

Navigating together without a map: metaphors for making Geography's future

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Abstract: This article sets the scene for the ten papers comprising the special section ‘Geographical research for the 21st century: trajectories and possibilities’. It asks the hoary question: ‘by what means, and to what ends, should Geography be directed?’. It does not, however, venture a substantive response because there is no single answer that will suffice. Instead, the article offers resources for those seeking to respond to this question. It identifies twelve parameters that define the ‘operating space’ that most geographers worldwide now have to act within, like it or not. These parameters impose constraints but also offer opportunities. The article then focuses on metaphors that might help us better understand who we are as a research and teaching community: after all, metaphors can distil the essence of our ongoing preoccupations. I venture a ‘new ecological’ metaphor that might enable accuracy and hope in our self-understanding as we enter the third decade of an already extraordinary century. It may seem paradoxical to say, but we can navigate forward purposefully without a map, avoiding the polar opposites of an infeasible disciplinary unity and an undesirable Balkanisation of our activities.

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Introduction

This first issue of *Environment and Planning F* largely comprises articles in a special section entitled ‘Geographical research for the 21st century: trajectories and possibilities’. There are ten papers, along with this short introduction. *EPF* is a whole-of-discipline journal devoted to making productive connections among the numerous strands of contemporary Geography, reaching into cognate research domains (Castree *et al.*, this issue). It seeks to make more – indeed the most – of Geography’s remarkable intellectual diversity, without presuming that geographers can or should all swim in one direction. This raises the perennial question that academic disciplines ask from time to time: namely, by what means and to what ends should our collective research (and educational) endeavours be steered? This question is especially interesting to ponder for disciplines that are somewhat ‘ill-disciplined’ and heterodox. It’s a question the editors posed to a range of invited authors, each possessed of considerable experience working as geographers in different parts of the globe. The authors are ranged across human, physical and environmental geography, having different points of connection to other disciplines too. Inevitably, their assessments of Geography’s current trajectories and future possibilities reflect their own histories and present institutional contexts. The putative whole that is Geography is a dynamic, complex amalgamation of local, national and international activities, organisations and flows (of people and knowledge). It defies a summary characterisation. Yet it’s only through a keen awareness of the many ‘parts’ – often ill-fitting, friction-filled and disarticulated – that we get a surer sense of our own situated possibilities as geographers, whoever we are and wherever we may be. The parts cannot speak for themselves; instead, they must be spoken for by geographers with particular angles of vision on them. The result can be kaleidoscopic; the challenge is then to avoid being defeated by the complexity.

Making Geography, but not under conditions of our own choosing

Rather than summarise each of the papers in this special section, it’s perhaps more fruitful to remind ourselves of the broad parameters governing the myriad activities we inevitably reify when invoking the abstraction Geography. In no particular order, and with some parameters being general and others Geography-specific:

- *Academic freedom*: the principle of academics’ right to research and teach without outside interference is globally recognised, albeit badly tarnished in many places (a recent case in point being Australia, where several national research council grants were vetoed in late

2021, after positive peer review, by a federal minister). The principle remains precious. It founds the collective ability of academics to make informed decisions about research aims, methods and goals; about degree syllabi; about modes of engagement with policy makers; and about much more besides. Critically, it also creates the distance necessary to speak various truths to power, noting that 'truth' is never absolute nor value-free.

- *Professional vocation*: Despite (i) the cadres of casual and sessional staff who do not enjoy the privileges of tenured academics, and (ii) the dismay many tenured academics experience as their universities become more tightly managed and measured, the notion of 'vocation' arguably remains as potent as the ideal of academic freedom. It denotes our work as constitutive of who we are, not merely a 'job' we do to pay the bills. It drives a strong sense of care and concern about our academic endeavours: metaphorically, we are what we eat, and we do a lot of self-provisioning too. Vocation comes under assault when we're addressed as 'employees' or a 'workforce', and when a culture of managerialism permeates our institutions, linked to poor working conditions for many.
- *Public professionalism*: The notion of 'the public' emerged in the 18th century, as new European democracies slowly emerged from a feudal-monarchical past. Despite the large national differences in today's university systems, the notion that university academics work in 'the public interest' is widespread. It goes hand-in-hand with the principle of academic freedom: after all, 'the public' is a complex, shifting constituency of needs, wants and values and therefore requires an independent academic community able to shape, and be shaped by, something that is constitutively protean. Geography, of course, enjoys uneven support globally, being well established in some national university sectors (e.g. the UK) and almost non-existent in others. But in those countries where it's currently prominent in multiple universities, a great many of these institutions are self-described as 'public' in their mission. This reminds us that we're somehow trying to ensure our collective activities support a wide range of particular and general interests, agendas and aspirations in the local, national and global societies we're connected to. The forces of central government intervention and market discipline have, to be sure, attenuated the public interest mission of many universities worldwide. The national and transnational public spheres are also under attack courtesy of media moguls, demagogues and ideologues keen to simplify the complexities and subtleties of public problems. Large social media platforms, the rise of infotainment and a fractured news media landscape have not helped. In this context, as with the principle of academic freedom and the ideal of academic vocation, public professionalism is a normative concept in need of strong defence.
- *The research-teaching nexus*: Research should infuse our teaching at all levels and the experience of teaching should, in turn, have some bearing on our research activities in a virtuous back-and-forth. In recent years, many academics have had to teach more and more in areas beyond their research expertise as 'student markets' alter. In other cases, specialist research-driven teaching has made no concessions to the important question 'what is a university education for?'. The huge proportion of young people, and mature students, now taking degrees, diplomas and certificates in higher education institutions is inevitably rebounding on research year after year. Making the case for Geography, and proposing specific directions of travel, must necessarily be deeply mindful of the question posed above and how the funding and focus of research is closely tied to student recruitment. It is also germane to consider, as Danny Dorling notes in this issue, exactly who our students are and how some of them becoming future academic geographers will help to shape the discipline in the 2030s and beyond.
- *Geography's wide academic bandwidth*: In many parts of the world, university Geography departments span natural science, social science and the humanities, reflecting the grand ambitions of the subject's late nineteenth century founders. Over time, geographers have adapted to this bandwidth by specialising, the result being a discipline that's more diverse

than most philosophically, methodologically and ethically-politically. It is precisely this heterodoxy that makes Geography almost the polar opposite of Economics – a discipline that even today, in the face of severe post-2008 criticism, has dominant paradigms, canonical characters and key departments that set agendas for many others. Geography's diversity is a weakness, but also a potential strength. While we're well past the point of achieving any sort of 'unity' across the whole discipline – a pipe-dream even if we earnestly wished for it (cf. Cox, forthcoming) – we can decide to pay more (or less) attention to the astonishingly rich tool kit of concepts, techniques and applications we have together created. In turn, we can decide whether to employ those tools in new combinations in different arenas of inquiry. Of course, there are centripetal forces at work too: for instance, many physical geographers continue to have more to gain from aligning with the wider geosciences than seeking to learn from the work of, say, cultural geographers (see Rhoads and Thomas, this issue). Related to this, Geography's breadth still makes it a candidate for being divided and merged with other disciplines in some universities. Yet for heterodoxy to be meaningful and positive, dialogue is required within Geography; otherwise, the discipline becomes a collection of mini-orthodoxies, more or less deaf and blind to each other. If disciplinary unity is undesirable and impractical, we nonetheless need to focus on the value-added of novel syncretisms within Geography. Balkanisation can otherwise intensify over time through lack of action to prevent it.

- *The challenge of critique 'all the way down'*: All academic inquiry is 'critical' in the sense that it aspires to use evidence and reason to answer questions free from dogma and prejudice. The hoary philosophy of science debates about 'verification' and 'falsification' were precisely about how best to operationalise the spirit of critical inquiry. But since the 1990s, new critical challenges have swept across the interpretive social sciences and humanities, reaching deep into parts of human geography worldwide. For instance, post-structural, decolonial, anti-racist and indigenous approaches have thrown down the gauntlet at all levels: philosophical, theoretical, methodological, ethical and practical. They raise profound questions about situated knowledge, perspectival relativism, unexamined axioms, the way power is expressed in the supposedly 'neutral' arena of disciplined inquiry, and so on (see Head, this issue). While many geographers ignore these questions, perhaps telling themselves that 'other people can worry about them', the truth is that the challenge they pose is very hard to contain. Even the 'science' of physical geography, in its several branches, stands to be significantly affected, as Emma Sharp and colleagues (this issue) show us so very well. Indeed, the rise of critical physical geography is one of the notable, positive features of our discipline, splicing older and newer senses of critique.
- *The turn to research 'impact and engagement' in higher education*: In many countries, university Geography has always been a very practical affair, geared to environmental management, regional development and urban planning. But in others, it's remained fairly academic until the last few years, when greater esteem has been accorded to research that has a demonstrable, positive impact on the wider world. For some, making research more 'practical' is anathema – a product of government meddling in universities. But, of course, 'impact' can take very many forms. Even the most critical-Left human geographers recognise that critique means little, in the end, if one cannot propose practical means to improve the world. At the present time, then, geographers have rich opportunities to think hard about the means and ends of impactful and engaged research, inspired by the diverse efforts of others in the discipline. We are, one hopes, beyond the stale, loaded dichotomies of basic-applied, critical-status quo research in most places. There are many legitimate ways to conduct 'relevant' geographical research.
- *Quotidian management, measurement and economic pressures in universities*: Generally speaking, universities today are far more muscular in their self-government, responding to various external pressures exerted over the last 30 years or so. Academics are now acutely

aware of things like publication expectations, research funding opportunities, student evaluations of their teaching, promotions criteria, the rules of national assessment and audit exercises, 'national interest' tests and so on. The architects of various management devices have, often, made no secret of the fact they want the proverbial tail to wag the dog. This has, with considerable justification, created a sense of doom-and-gloom among many academics. Their freedom is being quite tightly circumscribed, so it is said. Yet this narrative of loss-of-control – of vocation being squashed by imposed necessities – threatens to become self-fulfilling. Where possible, we need to recall that many of us are lucky enough to still have considerable latitude to act, including acts that resist the imposition of ill-judged metrics, policies and procedures. This latitude needs to be used and defended, on the basis of a positive concept of the university as an institution (Connell, 2019).

- *The neoliberalization of self, society and environment*: For some, the term 'neoliberalism' is merely a polemical term (and thus an inadequate descriptor of our complex social reality), but for others it's a concept of considerable analytical value. The processual concept 'neoliberalization' is preferable because it highlights the unevenness involved in the project – now over 40 years in the making – of extending the reach of markets so that even ostensibly non-market phenomena come to be seen as tradeable commodities or otherwise comparable according to various universal metrics. Many universities, of course, have been neoliberalized worldwide, while few countries have escaped policies that institute the values of individualism, competition, and entrepreneurialism over against values of social equality, social solidarity and social support. We do not have to believe in a 'neoliberal take-over' to recognize that, in both the institutions we work in and the world we study, there are problems afoot when the former values come to dominate. The problem is acute when the values are flatly contradicted by realities, such as extremes of wealth and poverty that ensure the markedly uneven distribution of 'liberty', with undue 'freedom' enjoyed by a wealthy minority. In Geography, as in other disciplines, we face questions about how far neoliberal axioms govern our sense of who we are, as well as our actions as researchers and educators. While universities have long celebrated individual achievement by academics and students, an ongoing challenge is to determine where and when to resist being 'interpellated' as neoliberal subjects. Our ties and obligations to others may, and frequently do and should, lead us down other pathways.
- *The allure and threat of 'grand challenge' interdisciplinarity*: We live in a world of 'wicked problems', though many people seem to want to treat them as more complex versions of the 'tame' problems that engineers, architects and planners have so successfully tackled in the last one-to-two hundred years. Many governments and research funding agencies are enamoured with grand challenge research, and fields like 'sustainability science' have grown quickly in order to occupy the interdisciplinary spaces left between the traditional disciplines. This context provides interesting, though potentially fraught, options for geographers and for the image of Geography in academia and beyond. Should some of us join big 'problem-solving' interdisciplinary teams? Should we form equally large *intra*-disciplinary teams geared to 'synthesis research' in a broadly scientific mould? Or should we critique such 'one world' imaginaries and forge a more political and ethical team-research ethos that attends to the plurality of ways people know and value our world? Kevin Grove and Lauren Rickards (this issue) address these important questions.
- *The ubiquity of 'technoscience'*: Innovations in science and technology are having huge impacts on universities, as well as the wider world. Public and privately funded technoscience is all pervasive, as everything from mRNA vaccines to smart phones to solar panels to carbon fibre aircraft demonstrates. Judgements about the pros and cons of specific techno-scientific innovations are unavoidable, so too their aggregated impacts practically, legally and morally. We are variously positioned as creators, users and critics of technoscience. Technoscience is always more than a means to other ends – more than a

'tool' – and its incumbent upon us to be thoughtful about how we employ and study technoscience in our academic work (as much as in our daily lives).

- *A pervasive sense of crisis*: Conventionally defined, a 'crisis' is a moment of break-down and stress, that holds out the possibility of renewal and reconfiguration. The current pandemic is a crisis in this sense. But there are also chronic crises that are prolonged rather than punctual: poverty, malnutrition, disease, biodiversity loss, armed civil conflict and starvation constitute such crises in many parts of the world (and of course we have the looming global crisis of a 'hothouse Earth'). Indeed, the United Nations Secretary General recently declared, matter-of-factly, that "Humanity now faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough" (Guterres, 2021: 3). The present convergence of sudden and prolonged crises raises large questions for university researchers and teachers (see Marvin Waterstone, this issue). What are we, and our disciplines, to do in the face of crises? Do we stand back and offer cool, rational analysis? Do we advocate for solutions and policies? Do we eschew the 'loaded' language of crisis in the hope of finding some sort of value-free position on the dramas of our age? How do we handle the risk that 'crisis talk' can be used for nefarious purposes and ill-judged ventures?

Karl Marx once famously observed that people make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Above, I've outlined some of the main 'circumstances' that both constrain and enable action to remake Geography in the specific times and places we happen to work. Of course, action tends to have a larger impact when it's collective and coordinated. But, as noted, Geography's considerable diversity means that, while thousands of us support a nominal Geography, the *substantive* Geography we have in mind is rarely all of a piece. For instance, in this section Weidong Liu, Han Cheng and Xiao Han advocate for a 'return' to regional geography, whereas Richie Howitt argues for a deeply ethical geography that eschews traditional epistemic 'synthesis' in favour of plural modes of knowing across human and physical geography.

Felicitous and infelicitous metaphors for thinking about disciplinary identity and change

We can lament this lack of unity and point to the political costs of not speaking with one voice and acting accordingly – especially in countries where Geography is not secure in the university system. But, then again, do most other academic disciplines (with a few exceptions) over-ride internal disagreement for the sake of fashioning a positive, consistent external image? And surely Geography can be advocated for, and promoted, without the need for a single overriding claim about its mission that most practitioners need to buy into? Great research of various sorts, and empowering teaching, can provide plenty of ammunition to advance the image of the discipline, especially when local and national circumstances are inauspicious. In this light, it might help to consider felicitous and infelicitous metaphors when thinking about academic Geography's 'trajectories and possibilities' as they vary, and intersect, across all sorts of sites and situations. Metaphors can distil the essence of our ongoing preoccupations.

Until the early 1990s, it was probably still possible to believe that most geographers had a vestigial wish to see their discipline (re)unified in those countries where it had become quite fragmented. Certainly, this seemed to apply in the UK, where John Matthews and David Herbert (2004) edited a book subtitled 'common heritage, shared future'. Metaphorically, this attitude conjures the image of Geography as a house in need of repair, or else as a ship: 'get the crew working together, plot a course and sail forward powered by the engine of cooperation'. The attitude animates Kevin Cox's new book *Geography Indivisible* (forthcoming). But to travel with purpose one needs a map. And, irony of ironies, Geography today defies a fixed and comprehensive mapping: it's now too large, too varied, too fluid and too international to be represented accurately by even the most well-informed surveyor of the intellectual landscape. As noted above, what we have instead are a set of snapshots taken by various participants located in (or on) various hills, valleys, plains, shores, forests and the occasional swamp. This

special section proves the point: the range of informed, situated, sincere interpretations of trajectories and possibilities makes for rich reading and can yield no consensus.

So, we perhaps need different metaphors to enhance our self-understanding, resisting architectural or vehicular comparisons. The metaphors need (if I may analogise) to convey the sense of Geography as a sort of multi-cultural republic organised at several levels (a confederacy?), with some fairly open borders to the outside world. But unlike political federations (e.g. the USA), of course, Geography has no central government to keep the peace or to offer political direction. Instead, it has peer review journals (like this one), professional associations, annual conferences, national committees and so on that give the 'citizens' space to meet, to learn from each other and to plan new initiatives. Geography can aspire to be inclusive and democratic, more or less. Its ethos, ideally, should be a mix of solidarity, respect and tolerance across a large and plural community of interest. This entails embedding epistemic justice as everyday practice.

In this light, it is felicitous to metaphorise Geography ecologically, though not in terms of the old 'systems ecology' nor even the (now not so) 'new ecology' of dynamic equilibria, thresholds and bifurcation points. Instead, we might see Geography as akin to one of the mixed-up ecosystems celebrated in science journalist Emma Marris's best-selling book *Rambunctious Garden* (2011). These are the ecosystems of the Anthropocene, whose hybridity varies depending on location. All manner of home-grown and introduced species combine in relations of competition, cooperation, symbiosis and occasional conflict, with many niches functionally distant from each other but co-located spatially in shared climatic conditions. There are no fixed 'baselines' to judge progress or the lack thereof, though there is a history to draw on critically for inspiration and instruction. This complex, hybrid ecology offers living organisms lots of room for manoeuvre, with the 'whole' changing yet absent any possibility of deliberate design. Ecological health lies in species diversity and interaction, including a degree of porosity with adjacent ecosystems. Ecological integrity is subject to change from within and outside, its precise form altering over time. A fuzzy coherence prevails amidst biological flux and variety.

This metaphor frames Geography somewhere between the antinomies of coherence and fragmentation, between the unpalatable options of fusion and fission. Crucially, our ecology is far, far richer than most other disciplines, even as we struggle to control most of the 'boundary conditions' itemised in my twelve point list above. Crucially, too, most of us are not, in fact, constrained to operate in just one niche (though we confine ourselves all too often). Indeed, one might say that many people usefully operate at a similar tropic level, notwithstanding the usual hierarchies and asymmetries. For all their differences, the many 'species' in our ecological domain share interests in spatial differentiation and connectivity, in people-environment relations, in the nature and importance of scale, in the difference that various borders and boundaries make, in place and region, and in the why and wherefore of geographical proximity and distance. These are among our *differentia specifica* and help to give us our *raison d'être*.

The richness comes through vividly in the ten articles in this special section. To use Eric Sheppard's (this issue) apt term, the essays offer different lines of sight on Geography's many 'conjunctures': the convergence of pressures, inherited conditions and reference points that delimit options in different departments, countries and ultimately Geography internationally. Reading across them, and reflecting on our own specific locations in the discipline, the articles are an incitement to recognise the power we have to respond intelligently and ethically to the circumstances in which we make Geography's future. We can enhance and promote our metaphorical ecosystem by acting in full awareness of how others in Geography are trying to do the same. Our decisions – and, equally, indecisions – will have significant consequences as

we adapt to what will be an extraordinary century to come. To phrase it in terms of an admittedly over-drawn distinction, there's a difference between 'geographical research *for* the 21st century' and 'geographical research *in* the 21st century'. The former implies a conscious process of remaking the discipline thoughtfully in light of constraints and opportunities, the latter a more reactive and piecemeal process of making do.

Hyperbolic claims about the discipline are usually a sign of weakness; but it's not hyperbolic to observe that geographers have the privilege and opportunity to study things of the first importance as the Holocene epoch gives way to a 'human planet'. If there was ever a time to be confident about the significance of what we do – not only as geographers, but as university academics more generally – then this is surely the time.

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