

Editorial: Boundless contamination and progress in Geography

Noel Castree et al. (2020) *Progress in Human Geography*, forthcoming

It is early April 2020 as we type these words. The coronavirus has transgressed boundaries with astonishing alacrity and rapidity. A microorganism brought (*it seems*) to the Huanan wholesale seafood market in late 2019, COVID-19 spread across the entire globe in just a few weeks. By March of this year it had infected hundreds of thousands of people, with a higher mortality rate than seasonal flu and a much higher mortality potential in the absence of vaccines. The geography of initial contamination was uneven, but enabled by the ubiquitous infrastructures and means of 21st century transportation (airports and Airbuses, roads and private vehicles, ports and cruise ships). After long distance travel restrictions were imposed, the second phase of contamination was hard-wired to the space-time routines of daily life in highly urbanised countries like China, Italy, Spain, the USA and Britain. Some countries acted early and decisively to 'flatten the curve' of infection (such as Taiwan, South Korea and Japan). But many did not. The knock-on effects of this profound threat to public health have been unprecedented in modern world history. COVID-19, a tiny living entity, is so contagious that the entire body social has virtually shut down at the time of writing. Schools, shops, universities, sports venues and workplaces have been closed. The vital organs – notably hospitals – are being protected so that, in time, full societal health can somehow be restored. For now, the virus has successfully infiltrated the nooks and crannies of our lives; it has thrown into sharp relief the multi-dimensional vulnerabilities of billions of people; and it has tested to the limit the capacity of government, business and civil society to respond to an existential threat that's normally the stuff of Hollywood science-fiction films. We very much hope that, by the time this editorial is published in an issue (rather than online), the virus is under some sort of meaningful control.

What of the future? It is true, but banal, to say that COVID-19's legacy will leave no one untouched as we look ahead. The legacy will be as geographically encompassing as it will be long-lasting. The real question is how we choose to interpret what the virus signifies: how will its legacy be framed, what lessons will be learned, how will they be acted on (and by whom), and on whose authority? Millions of words are currently being written in the news media, blogosphere and elsewhere, presenting the epidemic in a wide range of ways. But the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007-8 offers a recent history lesson about what's likely to eventuate. At the time it was heralded as a 'game changing' event, one best understood in the context of long run political economic forces and shifts. But there's little evidence that the structural causes of this cataclysmic occurrence have been tackled by legislators in Washington, Westminster and elsewhere. The room the crisis created for deep reflection about new directions gave way to a narrower space of regulatory tinkering – or so a great many informed commentators would argue.

Researchers in many universities worldwide enjoy the remarkable, if in some places threatened, privilege of academic freedom. We have the time and space to study all aspects of a crisis like COVID-19, from pre-conditions to triggers, from causes to impacts, from immediate responses to long-term effects. We can analyse it cognitively, by posing 'how?' and 'why?' questions; we can also analyse it normatively by asking critical questions (e.g. about the links between poverty, wild animal capture and food safety standards; about the state of public health systems; or about the ease of movement between nations enjoyed, mostly, by a few hundred million wealthy humans). In addressing such questions we get to collectively shape the future story of what COVID-19 was all about and what changes the crisis ought to precipitate in a hyper-integrated world deeply etched by processes of uneven geographical development and escalating environmental destruction. In most cases – let's be honest here – our shaping will make little difference in the wider society (heterodox economists knew this well even before the GFC). But, nonetheless, researchers in the health and

medical sciences, in social science and in the humanities will have an awful lot to say about the coronavirus crisis in the next few years. Their arguments, findings, predictions, criticisms, concepts and policy ideas will soak into the wider discursive and material environment, albeit rather patchily according to circumstances.

Human geographers will, of course, play their part – using this journal and other media. *PiHG*, and its ‘twin’ (*Progress in Physical Geography*), were founded in 1977. They are review journals. Their papers and reports track ‘progress’ within and between sub-fields of human and physical geography. Most of them also seek to ‘add value’ to the research publications they survey. *PiHG* and *PiPG* are thus journals of record as well as a places where authors seek to move Geography forward: that is, they both ‘map’ and ‘navigate’. The COVID-19 crisis presents a challenge to geographers, as it does to researchers in most other disciplines. The challenge is also a significant opportunity:

1. How should we describe, explain and evaluate the unfolding crisis, foregrounding its dimensions of spatio-temporal unevenness and connectivity throughout?
2. How can we ensure that it is not only the voices of English speaking academics and those based in more the more privileged institutions internationally that are heard?
3. How might attempts to make sense of COVID-19’s geographies affect the way we *do* Geography and define ‘progress’ in the discipline? As part of this, are there older approaches, ideas or methods that might usefully be revisited? Conversely, what might we need to invent in order to address absences in our cognitive and normative tool box?

The first question is the obvious one to ask, but no less important for that. The second question is pertinent not only because COVID-19 has affected so many countries in Asia, continental Europe and elsewhere. It also speaks to different potential ways of understanding the how, what, why, when and significance of the ‘crisis’. The third question is relevant not simply because of the mind-boggling scale, scope and magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, it’s salient because Geography, as a discipline largely based in public universities (at least in the Anglosphere), has an ongoing obligation to respond to the wider context in which it operates – and not just in moments of manifest crisis. As the context changes, so geographers get to change their *modus operandi* – more, or less, depending on a range of factors, forces and professional decisions. The coronavirus pandemic sharpens the perennial question of ‘what kind of Geography for what kind of world?’ (cf Harvey, 1986).

In this light, let us offer some brief speculations and broad recommendations about (Anglophone) Geography and COVID-19. First and most obviously, there are analytical frameworks to-hand that can usefully illuminate the jagged geography and temporality of viral transmission. Many build on long and strong traditions of inquiry in medical and health geography (inspired by the likes of Peter Haggett). These will assuredly be deployed, and soon too. For instance, political ecologies of disease and health will be traced and associated critiques published about the classed, raced, gendered and aged vectors of spatial vulnerability. Likewise, the ‘one world, one health’ approach will see geographers working alone and across disciplines to design holistic analyses and policy proposals attuned to the multi-stranded character of the coronavirus pandemic. Others, drawing on human geography’s rich ecology of critical thinking, will meanwhile want to rethink what sort of ‘problem’ COVID-19 is thought to be. Perhaps it is to be regarded as much a herald as a threat. (cf. Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2017).

Second, the pandemic will no doubt produce some familiar calls-to-arms in Geography. As a problem of society and environment, of city and country, of proximity and distance, the CV crisis will inevitably reprise the question of disciplinary dis-unity: that is, the intellectual fragmentation represented by the decomposition of *Progress in Geography* 43 years ago into two sibling journals. Integrated, multi-scalar analysis involving biogeographers, transport geographers, urban

geographers, agricultural geographers, rural geographers and others is clearly of value to understand and manage any newly emerged pathogen, never mind COVID-19. Today we have the benefit of novel approaches to 'synthesis' such as 'critical physical geography' (Lave, Biermann & Lane, 2018). These approaches present alternatives to the 'old fashioned' arguments for Geography's unity that pivoted on a monistic ontology and viewed knowledge as a set of jigsaw pieces waiting to be joined together to reveal a singular picture of reality. We need not cleave to one vision of a Geography (more) united – and, even then, operationalising any one vision in a sustained way would take considerable effort and tenacity.

Thirdly, aside from these two likely responses to COVID-19, there is a more exacting and transformative reaction to the pandemic – one whose relevance reaches far beyond this viral crisis. Just as the crisis has revealed the forces and fault lines that criss-cross 21st century societies (see, for instance, Wallace *et al.*, 2020), so it can be used to reveal what is fundamentally awry in the academic house we have constructed, furnished, maintained and, at various times in the past, refurbished rapidly. For those willing to look at the foundations, this is more than a question of 'disunity' between large parts of human and physical geography and the need to better occupy the 'middle ground' of environmental geography. It is a root-and-branch question about our philosophical, theoretical, methodological and evaluative resources, about how we deploy them and about how far we are even able to have a deep conversation across the discipline about these issues (and then act on it). In Anglophone Geography, it is – in part – a question of where (literally and metaphorically) we learn about the world and ourselves (a question addressed by post- and de-colonial critics). Nearly 50 years ago, David Harvey (1972) called for a revolution in geographic thought. He did so on the eve of the first generalised post-1945 economic crisis. One does not have to be a Marxist to appreciate that asking revolutionary questions is a mark of true responsiveness to a world that's presently shaking us to our social and environmental foundations (see Gray, 2020). Even if revolutions in geographic thought are, like political revolutions, rare things, the mind-opening potential of the CV crisis should surely not be squandered.

In sum, the COVID-19 epidemic is clearly a game-changing phenomenon. It has compressed, in a confronting way, the sort of massive questions and challenges represented by humanity's long-term transformation of the Earth (captured by some Earth System scientists in the Anthropocene concept). But what 'game' and what sort of 'change' are matters to be debated, in academia and the world at large. Geographers could respond to the crisis in a range of ways, some safer and more immediately feasible than others. But, if we shy away from more far-reaching scrutiny of what the discipline's means and ends should be, we risk undue conservatism. At the least, we need to assure ourselves that our intellectual anti-bodies are defending us from the right metaphorical viruses. If we too hastily immunise ourselves against the need for exacting forms of change, we risk becoming part of the proverbial problem (O'Brien, 2012). 'Progress' can take many forms, as we know. It's political all the way down and without remainder (Sarewitz, 1996). In Geography, as in many other disciplines, we could use our academic freedom to think radical thoughts and experiment with radical actions. And those who do not favour such radicalism can, at least, make their case openly and seek to defend it in journals like *PIHG* and *PIPG*. In this, the discipline's existing internal diversity may stand it in far better stead than those subjects where orthodoxies inhibit real debate, never mind real change. In the pages of *Progress*, we look forward to future submissions that use the COVID-19 pandemic to 'think well' both about the world we study and the many tools we use to do so.

Noel Castree, Louise Amoore, Alex Hughes, Nina Laurie, David Manley, Susan Parnell

References

- Gray, J. (2020) 'Why this crisis is a turning point in history' *New Statesman* 1st April, <https://www.newstatesman.com/america/2020/04/why-crisis-turning-point-history>
- Harvey, D. (1972) 'Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in Geography', *Antipode* 4, 2; 1-13.
- Harvey, D. (1984) 'On the history and present condition of Geography', *Professional Geographer* 36, 1: 1-11.
- Hinchliffe, S., Bingham, N., Allen, J. and Carter, S. (2017) *Pathological Lives: Disease, Space and Biopolitics* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell).
- Lave, R., Biermann, C. & Lane, S. (eds) *The Handbook of Critical Physical Geography* (London: Palgrave).
- O'Brien, K. (2012) 'Global environmental change III: Closing the gap between knowledge and action', *Progress in Human Geography* 37, 4: 587-96.
- Sarewitz, D. (1996) *Frontiers of Illusion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- Wallace, R. *et al.* (2020) 'COVID-19 and circuits of capital', *Monthly Review*, <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/03/27/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital/>