ controversy alongside texts on geography and (classical) imperialism allowed students to examine questions of contemporary research ethics and politics while remaining attuned to the persistence of historical processes.<sup>2</sup> Reading a contemporary first-person account of mathematical modelling (Lane, 2011) alongside historical discussions of the quantitative revolution in geography compelled some students to resist consigning spatial science to a moment of the past. Being less literal about history can thus be an effective way of opening up the historical to contemporary questions, and vice-versa. To some extent, this has meant weaning myself *off* Livingstone’s classic book which, alongside his work on geographies of science, had served to open up the subject for me personally, radicalizing it in some ways. Today, to a more diverse and international graduate student population, and with situated histories of science becoming more or less mainstream, *The Geographical Tradition* seems hopelessly Euro-centric. This, too, is a challenge to pedagogy, but it is one we can begin to address by taking seriously the book’s subtitle, in which Livingstone framed the book as a series of ‘episodes in the history of a contested enterprise’, not as a comprehensive or definitive history. But I must confess to have weaned myself off Livingstone with more Livingstone—

specifically, the edited *Handbook of Geographical Knowledge* (Agnew and Livingstone, 2011) which has been useful in developing this slightly-less-literal approach to disciplinary history through a number of outstanding chapters built around historical approaches to key concepts, settings, and institutions, rather than around historical moments, epochs, or trajectories.

There are, of course, many possible ways to tweak or rethink courses like this within contemporary graduate curricula, and my ideas and various pairings are by no means always successful. It remains a challenging, and important, course to teach precisely because of its prominence in the institutional landscape of the discipline (especially so in an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary world wherein disciplines still matter). Do we *need* the history of geography? Of course not, strictly speaking. But rather than being austere, let us allow ourselves the *luxury* of disciplinary history, together with its persistent challenges. ‘Luxury’ is a term that is most often used pejoratively in contemporary academics, but I want to appropriate it positively here, acknowledging the luxury but also the value of examining the history of ideas, discourses, and knowledge making practices over long historical periods—expanding our historical imaginations alongside our more celebrated geographical ones—even when compelled to do so by degree requirements.

In a more recent AAG President’s column, Mona Domosh (2014) asked geographers to mobilise strategically the discipline’s ‘radical intra-disciplinarity’,

reflecting geography's position as a meeting ground for diverse approaches from the natural and social sciences and humanities. By inhabiting the 'same space—this thing called geography—we often know each others' habits, respect each others' ways of knowing, and understand enough about each other to speak and be heard' (Domosh 2014). If knowledge-making and problem-solving will increasingly depend on a diversity of approaches, skills, and sensibilities, Domosh (2014) argues (see also Lave *et al.*, 2014), then 'that diversity exists (and often thrives) within geography'. In fact, pedagogy in the *history* of geography remains one of the key sites where this radical intra-disciplinarity is being cultivated as a matter of the disciplinary present. Though they can be hard work, graduate seminars in the history of geography offer a rich setting from which we might enhance this sense of a discipline built around clustering, interaction, and mutual understanding, and through engagement with other disciplines (and *their* histories), rather than through the policing of porous borders.

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## **VI Teaching the history of geography: a biographical approach**

Just as people have biographies, so too do their ideas. I have learned that the best way to capture students' interest in the history of our discipline is to animate the story, help

them to understand that ideas are never free-floating but always ideas *thought*, that the discipline is no more—nor less—than the total of thoughts/actions through which it is performed, communicated, and disciplined. By humanizing the discipline, not only are students more captivated (which is important), but they also come to confront epistemological issues around the creation and transmission of knowledge, the politics of knowledge creation, and the myriad ways in which they are themselves the vessels through which past and current ideas are performed, maintained, challenged, and changed. In an ideal situation, they come to think of themselves as part of the performance of the discipline, and to question critically how their own lives become part of the larger intellectual legacy, enfolded within the ongoing project that is Geography.

The idea of ‘race’ provides an excellent example. Early in their university careers, most geography students come to terms with the social constructionist perspective that race, like gender and other markers of difference, is a human, historical creation. Many struggle nonetheless with trying to sort out the difference between ‘real’ and ‘constructed’ race, and it is always a moment of pedagogic celebration to see the lights go on as they realise that life/history/humanity is an ongoing construction that *is reality*. Peopling their understanding of the historical construction of race with those actually involved in its creation is a big pedagogic help. For example, I ask them to read some of the materials on the life of Carl Linnaeus and his ideas on racial classification

that became the basis for much lively debate during the Enlightenment period. I show pictures, that I have taken myself, of his still extant home and garden near the Uppsala University in Sweden, and ask them to reflect upon the idea of classification and how it fit with the political economy of the times. How on earth are plant classification, exploration, and current understanding of biography and (what we now call) anti-racist geography connected? What was the institutional setting in which Linnaeus' ideas emerged? (Fortunately, the Linnaeus Society, based in London, has plenty of evidence).

I then introduce them to Immanuel Kant, whose lectures on physical geography were given at Königsberg, Germany starting in the mid eighteenth century and published from notes taken by his students. Kant went considerably further than Linnaeus, giving lengthy discussions of the physical, intellectual, and moral attributes of putative races, as well as the effects of climate in determining human qualities. Students are frankly shocked when they first read Kant's words—e.g., 'this fellow was quite black... a clear proof that he was stupid'—and his bizarre notions of how exposure to the sun creates black skin on the African-born, and shrinks their intellectual capacity (Kant, 1997 [1775]: 38). The story is told that Kant 'learned' about the qualities of the inhabitants of Africa by talking to sailors at the docks. Whether he did is irrelevant to the point that his ideas were a product of his time, and they were shared in a geography classroom with a small group of male, elite, German students who were preparing to use those ideas in the context of a rapidly developing and globalizing Europe.

Kant's writings on race differ strikingly from what students today learn about him in their first-year philosophy courses. The students are often disturbed, sometimes angry. Another pedagogic celebration occurs, however, when I ask them to do two things: 1) to reflect upon the relationship between popular (mis)conceptions and the scholarship of the day, and on the ways in which such popular notions often outlive their scientific debunking; and 2) to reflect on the ways in which their own emotional responses to something that they do not usually consider as scholarship sheds light upon knowledge transmission, normativity, and, indeed, the concept of 'enlightenment' as what Kant himself famously called the 'public use of reason'. The latter discussion opens up several avenues for students to think about knowledge formation not only in the abstract, but in the integration of different forms of knowledge from formal texts, artistic productions, novels, common-sense talk, cultural nurturing, politics, the media, and so on. In other words, I ask them to situate themselves within the project of knowledge formation.

The concept of race is a trope running through the history of the discipline in some dramatic ways (Livingston, 2008). Climate science, of which Kant was one of the early purveyors, developed into a major aspect of geographical studies by the nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century environmentalism had become perhaps the most heated topic of debate. As human geographers turned away from environmental determinism, they also cleaved their interests from those of physical geographers, which

is one of the most fascinating points in the formation of the discipline. By the 1920s, under the influence of Carl Sauer, there was a well-known turn away from the discussion of race to that of culture, with the result that for many decades race hardly entered the canon of geographical topics (Kobayashi 2014). I ask students both to ponder the textual evidence of how geographic thought on the matter of race has emerged, or been submerged as the case may be, but also to speculate on the larger context in which race ideas have influenced not only geography but humanity as a whole. How might we understand the emergence of the Chicago School of Sociology and its very peculiar influence upon urban geography? What are the lingering notions of environmentalism, which may have taken very different forms over the past century or so of geographic scholarship? How do they square popular and academic discourse over questions of race? What are the settings in which knowledge is created and who are the characters that inhabit those settings? How is it all connected? Shared? Given power?

A biographical approach engages stories of scientific and popular ideas, the people who expressed, accepted, adapted, or challenged those ideas, and the ways in which scholarship is a recursive way of structuring human relationships, including the relationships that students have with their peers, the texts they read, and the larger society. I do not wish, thus, to create an excessive sense of self-scrutiny or navel gazing—far from it! Rather, I encourage them to think about how knowledge is situated as part of human creativity, understanding, and relations with other humans. In the

process, I try to make the history of geography as fascinating as possible, in a way that will engage their imaginations as well as their analytic abilities. I challenge those, including students, who tell me that the history of our discipline is dry, boring, irrelevant, or uninteresting, to recognise that understanding geography as a human project is enlightening, fascinating, challenging, relevant, and more than a little provocative. What is more, the history of our discipline is full of very human stories worth telling.

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## **VII Provocations for effective teaching in the history of geography**

The observations brought together in this Forum show that a revival or revivification in the teaching of the history of geography depends, variously, on course content, curriculum design, and pedagogical approach. Critical reflection on the *doing* of the history of geography, at least as far as it concerns teaching, necessarily draws attention to various ideological and methodological issues. The history of geography as a subject taught to undergraduate and graduate students is often criticised, and rightly so, for being 'academocratic' and for frequently overlooking silenced voices and alternative perspectives. In its worst extremes, it is an approach ignores the contribution of women

(Monk, 2004; Maddrell, 2009), Afro-Americans and other minorities (Sammons, 1990; Shresta and Davis Jr., 1989), and geographers outside the Anglosphere. Beyond questions of content are concerns over effective strategies of teaching. Some pedagogical approaches are, undoubtedly, in need of updating; there are no dry materials, only dry teachers. In what follows, I present five, partially overlapping prompts that may serve as provocations to rethink the ways in which we teaching the history of geography and how we might more effectively spark students' interest.

*I Teaching of the history of geography should be a means, not an end*

The perception of the history of geography as a tedious, sometimes mandatory, curricular component does not encourage students' enthusiasm; they fear an overdose of names and dates, a single fact-laden disciplinary narrative. Ideally, teaching the history of geography should not be limited to a specific taught class, but rather should permeate the entire curriculum as a common thread. How aware, for example, are educators from subfields such as cultural geography or climatology of the importance and relevance of the historical dimensions, and the human richness, of their areas? Geographers teaching physical geography or urban geography might productively include more by way of historical contextualization, genealogy of key ideas, and biographical richness in their

classes as a means of showing their concepts and principles to be not abstract and unchanging, but products of particular people and places.

## *2 The teaching of the history of geography must come closer to reality*

Many students struggle to establish a connection between the history of geography and their personal experience. Why should a student be interested in the outdated or conservative thoughts of unsexy-seeming nineteenth-century German, French, or British geographers? Why should a student learn about the historical trajectory of the undergraduate or graduate program in which they are enrolled? Educators could, and arguably should, teach about *histories* of geography instead of *the* history of geography, investigating and illuminating everyday practices in the lives of geographers—practices which render those distant geographers as real, as individual, as people. In recent years, several popular history writers have done just that to great effect (Winchester, 2001; Helferich, 2004). Even the otherwise trivial or quirky—William Morris Davis’s breakfast habits (Keighren, 2007) or Marx’s coat that ended up in a pawnshop (Stallybrass, 1998)—can be employed to make the history of geography more lively and engaging.

## *3 The teaching of the history of geography wrongly emphasises time over space*

A fundamental question which haunts those geographers tasked with teaching the history of their discipline is how the history of geography can be treated as geography rather than as history. In other words, how should one question dominant historical tenors? Should there be a historical sequence or chronology in such teaching? This provocation echoes an idea put forward in José Saramago's (2004) novel *The Double*. The protagonist, a history teacher named Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, complains that history is being taught all wrong—it should be taught backwards. 'Historical material', Afonso complains, should be 'studied from the present to the past, rather than from the past to the present' (Saramago, 2004: 147). Looking back in time always implies the interpretation of past events and processes through the lens of the present. This fact requires a deeper reflection on the part of geography's educators.

#### *4 The teaching of the history of geography should be multi-scalar*

The teaching of the history of geography should not be restricted only to geography's 'big picture'—its key thinkers and founding fathers and mothers—but should also include the parochial and micro-scale, its individual departments and programs, its local exponents and characters, thereby addressing broader historical contexts and local peculiarities simultaneously. Lorimer and Spedding (2002), Withers (2002), and

Lorimer and Philo (2009) have offered thought-provoking examples of how to deal with local settings and people, the (in)visibility of archives, and processes and practices of archiving. A well-documented departmental history may not please everyone, and may cause tensions among the professors, but it can undoubtedly help to shape an identity among students and faculty and stimulate student involvement.

##### *5 The teaching of the history of geography needs a methodological revamp*

The teaching of the history of geography needs a stronger emphasis on innovative pedagogical methods and strategies. Paraphrasing Thrift and Dewsbury (2000), students encounter many 'dead geographies' in teaching on historical topics, and educators must work to make them live. This observation resounds with recent tendencies and movements in human geography that valorise practice over representation. Nobody has to be a fan of the non-representational movement in geography, but the idea of conceiving the history of geography as histories of lived or performed experiences may open up new dimensions in research and pedagogy (Lorimer, 2003, 2006). Why not disguise classes as action, and employ more palatable modes of teaching and learning in the form of theatre performances or role plays (Maddrell, 2007) or even of video games or graphic novels? Visual materials are underutilised resources in the classroom; the

pictorial turn in the humanities and social sciences has not reached the realms of geography's history (Mitchell, 1995).

These provocations are intended to serve as a starting point to rethink pedagogical practices and to turn the discipline once again into a meaningful part in the formation of geographers.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The course benefits enormously from the pedagogic labour bequeathed by my immediate predecessors: Charlie Withers, Fraser Macdonald, Innes Keighren, Genevieve Patenaude, Iain Woodhouse, Brian Barrett, Ealasaid Munro, Andy Dugmore, and Julie Cupples (and many others before them).

<sup>2</sup> See the guest editorials by Bryan, Herlihy, Cruz and Agnew in *Political Geography* 29 (2010) and additional responses from Bryan and Herlihy in *Political Geography* 30 (2011).