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Book review: Geography and Geographers

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Geography and Geographers' sublime incrementalism

A review of the 7th edition of R Johnston and J Sidaway (2016) *Geography and Geographers*. London and New York: Routledge

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In 1979, Ron Johnston published 'Geography and Geographers' (G&G), a small pocket book for undergraduate students to socially and intellectually navigate human geography. It included tips on career development and surveyed the large debates that had engulfed Anglophone geography in the preceding decades. At the time, US and UK human geography were just recovering from a decade of power struggles between 'positivists', 'humanists' and 'radicals', and students could use a little guidance in discerning the various flags in the field without a priori normative judgment. Moreover, geography was about to enter a period of reconciliation between paradigms, for which G&G was the perfect, non-judgmental, primer.

Having captured this early 1980s zeitgeist, G&G was successful, spawning up to now seven editions (the last two co-authored by James Sidaway). Throughout the subsequent editions, the author(s) largely retained the original structure. As human geography took new turns, new chapters were added. Consequently, G&G lost its slender crash course appearance, steadily gaining weight, due to a strong reluctance to throw stuff out. The 7th edition is, excluding its deliciously gargantuan bibliography, exactly 400 pages of small-type font discussing post-1945 disciplinary history. This corpulent book is incredible bang for your buck in terms of geographical knowledge.

Every historian of geography is confronted with three puzzles: how to demarcate the subject matter in time? in space? and how to explain disciplinary change? From the beginning, G&G chose to focus on 'Anglo-American Human Geography', because Johnston (preface, first edition) felt insufficiently equipped to cover other contexts. Furthermore, G&G used Thomas Kuhn's paradigm model to demarcate temporal boundaries. Continuing to follow this approach, G&G's structure has to this day remained that of a 'book inside a book'. The first and last chapters reflect on the question of how to understand the history of human-geographical praxis since 1945 and tries to gauge Kuhn's usefulness for that task. The inner chapters cover the historiographical substance demarcated in overlapping, paradigmatic, episodes.

Although the authors' 'stick to the plan' approach in the face of new understandings of human geography has been criticized (e.g. Trevor Barnes' position, G&G: 389), to my mind,

the skillfulness of implementation amounts to sublime incrementalism. G&G has gradually become a living history of geographical thought. New viewpoints on old theories are added and the existing narrative is enriched with newly published historiographies. Simultaneously, the reluctance to take out older material results in a treasure trove of long-forgotten references. G&G is likely to be the book that will lead you to that once famous but now obscure study that you never knew existed but is fully relevant today.

Of course, viewpoints on how to understand human geography's history are contested, and the decades-long tradition to structure the book in terms of paradigms (G&G: 279, 350) restricted to Anglo-American Human Geography (G&G: 376-377) is easy bait for critiques. However, G&G's ability to acknowledge criticism and revise accordingly makes its resistance to structural changes palatable. Illustrative is G&G's (290-292) treatment of feminist geography where a recollection of the debate how to properly integrate the subject in geography textbooks results in a clever exposé about what some of the core issues of feminist geography are. This reflexivity also extends to the battered debates on paradigms and reproduction of Anglo-American hegemony: the final chapter debates alternative ways to structure disciplinary history extensively. The situational awareness renders G&G the evolving consciousness of the discipline, the tally of what was regarded important when, in a way that no newly-written book could.

Nevertheless, several dilemmas arise if G&G wants to retain its ability to describe human geography's all possible worlds. As English has become the discipline's lingua franca, it is increasingly faulty to 'fit' Anglophone geographical praxis to the institutional underpinnings of British and US academia, necessitating re-thinking the Anglo-American angle. Although G&G utilizes it very effectively, the paradigm notion with its overblown (Van Meeteren, 2016) emphasis on incommensurability (although not stressed in G&G) subdues possibilities for paradigm remixing (cf. Cox, 2014) going forward. Current societal challenges require a human geography that combines insights from spatial science, political economy, ecology, humanist, feminist, and postcolonial concerns alike. For instance, big data invokes old spatial science debates (Van Meeteren and Poorthuis, 2018) and the challenge is not to make the same mistakes as before. This begs the question how G&G could rearrange its treasure trove of material to allow juxtaposition of its temporal and geographical anchors. A Herculean task for sure, but not one that should not be contemplated. A final dilemma is that this 520-page tome has become way too encyclopedic to achieve its original goal: being that 'bluffers guide to academic geography' for aspiring scholars. As the need for such guidance is as big as ever (Keighren et al., 2017) it seems we require a complementary new dedicated pocket book.

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