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The pedagogy of autobiography in the history of geographic thought

Michiel van Meeteren

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE 11 3TU, UK. Email: m.van-meeteren@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

This reflection on Arild Holt-Jensen's lecture "*Transformations in the discipline of geography experienced over 60 years by a Norwegian geographer*" contemplates the mechanisms by which autobiographical writing enhanced the pedagogical value of textbooks. By recalling Anne Buttimer's and Torsten Hägerstrand's International Dialogue Project (1977-1988), it is argued that Holt-Jensen's approach has the same pedagogical potential as the International Dialogue project had for an earlier generation of geographers. As such, this contribution appreciates the contributions of humanist geographical tradition to geographical communication and pedagogy.

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Commentary

Anne Buttimer (1938–2017) opens the first video of the *International Dialogue Project* (Buttimer & Hägerstrand 1980; Buttimer 1983) by stating how ‘It is always a surprise to me when I meet the person behind the ideas that I have been reading’. Recorded in June 1978, the video pioneered the use of autobiography as a method to understand the history of geographic thought. A similar pleasant surprise of ‘meeting the author’ and the engagement it fostered with geographical ideas prompted James Sidaway (2018) and myself (Van Meeteren 2019a) to praise recent editions of Arild Holt-Jensen’s textbook *Geography: History and Concepts* as an excellent curriculum for a seminar in the history of geography. Holt-Jensen’s autobiographical approach was the immediate reason for the *RGS-IBG History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group* to invite him to speak and discuss autobiographical merits, a debate reflected in the commentaries in this issue of *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography*. Autobiography has increasingly been recognized as an important source and medium from which to understand the history of geographic thought (Moss 2001; Purcell 2009; Jones 2018; Johnston 2019). However, although these works discuss the benefits and pitfalls of the autobiographical method, they do not necessarily emphasize the pedagogical value of autobiography. Somehow, the personal contextualization of geography’s big ideas helps to engage a student of geographic thought with the curriculum. Autobiography has a remarkable power to affect the reader (Purcell 2009), which is not unimportant for a textbook. Therefore, this appreciation of Holt-Jensen’s RGS-IBG lecture (Holt-Jensen 2019) focuses on understanding the pedagogical power of autobiography.

The humanist legacy in the historiography of geography

In his book and lecture, Holt-Jensen (2018; 2019) acknowledges Torsten Hägerstrand’s significant influence on the development of his thinking. Similarly, Ron Johnston (2019, this issue) points to an autobiographical essay by Allan Pred (1979) written in Hägerstrand’s time geography tradition as a particularly insightful example of autobiographical writing. I opened this commentary by crediting Buttimer and Hägerstrand’s collaboration as pioneers of autobiographical methods in geography. Therefore, revisiting the dialogue between Hägerstrand (1916–2004) and his theoretical interlocutors, such as Buttimer and Pred (1936–2007), and Dutch existentialist-humanist geographer Christiaan van Paassen (1917–1996) in the 1970s and early 1980s is my starting point to evaluate the pedagogy of autobiography and time geography. The pedagogy is most evident in the International Dialogue Project (Buttimer & Hägerstrand 1980; Buttimer 1983; 1987; Ferretti 2019), which was initiated by Buttimer in the mid-1970s and generated between 1977 and 1988, amongst other outputs, at least 68 autobiographical video recordings of geographers that were extensively used for teaching purposes (Buttimer 1987).¹

¹ The videos are currently available on YouTube’s IGU Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1WzSi02jYP3QgjeHxKB3g>) and on Anne Buttimer’s personal YouTube

There are several key commonalities between Holt-Jensen's textbook and the International Dialogue Project. First, both are concerned with the fragmentation of geographical knowledge. For Buttimer (1974; 1979), geography in the mid-20th century had evolved from a holistic discipline with an understanding of man-environment relations into a set of disjointed technical applications. This fragmentation increasingly invited critique. Young anglophone scholars argued that geography as a discipline was not able to develop independently a theoretical perspective for the modern world and urged geographers to take their cue from social theory or sociology instead (Gregory 1978) or even to abandon the discipline altogether (Elliott Hurst 1980).

For a Dutch geographer nearing retirement, such as Van Paassen, this must have felt like history repeating itself. Van Paassen was a veteran of a long scholarly fight in the Netherlands in the 1950s, in which sociologists had aggressively pushed to take geography's place at universities because geography was deemed unfit for the modern, urban, quantified world (De Pater & De Smidt 1989). For scholars such as Buttimer and Van Paassen, the lack of attention to the French and German geographical traditions in these debates was cringeworthy, as they were convinced answers were to be found there (Buttimer 1974; Van Paassen 1976; 1981). Hägerstrand, in turn, was very attentive to these issues. His attentiveness reflects that he himself was a contemporary of Van Paassen but also that he was gifted with extraordinary curiosity and reflexivity, and tended to take people's critiques very seriously (Buttimer 1974, 50–54; Hägerstrand 1982; 2006).

Autobiography and the plural accounts of the history of geography

While splitting the realms of physical and human geography might have seemed rational in the 1950s and 1960s, after the Club of Rome and the diffusion of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), the environment became a hot and pressing topic in the 1970s (Boyle et al. 2020). Perhaps anglophone geography could learn something from those traditions in which the ecological human-environment perspective had been preserved? Holt-Jensen (2018) similarly argues for preserving the bridge between human and physical geography, while advocating for a distinctive geographical perspective on theory. Given the current environmental crisis, one can do little but frown on how human-environment relations slipped off geography radars in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

When questions change, reacquainting different geographical traditions touches on another commonality between the International Dialogue Project and Holt-Jensen's work (Holt-Jensen 2018). Both tout the value of conversations across different geographical traditions, as there is not a singular right answer to a geographical conundrum (Buttimer 1974;

channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH2zyPfp_AaPpxZFjX62BA). The channels contains audio-visual presentations of geographers born in the period between c.1900 and c.1930, of which often no other videos have been preserved.

Holt-Jensen 2018). Such a situated perspective recognizes that (re-)writing the history of geography across contexts is Sisyphean labour that is never finished (Van Meeteren 2019b). Since the relevant questions change over time but never in a linear way, there is no 'progress in geography' wherein the old supersedes the new (Buttimer 1981; cf. Barnes 2006; Livingstone 2006). Yesterday's answers might have more relevance to tomorrow's problem than to today's thinking. However, to make such an evaluation, one needs an engaged pluralist historiography of geography that does not just emphasize cautious tales from a shady past but also situates the history of geography empathically (Van Meeteren & Sidaway 2020). In their non-contextualized form, older geographies might not have the capacity to speak to new generations. Moreover, new subjects and stakeholders will want to have a seat at the table in the conversation (Jöns et al., 2017). Therefore, adding autobiographical layers can help to build bridges. Such layers make subjective and contextual what was previously presented in the literature as timeless and objective (Van Meeteren 2019c), a problem exacerbated by the conventions of the once popular version of the scientific method that discouraged personal pronouns and chased the mirage of objectivity (Buttimer 1974; Purcell 2009).

Buttimer & Hägerstrand (1980, 6) decided to focus on retired or near-retired geographers in the International Dialogue Project, which was a conscious methodological choice (Feretti 2019) because one needs the freedom from institutional roles to acknowledge one's situatedness. These geographers belonged to the generation that had witnessed and participated in the post-1945 dream of social-democratic modernization, which was perceived as having been degenerated in a top-down technocratic iron cage by the 1970s (Buttimer 1979). The interviewees were people that started their careers in the conviction that geography could straddle the divide between the humanities and the sciences, only to feel an increasing pressure to the contrary as their careers progressed (Buttimer 1974; Van Paassen 1981). Buttimer's invitation was to entice this generation of geographers to drop their veil of objectivity and reflect on their life's projects. To me, Arild Holt-Jensen did exactly that in his RGS-IBG lecture for his own younger generation, which came of age in the post-war period (Holt-Jensen 2019, this issue).

Autobiography, corporealization and the choreography of existence

What makes the choreography of existence in time-geographical perspective touted by Pred (1977; 1979) so useful for building bridges in geographical praxis? Early, and unfortunately the most-often cited, publications about time-geography (e.g. Hägerstrand 1970) drew criticism for being 'physicalist'. Buttimer famously argued that simply depicting the intertwinements of biographies in paths in time-space amounted to a 'dance macabre' devoid of human intention, thought and feeling (Hägerstrand 2006). The work of Hägerstrand and his existentialist-humanist interlocutors during the 1970, of which the International Dialogue Project was an integral part, was to make the 'inner world' accessible within time geography. Both Buttimer (1974) and Van Paassen (1981) sought connection to the French Vidalian concept of *genre de vie* in which humanity and its environment produces distinct ways of living, including material

culture, collectives, ways of sustenance, and geographical imaginations. Van Paassen (1981) argues that Vidal de la Blache had produced a geography that in the pre-modern era could theorize the relation between 'civilization and milieu'. However, Van Paassen (Van Paassen 1981, 20), struggled with the issue that:

neither French nor other geographers could find a satisfactory solution for a modernization and expansion of that geographical paradigm which is in tune with modern society. The 'genre de vie' concept faded away and a kind of socio-economic description filled the gap left after the collapse of the historical school of economy.

According to Van Paassen, biography engenders a 'corporealization' of space. Intertwinement of biographies makes collectives emerge and shapes the existential corporeality of man and society, in which material and immaterial items are linked in different ways and in different degrees. The societal system is by its corporeality a social substance. In that perspective, the societal system can be perceived as a 'corpus societatis' (Van Paassen 1976, 330). It is the production of 'togetherness', analytically put in focus by time-geographical methods, that enables us to understand how corporeality emerges, and how collectives and communities begin to understand themselves in co-evolution with their milieu (Van Paassen 1981). Van Paassen (1981), in his contribution to Hägerstrand's *Festschrift* forcefully argues that Hägerstrand had solved the puzzle of how Vidalian thought could be upgraded to serve as basis for understanding modern society. Hägerstrand (1982) reciprocates this *festschrift dialogue* by integrating Van Paassen's ideas in time geography through the concept of 'diorama'. The diorama theorizes the environmental context that shapes the biographical paths and projects of the time geographical language. Published for the occasion of their respective retirements, it was a solution to a career-long search for a geographical frame and as such a conceptual gift to a new generation.

However, gifts need reception and appreciation, and despite Pred's vigorous efforts to the contrary (Pred 1977; 1979) the humanist expansion of time geography as a form of explicit geographic theory met with scepticism in anglophone geography (Gregory 1978, 12), wherein the argument of 'physicalist fallacy' is repeated to this day (e.g. by Warren 2017, 789). For now, I leave it to the reader to ponder whether geography could have antedated by several years Bruno Latour in theorizing the relationality between the human and the non-human in producing larger wholes using time-geographical language, but I hope we can agree that something was lost (in translation) in this path not taken.

Autobiography as pedagogy: provincializing, humanizing, relating, and comparing

How does the togetherness and corporeality produced by a time-geographical perspective of autobiography contribute to pedagogy? How does it help to bring ideas about 'thinking geographically as homo geographicus,' to paraphrase some key inspiration for *Geography: History and Concepts* (Van Meeteren 2019a, 157), across to a new generation? For me,

reflecting on this interchange between an academic grandmother and two great-grandfathers, I note that a time-geographical approach to autobiography enables a double movement. On the one hand, autobiography reveals the unique environmental circumstances that led to people practising geography in a certain way. It shows how corporeality, being a recognized collective identity, evolves from shared projects in a shared environment. By understanding the situatedness, one is able to *provincialize* a contribution, show how it is a product of one possible trajectory in a particular time-space environment (Leitner & Sheppard 2015).

However, by at least partly couching life stories in the abstract language of diorama, path and project, the stories also become *comparable*. Common patterns emerge that speak across linguistic, generational, cultural, and disciplinary divides. Having myself now recorded oral histories with retired geographers over several years (e.g. Van Meeteren 2019c), I notice how interviews reveal the importance of key life events that explain career directions that never were mentioned in published works. In the 1960s, work–life balance issues, mortgage worries, and ageing parents were as important as they are today in the structuring of academic careers, as were the ephemeral fashion-prone priorities of funders dictating what was researched and by what methods. However, contrary to the present day, private struggles and funding fads were never really discussed in published professional forums. Buttimer (1983, 10) notes the discomfort of some geographers because of how the private and professional registers became mixed in the International Dialogue Project. However, identification in the private realm *humanizes* geographical thought and provides it with historical consciousness. Any claim to universality is replaced by reflection on whether the past was different from the present and how the present can and cannot learn from the past. Connections across paradigms appear where it previously seemed there were none. Buttimer (1987) extensively experimented with using the International Dialogue Project’s outputs in pedagogical contexts, and if there is one pedagogical remark that stuck with me, it is that

the conventional habit of labelling and stereotyping individuals and their works in terms of various ‘-isms’ and ‘-ologies’, ... is challenged radically ... Having studied major events and products which mark the scholar’s career, there is always evidence of major changes, re-orientations, and new discoveries, all of which illustrate a dialectical interplay of inner and outer circumstances in the life histories of individual academics. The life journey then becomes construable as a moving theatre of events rather than an objectifiable body of data to be sorted and classified by standard measure. (Buttimer 1987, 138)

Pedagogically, Buttimer’s statement means that a student engages with conceptual becoming rather than having to learn concepts as a given. The textbook author’s train of thought becomes visible, and that regime of visibility invites identification (Couper 2017). One starts to understand ‘the other’ *empathically*, and the research choices the other made in that particular circumstance. In other words, the student is seduced to a dialogue through listening

and relating (Janz 2018), and engaging with the value heritage and bequest of a canon rather than the imposition of a gallery of great man portraits (Keighren et al. 2012). Therefore, the textbook genre (Sidaway & Hall 2017) that autobiography stimulates is one that actively counters the paradigm-driven genre that has persisted so long in geography because of its efficiency, despite readily acknowledged critique (Van Meeteren 2019d).

The empathic mechanism is not entirely unique to autobiography and many of the above-mentioned pedagogical effects can also apply also to well-written biographies. However, autobiography allows authors to choose how they want to relate to the student. Authors can situate their own past and work in the present, making the agency visible that is key to the humanist perspective. Expressions of sympathy for the issues of a new generation can be inserted that would be less appropriate in a biography, in which the author tends to situate work in its own time (cf. Baigent & Novaes 2017). Hence, autobiography invites dialogue in a more active sense than when it is mediated by a third party, the biographer.

To summarize, adding an autobiographical layer to past geographies is an invitation to dialogue. After having met Arild Holt-Jensen and read his works, the more I became convinced of how his textbook *Geography: History and Concepts* (Holt-Jensen 2018) can be cast as a *cri de coeur* to new generations of geographers, as exemplified by the books' call to arms to tackle contemporary crises, in the penultimate chapter. For all the mistakes, naivety and faults that my academic grandparents' generation might have had – like the generation before them that Buttimer engaged with – their experience in the vocation of geography does provide lessons that young people can rework to engage with the problems of tomorrow. I believed after first reading the book, and after further reflection even more, by making that *cri de coeur* personal through autobiography and sketching the dioramas of Arild Holt-Jensen's life, new generations will get the message.

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