

Biographical approaches in the teaching of the history and philosophy of human geography: introduction to review essays on Key Thinkers on Space and Place

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Twenty years ago it was common to bemoan the lack of textbooks on the history and philosophy of geography. Although Arild Holt-Jensen's (1999) *Geography: History and Concepts* (first published in English in 1981) was the first book to systematically chart different approaches to geographic thought, it was Ron Johnston's *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Geography Since 1945* (first published in 1979) that occupied premium position in the marketplace. Applying Kuhn's paradigm theory, Johnston of course attempted to trace the biography of geography in terms of the rise and fall of environmental determinism, possibilism, regional geography, positivism and spatial science, behavioural geography, humanistic geography, and structural Marxism. In its valiant endeavour to make sense of the complex trajectory of the discipline from the mid-1980s, *Geography and Geographers* has benefited from the recent addition of James Sidaway as coauthor of the 6th edition published in 2004 (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004).

Geography and Geographers has undoubtedly been the formative text for many teachers currently charged with the responsibility of delivering courses on the history and philosophy of the discipline. Nevertheless, the addition of a whole series of new textbooks has opened up fresh opportunities for those keen to deliver material in more innovative ways. To be sure, some of these textbooks have adopted a similar kind of 'quasi-paradigmatic' approach to *Geography and Geographers* and have served largely to deepen, clarify, exemplify, and enrich the standard account. Included in this category might be Paul Cloke, Chris Philo, and David Sadler's (1991) *Approaching Human Geography*, Tim Unwin's (1992) *The Place of Geography*, and Richard Peet's (1998) *Modern Geographical Thought*. Other contributions, nonetheless, have sought to encourage alternative ways of reading the discipline's philosophies and trajectory. Six innovations, which are not mutually exclusive and which have different relationships with the hegemonic paradigmatic approach, are of particular note here.

First, stimulated in part by David Livingstone's (1992) seminal *The Geographical Tradition*, contextualist approaches have emerged which attempt to locate geography's origins and evolution against the backdrop of the social, political, and economic dramas of the time (in particular colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts, and modernity and postmodernity). Second, on the basis that students learn theory and philosophy better when it is applied to concrete instances, thematic approaches

have attempted to introduce complex ideas with respect to a number of common 'objects' that they are normally applied to [cities, environment, Europe, migration, and so on (Cloke et al, 2000; Hubbard et al, 2002)]. Third, subdisciplinary approaches have been written on the assumption that theory can best be appreciated within the systematic branch of the discipline one knows best (Benko and Strohmayer, 2004). Fourth, and interestingly proving more successful at disentangling the fragmentary strands of the discipline today, some contributors have sought to study geography's philosophies from the perspective of their futures rather than their pasts (Cloke et al, 2004). Fifth, inspired by the rise of nonrepresentational theory, there has emerged an interest in theorising the production of geographical knowledge as much as an unpredictable and expressive performance as an organised social practice (Dewsbury et al, 2002; Thrift, 2004). Sixth, echoing the focus given to key theorists within subjects such as sociology, there has surfaced an intriguing interest in excavating and revisiting the biographies and life works both of geographers, and of social theorists with lively geographical imaginations.

It is against the backdrop of the growing popularity of this sixth alternative that Sage has recently published *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*. Edited by Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, *Key Thinkers* represents the reflections of thirty-five reviewers on a total of fifty-two individuals who embody a range of conceptions of space and place. Clearly pedagogical in inspiration, the book is advertised as being the "best encyclopaedic tool for human geographers since the *Dictionary of Human Geography*". This is no empty boast. The closest competing text to *Key Thinkers* would be Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift's (2000) *Thinking Space*. Even a cursory examination confirms that, given its ambition, design, and execution, *Key Thinkers* will probably emerge as the more popular of the two texts among undergraduate students.

To begin with, it covers more key thinkers and more contributors and therefore offers more bang for the buck. Moreover, chapters are bite sized and more digestible. Most importantly of all, however, the book is quite stringently edited and as such is more lucid and user friendly. It begins with a useful editorial introduction and ends with a valuable glossary of key concepts and terms. Each chapter presents the work of a particular key thinker in an identical chronological structure which begins with that thinker's biographical details and the historical context within which he or she worked and are working, which progresses through an exposition of his or her key spatial contributions, and the key advances and controversies which surround that work, and which ends with a useful bibliography identifying that thinker's major works and a range of useful secondary sources and references. Given this consistency of layout, students ought to be able to read across chapters with relative ease.

It is a safe bet, then, that *Key Thinkers* will emerge as something of a 'hit' within the undergraduate community and will rise to prominence as a 'must buy'. Given its likely popularity, it has been deemed instructive to commission a number of critical review essays of the book for publication in *Environment and Planning A*. These reviews have been written by geographers who are at different stages in their careers and who have different formative experiences, and who have had different experiences of publishing in and teaching the history and philosophy of the discipline. They stand as

a useful introduction to some of the book's main strengths and limitations and, although not written with this specific audience in mind, ought to serve as a valuable guide for course organisers and module leaders in particular.

It is not the purpose of this introduction to offer an opinion on the text. The reviews perform this task eminently. It is pertinent, however, to conclude by highlighting two areas that would appear to have captured the attention of the reviewers most: the selection of the 'key thinkers' for inclusion, and the virtues of adopting a biographical approach per se. First, the choice of the key thinkers for scrutiny is acknowledged by the editors to be controversial. In their introduction, the editors note that they sought to capture a broad range of current ways of thinking, and that the final list should not be read as a statement of who has been most influential or who is hot at the moment. The cast includes geographers and nongeographers, is mainly drawn from the Anglo-American tradition, consists principally of men (only seven of the fifty-two are female), privileges those whose contribution is primarily theoretical (and thereby excludes leading practitioners of space and place), and has been constructed with human geography and not physical geography in mind.

It is inevitable that a project like this, which must by definition be limited and selective, will fall foul of those who feel that they or a colleague have been overlooked. This point is noted by most of the reviewers to be an occupational hazard and not worthy of serious discussion. Nevertheless, it is clear that the principles, methodologies, rationalities, and strategies underpinning the selection process and not merely individual grievances exercises the reviewers greatly. The editors, it is argued, are insufficiently reflexive about the cultural politics of the selection process and their situatedness in the power politics of academic publication. The book, it is contended, constructs an overview of the landscape of geographical thinking that runs the risk of being complicit in the privileging of white, Anglo or Anglo-American, and masculinist geographies. Moreover and in part an outcrop of this point, the book promotes the importance of social theorists who have at best weak and buried geographical imaginations. Whilst geographers such as Derek Gregory (1994) might possess the dexterity and literary flair to tease out and reveal these imaginations, they remain too submerged to make it onto the radar screen of the larger community. In their reply, the editors provide a clear response to these criticisms.

Second, irrespective of which key thinkers are selected in the end, the reviews also serve well to stimulate discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of using biographical approaches per se. I have to confess to being a strong advocate of this kind of approach to pedagogy. Sustained and close reading of the ideas of key thinkers helps in my view to overcome crude and sloppy historiographies of geography which ignore and do violence to individual contributions by reading them through the lens of broad paradigms or schools or research programmes or traditions or discourses. It also fosters reading practices and an academic rigour that is somewhat lacking within the student body at present.

Nonetheless, although Key Thinkers is to be welcomed for promoting biographical

investigation, it simultaneously generates a number of questions about how such investigations ought to be conducted. What kinds of relationships might be built between biographical accounts and other ways of recapturing the histories and philosophies of geography? Might a biographical approach lend itself to an unhealthy cult of the individual? Might a biographical approach engender a sense that geography is unmappable and disorienting, giving a misleading picture about the broader drift of the discipline? Are geographers equipped to write biographical analyses and do other disciplines not have better tools and a richer narrative repertoire to draw upon? Does geographers' status as novices of this kind of investigation open up fresh possibilities as to how biographies might be written? Although most attention is given to the choice of the key thinker, is it not more important to reflect upon who is doing the reviewing as evidently different reviewers will offer different readings? Might a text like this foster laziness among students, with students starting and ending with this kind of book rather than using it as an entry to a detailed reading of the original tome?

These points and many more are fleshed out in the reviews to which we now turn. Following the presentation of the six reviews, a brief section at the end is dedicated to the editors' response. Of course, although 'space and place' remain the fundamental objects of enquiry within human geography, it is important to remember that geographers have been active in generating sustained theoretical interest in other related but distinctive objects, such as 'scale', 'nature', and 'landscape' (Holloway et al, 2003; Hubbard et al, 2002). If the idea behind Key Thinkers proves to be as popular as expected, it might be that there is scope to redeploy the same concept with good effect to a host of other domains. Given these wider possibilities, sustained critical debate on this seminal text will be even more important.