

---

## Review essays on: *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*<sup>†</sup>

---

Mark Boyle	161
Richard Peet	165
Claudio Minca	168
Michael Samers	171
Kirsten Simonsen	174
Mark Purcell	177
Elspeth Graham	181
Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, Gill Valentine	184

---

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

Mark Boyle

Department of Geography and Sociology, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, G1 1XN, Scotland;  
e-mail: [mark.boyle@strath.ac.uk](mailto:mark.boyle@strath.ac.uk)

Received 13 October 2004

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.

<sup>†</sup> *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* edited by P Hubbard, R Kitchin, G Valentine; Sage, London, 2004, 368 pages, £70.00, £22.99 (US \$125.00, \$49.95) ISBN 0 7619 4962 3, 0 7691 9463 1.

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 Strohmayr, 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.

#### References

- Benko G, Strohmayer U, 2004 *Human Geography: A History for The Twenty First Century* (Arnold, London)
- Cloke P, Philo C, Sadler D, 1991 *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (Guilford Press, London)
- Cloke P, Crang P, Goodwin M, 2000 *Introducing Human Geographies* (Arnold, London)
- Cloke P, Crang P, Goodwin M, 2004 *Envisioning Human Geographies* (Arnold, London)
- Crang M, Thrift N, 2000 *Thinking Space* (Routledge, London)
- Dewsbury J D, Harrison P, Rose M, Wylie J, 2002, "Introduction: enacting geographies" *Geoforum* 33 437 – 440
- Gregory D, 1994 *Geographical Imaginations* (Blackwell, Oxford)
- Holloway S, Rice S P, Valentine G (Eds), 2003 *Key Concepts in Geography* (Sage, London)
- Holt-Jensen A, 1999 *Geography: History and Concepts* 3rd edition (Sage, London)
- Hubbard P, Kitchin R, Batley B, Fuller D, 2002 *Thinking Geographically: Space, Theory, and Contemporary Human Geography* (Continuum, London)
- Johnston R J, Sidaway J D, 2004 *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography Since 1945* 6th edition (Hodder Arnold, London)
- Livingstone D N, 1992 *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (Blackwell, Oxford)
- Peet R, 1998 *Modern Geographical Thought* (Blackwell, Oxford)
- Thrift N, 2004, "Summoning life", in *Envisioning Human Geographies* Eds P Cloke, P Crang, M Goodwin (Arnold, London) pp 81 – 103
- Unwin T, 1992 *The Place of Geography* (Longman, Harlow, Essex)

DOI:10.1068/a37351

## Bio-gaze

Richard Peet

Clark School of Geography, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester MA 01610, USA;

e-mail: [rpeet@clarku.edu](mailto:rpeet@clarku.edu)

Received 13th October 2004

This encyclopaedia of individuals “most influential in theoretical debates over space and place” uses a biographical approach revealing “how individual thinkers draw on a rich legacy of ideas drawn from past generations”. About half the chosen few covered by the encyclopaedia are geographers, and half are thinkers on space drawn from a wide range of other social philosophies. On the whole, the fifty-two pieces on individual thinkers, written by geographers, mainly British, are nicely versed, with insight and even concern, and the book comes off as a volume to be placed in most libraries, personal and institutional. But that is exactly the problem I find with the book: its suitability for the reference shelves of the library or the web, just waiting for the student pressed for time to look up a geographer for a paper she or he has to produce... by tomorrow. There are a couple of things about the book, related to this theme of the webization of knowledge, that I do not like, indeed that I find problematic, and want to talk about in public: the weak version of biography used as methodology compared with the strong version of encyclopaedic vision as tool of intellectual power. The two in combination I call ‘bio-gaze’.

As the editors say, understanding how ideas emerge and evolve requires an approach that “acknowledges the situation in which they are constructed” and this the editors interpret as “the ways in which personal history affects intellectual development” as well as the “legacy of ideas thinkers draw on”, the places thinkers lived in and went to school, and so on. Indeed, the pieces that make up the main content of the book include interesting information on personal backgrounds, pleasant bits to read, like when and where people were born, and whose ideas they seem to have taken in along the way to fame and reputation in the keydom of space. So here comes the big but. But... a page or two on background does not a biography make. Take first the personal part of the biography—the places thinkers on place come from, where they were schooled. The influences of place and experience on the development of thoughts are varied, mediated, obvious and subtle, structured and accidental, even in the same moment of effect. Sorting all this out requires sustained and repeated contact with the thinker, a kind of psychoanalysis of intellectual development, set in the context of the structuring influences of place. And clearly this level of contact did not, could not, happen as the pieces in this book were being written, so the experiences that I know to have been formative for many of the people I personally know in the book are always missing—for example the effect of Michel Foucault’s presence at Berkeley, the effects of his benign personality, on Arturo Escobar’s thinking.

Take, second, the writings that influenced the key thinkers, again necessarily a quick list in just about every case. Merely listing these influences trivializes the democratic notion that thinkers are produced largely by the political and intellectual context they inhabit, and the ongoing themes to which they contribute, rather than by their personal brilliance. Putting these two together, biography is not a ‘background briefing’. Biography has to be investigative, it has to be deeply appreciative, it has to contextualize the haphazard, and disturb the structured with the mistakes and accidents that really make things happen. Just about all the contributors to the volume did their best with the limited space available... that is not the point. Rather, there are structural problems with employing the biography as ‘quickie’ that have to do with a callous attitude towards the life work of others. This attitude comes from publishers wanting books

that libraries will buy in hardcover version for \$100 a throw, and that students will buy on the web for \$10 a thinker. But this attitude of get their ideas down and include a bit of bio has to be taken on too by the academics that publishers rely on to do the real work in producing a book. The question is, should critical academics so readily agree with commercial publishers, and is 'biography' in this case merely a methodological disguise for political-intellectual compliance? The answer I find revealed in the more fundamental methodology of the encyclopaedic gaze used by this book. To which I now turn.

In their introduction, the editors of the volume go on at length about their rationale for choosing the fifty-two 'key figures' to be included from an initial list of "several hundred names" they had previously come up with. No matter what they did, they say, their choice would be controversial—by which they mean missing people who consider themselves or others to be important, even 'key' thinkers. So they just did their best to produce a "user-friendly guide to some of the most important thinkers informing current debates about space and place". At first sight this seems fine and quite reasonable, given the constraints of a book that would otherwise go on, and on. But the anticipated criticism that they missed some (for example, Jim Blaut, who said more about space than a thousand actor network theorists ever could... ANT has to be the biggest fraud ever visited on social theory...) does not get to the point, which is, more, the editors' assumption on behalf of their publisher of the right to include and exclude, to anoint to keydom, or to banish to the sticks of the intellectual periphery.

Of course, all evaluations of a school of thought are filled with decisions of what to say, of the many things that could be said, which ideas to include, of the many ideas that could be, who to mention, in what way, and who not. And I have written my own version of such a work, ostentatiously titled *Modern Geographical Thought*, that hardly escapes my own criticisms (indeed thinking back on writing that book partly informs my present, critical sentiments). But the method employed in such evaluations, simplified as "paradigmatic" by the editors of this present volume, places individual thinkers in the context of streams and flows of ideas, rather than placing them by whim on alphabetical lists of the key and the not-so-key. Histories of ideas, phrased in terms of tendencies in ideas, basically deem thinkers significant in terms of their contribution to a mode or style of thought that is elaborated and explained at length.

The editors of *Key Thinkers* include a fifteen-page introduction with seven pages on "thinking space and place" that constitutes their recognition that such a method, fitting the individual into the stream, is indeed necessary. But there is something strange about this quick history of some of the main themes in the field. It mentions almost exclusively, and in bold print too, thinkers on space and place that the editors had already included in the book and, probably, already commissioned pieces on, before the intro was written. So what we have here is an arbitrary method of inclusion rather than one that can be justified by the broader standards of contribution to streams of thought. What I really don't like about the book, in other words, is the assumption of surveillance power by the editors. I don't see who or what gave Phil, Rob, and Gill that prerogative. I don't like even to think of the editors meeting at the IBG over a drink or two and chatting by e-mail about who they think is a key thinker on space and place. I don't like the careless power of that kind of disciplinary gaze.

Here we have three editors drawn from the trendy fringes of British geography, where questions of power and surveillance have supposedly formed a main, critical theme influencing disciplinary attitudes and personal behaviours, taking on for themselves the power to look the field over, to rank and order people who may not wish to be hierarchized, judged as major figures or not, even glimpsed in this encyclopaedic way. The Free Speech Movement at the University of California,

---

Berkeley, a main event in forming trends in late 20th-century critical thinking and action, began with protests against the treatment of students as numbers and letters, as cards to be filed and sorted on lists: “don’t bend, fold or mutilate me” was our lament. Well... don’t look at people with a quick glance of judgment, considering their life work in the flick of a eye, don’t evaluate their ideas formed during years of struggle and many a night of torment, don’t include or exclude them, me, us, based on what you just happen to find important, significant, and relevant, just don’t think of people as possible alphabetical letters on a list, and listen to your own critique of millennial listomania, for maybe you have more of a point than you thought, and perhaps you too are merely slightly reflexive, somewhat sensitive, listomaniacs.

That’s what I would like to say to the editors of *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*.

## Comments on *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*

Claudio Minca

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, England; e-mail: [claudio.minca@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:claudio.minca@ncl.ac.uk)

Received 13th October 2004

*Key Thinkers on Space and Place* is an engagingly written, well-researched, and very accessible book. It will surely prove an invaluable tool for students, whom I would strongly encourage to purchase this edited collection as one of the best guides to recent geographical thought. The introduction to the volume is not overlengthy and is clear in its presentation of the editors' aims—as well as their awareness of all the challenges that any such 'encyclopaedic' endeavour inevitably faces. The entries themselves are also clear and well organised. The choice to introduce each 'thinker' with a short biographical sketch, followed by a section on her or his 'spatial contributions' and, finally, a consideration of the "key advances and controversies" resulting from their work is very effective. The reference lists included at the end of each entry are extremely useful and, again, will be a precious resource for students, including both key primary and secondary sources. Although an attempt at cataloguing 'important' geographers could easily slip into a celebration of 'big names', I think in this case the editors explicitly recognise the "dangers inherent in compiling a list of key thinkers" (page 13) from the outset. I find this particularly commendable.

But my task as reviewer is also that of calling attention to the shortcomings of this project which I consider, on the whole, well developed and a very welcome addition to recent literature. I do not wish to point out the presences and absences in the list of thinkers, because the choices made in any such disciplinary mapping are inevitably marked by the cultural logic of the project in question—and its innate limits (although I must say that, considering the remit of the volume, the absence of a theorist of Gunnar Olsson's stature is, frankly, inexplicable). It is precisely on this broader question of cultural and academic politics that I would like to focus my observations. It is an issue that I have raised several times in the past—and one that, inevitably, emerges when I open a book of this kind: the seemingly insurmountable incapacity of a significant part of English-language geography not necessarily of *transcending* its boundaries but, at least, of fully *recognising* these boundaries. It is, again, a question of cultural politics: a question of recognising some of the undeclared choices that lie at the heart of the relationship between power and (academic) knowledge.

First of all, the choice of commencing the genealogical reconstruction of thought on space and place from the quantitative revolution *onwards* (as many other such volumes have done previously) reveals much about the 'philosophy' that guides this initiative. Although the introduction to the volume includes a brief reference to the "*less-celebrated* [sic] German *landschaft* tradition" (page 6, my emphasis), there is no mention whatsoever of the enormous influence (certainly on 'other' European geographies) of the French tradition. It is not surprising, then, that two of the geographers who perhaps most strongly influenced the discipline *throughout* the 20th century—Friedrich Ratzel and Paul Vidal de la Blache—are missing from the list of 'key' thinkers. How can the contribution of these two thinkers to the development of geographical reflection be excluded from a volume that purports to trace theoretical debates on space and place? It can be excluded only by beginning the disciplinary reconstruction from the quantitative revolution onwards, pretending that nothing of any import for contemporary geographical thought came before it; erasing, *de facto*, the legacy of the European geographical tradition.



---

Recognising the influence of Ratzel and Vidal does not necessarily constitute “an exercise in nostalgia” (page 1) (that the editors, understandably, wish to avoid). Ratzel’s theories of space and politics continue to inform current debates in (also ‘critical’) geopolitics, as the ghost of Vidal continues to haunt present-day debates on regions and regionalism. Implicitly relegating Ratzel and Vidal to ‘nostalgia’ is a clear political choice—not on the part of the editors of this volume in particular, but of the discipline’s ‘gatekeepers’ more broadly. The choice to forget their contribution is part of a broader ‘forgetting’ operated by a hegemonic disciplinary project: after all, the quantitative revolution paved the way to (and was the reflection of) a ‘new’, postwar geography reflecting US geopolitical and cultural–intellectual dominance.

In the introduction to the volume, the editors suggest that they wish “to provide a guide to some (but inevitably not all) of those figures who have progressed *our* theoretical understanding—in some important way—of space and place, at the same time illustrating the *diverse traditions* of contemporary geographical thinking” (page 13, my emphasis). A clear statement of purpose, to be sure, but nowhere do the editors render explicit who this ‘our’ includes—and excludes. It is this little word that is constitutive of a specific reconstruction of the discipline’s history; a specific reconstruction with enormous political and cultural implications. And further yet—what ‘diverse traditions’ do the editors refer to? The missing specification of the context of these remarks is no way politically innocent: where are the other (here forgotten) geographical traditions, whether the French-speaking one (what about the influence of thinkers such as Claude Raffestin or Yves Lacoste on contemporary European geography?), or the Spanish (certainly Horatio Capel would merit a place on the list, if only for the international acclaim enjoyed by his critical reconstruction of the history of geographical thought), or the Latin-American one (where is Milton Santos?), or even the Finnish (Anssi Paasi’s reflections on regions are a fundamental reference point for Anglo-American geographers as well). I am in no way suggesting that the volume should have included token references to each and every ‘national’ geography: I am referring simply to some of the geographers who have contributed to ‘making’ contemporary European geography what it is, just as much, if not more, than many of the key thinkers present on the list.

It is not a question, then, of expanding the list (which would always remain incomplete anyway) but, rather, of rendering explicit the politico-cultural context of its elaboration: rendering explicit *which* geography is being described and recognising the limits of any such operation. Because it *is* a question of cultural politics: how else to explain the fact that among all the ‘foreign’ (read: non-Anglophone) figures on the list there is only one geographer (Torsten Hägerstrand), whereas all the others (mostly French thinkers) come from other disciplines? Is there some sort of unease in introducing ‘other’ geographical thought, whereas there does not seem to be any similar reluctance in co-opting the spatial theories of famous nongeographers? The answers can be diverse: perhaps there is no awareness of the contributions of ‘other’ geographers; perhaps there is no one in the English-speaking academy able to access—and ‘translate’—their work (something I highly doubt); or the choice to ignore their work is driven by other motives, which should be rendered explicit and opened to debate. I would not be surprised, indeed, to find Giorgio Agamben (whose work has been only partially translated into English but is very much in vogue at the moment) included in the next edition of this book, while the contributions of the most influential Italian geographers continue to be ignored.

What is at stake here is the construction of a specific field of legitimate (geographical) knowledge: a field of knowledge that an (otherwise excellent) volume such as this one certainly contributes to codifying. How can we possibly expect our students

(and here by ‘our’ I mean British students, because it is in Britain that I now teach) to be ‘open’ to an international geographical culture if even an intellectually cutting-edge book like this edited collection fails to identify its specific terrain of analysis? The book claims to focus on “thinkers who are *currently doing most* to shape the way we think about space and place” (page 1, my emphasis)—but ‘current’ influence is something necessarily mediated by a complex (and highly politicised) process of ‘filtering’ of (in this case, geographical) knowledge. Such a process always needs to be made explicit.

DOI:10.1068/a37353

## Dancing on an asymptote, and conveying it

Michael Samers

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, England;

e-mail: [michael.samers@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:michael.samers@nottingham.ac.uk)

Received 13 October 2004

Some of you may recall from basic Euclidean geometry that the asymptote is a line that infinitely approaches, but never touches, the  $x$  or  $y$ -axes. In light of the critical tenor of *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, my point in resurrecting a concept from what is now labeled a hopelessly baleful corpus of spatial thought (at least by the bulk of critical human geographers) is *not* ironic. Rather, the asymptote serves as a metaphor for the struggle by a range of scholars to approach the ontologically unapproachable concepts of space and place. We are all indeed dancing on an asymptote.

And so it is that the editors and contributors of *Key Thinkers* undertook the unenviable task of providing a historiography of space and place that is both intelligible and accessible to students. Insofar as geographers respect the task that the editors set for themselves, then I think they will be pleased with the outcome. In this sense, I do not wish to single out particular chapters and evaluate the qualities of individual contributions, although I will expound upon three dimensions of the project as a whole. The first concerns the editors' autocritique of the 'white, Anglo-American' character of the thinkers presented in this work, the second concerns the pedagogical potential of the volume, and the third relates to the ability of the book to reach beyond an audience of geographers.

### The 'white, Anglo-American' character of geography and its implications

The editors note—perhaps predictably—the predominance of 'white Anglo-American' voices in the text, although they are quick to dismiss this on the grounds that they have included a diverse set of scholars beyond the Anglo-American academy. My objection to this lies less with their choice of thinkers, than it does with their autocritique and the implications this has for the production of knowledge. Let me elaborate.

The accusation of 'whiteness' is an important one, and its implications for thinking about space and place, legion. Curiously, the authors do not expand on this point and it probably demands more explicit treatment in their introduction. On the one hand, that colonialism and racism figured centrally in the historiography and historical practice of geography is now firmly established. It has stimulated genuine attempts to 'decolonize' geography (through the work of Homi Bhabha, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak among others), and cultural geographers in particular have paid increasing heed to the racialisation of subjects, discourses, and practices. That this movement is partial and incomplete there can be no doubt. At the same time, the autocritique of 'whiteness' (however productive) verges on essentialism, as 'race', racism, and 'orientalism' are complicated by the internalisation of their critique within the white-dominated Anglo-American academy.

On the other hand, *Key Thinkers* might be read as a grand intellectual tautology—a kind of mirror in which the image of geographers is projected ('this is what we all have read, so this is what we all should read'). In *Key Thinkers*, then, 'our' identity is not simply reflected in the mirror, but reconstituted by it. An 'imagined academic community' is constructed and reinforced. On what grounds does this happen? The editors claim that "our selection of thinkers should not be read as a guide to who's currently hot (and who's not) in human geography" (page 3), nor do they wish "to identify the most important or influential theorists" (page 13). "Rather... it stands

as a user-friendly guide to some of the *more important* thinkers informing current debates about space and place” (page 13, emphasis added). And it serves “to provide a guide to some (but inevitably not all) of those figures who have progressed our *theoretical* understanding—in some important way—of space and place, at the same time as illustrating the diverse traditions of contemporary geographical thinking” (page 13, emphasis original). Not only is their justification nuanced to the point of ambiguity, more crucially the editors decide from a list of the already highly reputable, however ‘diverse’ the selection might prove to be.

In terms of its Anglo-American centrism, I would argue that *Key Thinkers* has a particularly *Anglo*, rather than necessarily *Anglo-American* inflection (I will leave the question of Canadian geography out of my argument here, for reasons which should become clearer below). Now if my rapid assessment serves me correctly, of the fifty-two key thinkers in *Key Thinkers*, only eight were either born or spent most of their childhood in the United States (Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Edward Said, Ed Soja, Michael Storper, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Iris Marion Young). Of the remaining forty four, almost all are European, and twenty four were born in the United Kingdom and educated in UK universities. Others such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Amartya Sen completed their doctoral work in the United Kingdom. True, many among the fifty two are now working or have worked in the United States. Yet my point is that critical thinking on space and place has been shaped acutely by educational policy and other societal processes at work in the *United Kingdom* during the 20th century (not to mention in France, for example).

To be more specific, the combination of an explicit class politics and state-supported higher education in the United Kingdom allowed critical and even radical voices to flourish in a discipline that (in contrast to the United States) has enjoyed a relatively more comfortable position within the academic division of labour. In fact, I see more divergence now in US and British geography than at any time since World War 2. The growing use of geographical technologies in the USA compared with the relative predominance of a critical cultural geography in the United Kingdom are both a symptom and a cause of this divergence. In any case, lest I be accused of empiricism of the ‘national’, I have argued elsewhere with James Sidaway (2000) that Anglo-American geography is itself the product of an enormous exchange with theory from outside the Anglo-American academy. In the end, if this is to be read as an *Anglo-American* work, it is in the list of contributors, not the list of key thinkers.

### **On its potential pedagogy**

To begin with, one might argue that *Key Thinkers* sacrifices depth for breadth. A possible response to this charge is that breadth *enables* depth. In other words, the inclusion of a variety of perspectives allows students to read a thinker *with respect* to another. And since *Key Thinkers* is such a tightly crafted collection (for which the editors and contributors should be commended), it allows students to compare different thinkers’ approaches to space and place. In sum, it is the relational dimension of the volume that provides its strength.

A second criticism might be that the student should read a key thinker’s body of work in the original, rather than relying on a condensed and simplified version. Let us be honest, how many undergraduates would be able to make sense, for example, of Spivak’s introduction to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*? This, however, assumes that the chapter contributions are themselves written in a suitably clear manner. A third critique might be that such texts should be based around common theoretical perspectives (for example, positivism, Marxism, humanism, postmodernism, and so forth) rather than what the editor of this review forum calls the “cult of the individual”.

It is certainly difficult to teach social theory without referring to individuals, but then *some* of the chapters' opening paragraphs—whatever the editors' and contributors' intentions to provide “social, spatial, and temporal contexts” (page 13) for the production of knowledge—verge on biographical empiricism. Moreover, it raises the question of what is meant by ‘context’ in the first place (Barnett, 1999). Perhaps a second edition will shed more light on this.

### Exporting the story?

Deservedly, this volume will no doubt be central to reading lists for geography courses in the United Kingdom, if not other Anglophone countries. I will not offer a definitive pronouncement on whether this reaches an audience beyond the relatively small world of geographers. There are reasons why it might. Indeed, sociologists, for example, have a “newly intense interest in place” (Griswold and Wright, 2004, page 1412), and, if for anthropologists, questions of place have had a longstanding centrality, they appear to be engaging increasingly with the work of geographers. In this respect, the volume offers an accessible purchase on an array of thinkers—many of whom would be dismayed at their association with any discipline, and it might be precisely this that appeals to a wide range of scholars concerned with teaching students about space and place.

And there are a number of reasons why it might not. To begin with, the volume is directed specifically at geographers, and as a consequence, I think it has underwritten somewhat of a missed opportunity. That is, rather than a volume directed at *all* students of space and place, and therefore a wider audience, it relies—despite the inclusion of a broad group of thinkers—on a certain degree of ‘disciplinary parochialism’ (Sayer, 2003). And lastly, regardless of the laudable quality of the volume, it may not simply ‘speak for itself’ in what Thomas Davenport and John Beck (2001) call an ‘attention economy’. In other words, in a world where attention is apparently scarce, the marketing of published work becomes, quite frankly, vital to its reception. One ‘has to be seen to be heard’ in this asymptotic dance.

### References

- Barnett C, 1999, “Deconstructing context: exposing Derrida” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **24** 277–293
- Davenport T H, Beck J C, 2001 *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Derrida J, 1976 *Of Grammatology* translated and introduced by G C Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD)
- Griswold W, Wright N, 2004, “Cowbirds, locals, and the dynamic endurance of regionalism” *American Journal of Sociology* **109** 1411–1151
- Samers M, Sidaway J, 2000, “Exclusions, inclusions, and occlusions in ‘Anglo-American geography’: reflections on Minca’s ‘Venetian geographical praxis’” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **18** 663–666
- Sayer A, 2003, “Long live post-disciplinary studies! Sociology and the curse of disciplinary parochialism/imperialism”, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/sayer-long-live-postdisciplinary-studies.pdf>

## Viewing from 'somewhere'

Kirsten Simonsen

Department of Geography, Roskilde University, Postboks 260, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark;

e-mail: [kis@ruc.dk](mailto:kis@ruc.dk)

Received 13 October 2004

When I got this book in my hands, my immediate reaction was to welcome it. It is a commendable initiative, a different and, for geography, novel way of portraying the history and theories of the subject. Of course, you should be careful not to consider the history and philosophies of geography as issues driven by individuals. In some disciplines (for instance, sociology) you sometimes witness an excessive emphasis on the work of individual theorists at the expense of thematic issues or theoretical problems to be solved, and I would be sorry to see that happen within geography. However, I find the focus on individual thinkers a valuable supplement to other representations of histories of ideas.

What are the gains then, from such an individual/biographical approach? Generally, according to Jean-Paul Sartre (1960), the potentialities of biographical analysis are tied to what he calls the 'progressive–regressive' method. This involves a repeated movement to-and-fro between biography and epoch, allowing one simultaneously to understand an individual's life in its particularity whilst positioning this life in its proper social context. And that is as I see it exactly the kind of goal pursued in this book. Of course, it is not one of Sartre's voluminous biographies, but when the editors argue for the representative character of their selected figures, their ambitions seem to be to portray Sartrean *universal singulars*.

To pursue that goal, they set up a common format within which the portrait of each thinker is to be formulated. It consists of four schematic sections followed consistently in each entry: (1) biographical information and theoretical context, (2) an explication of the contribution to spatial thinking, (3) an overview of key advances and controversies, and (4) bibliographies of primary and secondary literature. This format sets the scene for an understanding of the contextuality of knowledge production. You can trace the influence on the ideas of each thinker from disciplinary spaces of education, from shifting academic fields, and from the social and political context in which he or she has lived and worked. You at the same time underline the situated character of knowledge production and render visible some of its routes of dissemination. Indeed, in the introduction, the editors explicitly evoke the theme of the *roots* and *routes* of thinking on space and place.

A good part of the entries fill in that format in an excellent way—just to mention a few, I find the entries on Manuel Castells, David Harvey, and bell hooks exemplary in this sense. In general, however, the fulfillment of the intentions is somewhat blurred because of a variation in form and emphasis between the entries. Although some of them draw excellent connections between the biographical/contextual material and theoretical ideas, others merely leave them standing side by side, leaving it to the reader to draw the lines and trace overlaps throughout the book. Also, some variation occurs in the degree to which the entries focus on the actual thinker's contributions to spatial thinking. Although this is the case in many entries, others provide a more general introduction to the work of the figure in question. In particular, some of the nongeographic thinkers seem to have caused difficulties to their authors. Some of them are portrayed less by way of their own contributions than through the way they have been used in human geography, maybe because some of them (as one of the contributors concedes) have little to say about space and place. One might suspect

---

that some of them are in the book, not because of their spatial thinking, but because of their popularity in contemporary Anglo-American geography.

This turns the attention to the nearly unavoidable question when discussing a collection like this one: the selection of the fifty-two key figures to portray. Everybody will of course appreciate that making such choices is an extremely difficult and dispute-inviting task, and each of us would probably have personal views on specific inclusions and omissions. Therefore, discussions about why this person is included and why this is absent have limited general interest. I do, however, find it justifiable to draw attention to a few more systematic imbalances in the selection. The major argument from the editors as regards the selection is that they have sought to highlight those who have contributed significantly to *theoretical* discussions on space and place, and they continue:

“Given our disciplinary background, it is unsurprising that geographers dominate our list; given the inequalities that characterize academic geography (as well as other forms of intellectual labour...), it is also unsurprising that white, Anglo-American academics are most numerous” (page 1).

And this is not an understatement; among the twenty-seven figures from geography that are included in the book, one (one!) is from outside the Anglo-American context. I find this fact, and in particular the argument used to justify it, rather disturbing. The argument undoubtedly hints at the debate that has been running the past five years or so about power relations in international publishing (for example, see Berg and Kearns, 1998; Gregson et al, 2003; Minca, 2000). Being part of this debate, I never imagined the exposure of these power relations to be used, not as a means to counter-act them, but as a means to legitimize a practice that reproduces them. Instead of recognizing their own ‘partiality’ and situatedness, the editors through this argument ‘naturalize’ the existing power-hierarchies. And, by way of that maneuver, they situate the book right in the middle of a power-game that construes the ‘master – subject’ of geographical theory as Anglo-American.

Another imbalance concerns the gendered character of the selection. Some important feminist voices are heard, but the overall female representation is low. Amongst the fifty-two figures found worthy of the signification of ‘key thinker’, women make up only seven. With respect to recognised geographers, an even lower ratio pertains: twenty-five men and only two women. So, in more than one sense this book represents a view ‘from somewhere’: from a white, male, Anglo-American perspective on the development of the subject. Some other voices are sporadically heard, but the imbalances in the selection are certainly privileging a specific group of voices. This might be a deliberate strategy, a wish to mainstream the presentation. Or maybe the very mode of representation, the individualistic approach to the history of ideas, implicitly encourages such a mainstreaming. In either case, this is an issue calling for reflection.

Finally, as already suggested in the discussion above, a tension exists within and between the essays in the book. It seems to originate from an ambiguity in the overall intentions of the book. Is it supposed to be a new way of representing histories and philosophies of human geography, or is it a book about theories and thinkers of space and place? The answer to this question seems to be: both. That is in my opinion what causes ambiguities, both in the selection of figures to portray and in the way this portraying is performed. In spite of that, and notwithstanding the imbalances mentioned above, I find the book useful. I am not sure it will work as a textbook, for that purpose I think we need more coherent narratives. I see it as an encyclopaedic tool, a supplement to the *Dictionary of Human Geography* (Johnston et al, 2000), offering students and researchers well-informed introductions to a range of thinkers coming from or inspiring contemporary human geography.

---

**References**

- Berg L D, Kearns R A, 1998, "America Unlimited" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **16** 128 – 132
- Gregson N, Simonsen K, Vaiou D, 2003, "Writing (across) Europe: on writing spaces and writing practices" *European Urban and Regional Studies* **10** 5 – 23
- Johnston R J, Gregory D, Pratt G, Watts M, 2000 *Dictionary of Human Geography* 4th edition (Blackwell, Oxford)
- Minca C, 2000, "Venetian geographical praxis" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **18** 285 – 289
- Sartre J-P, 1960 *Critique de la Raison dialectique* (Galimard, Paris)



## For a more radically open discipline

Mark Purcell

Department of Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington, Box 355740, Gould 410, Seattle, WA 98195, USA; e-mail: [mpurcell@u.washington.edu](mailto:mpurcell@u.washington.edu)

Received 13 October 2004

In the introduction, the editors explain the rationale behind *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*. They remind us that at the end of the millennium it was the fashion to compile lists of “bests” of albums, films, books, etc: “It was against this background of post-millennial ‘listomania’”, they tell us, “that we began compiling this volume” (page 1). The editors project a vaguely critical attitude toward listomania, but they offer no convincing argument that their book is anything different than just another ‘best’ list. I cannot imagine it is at all original to be bothered by the book’s structure, which is essentially a ‘top 52’ list of academics relevant to geography. However, since the editors do not explain why ‘listomania’ might be dangerous, I will offer some arguments to that end.

The list of fifty two was compiled, as far as one can tell from the introduction, entirely by the editors. It goes without saying that Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine are eminently qualified to undertake such a task. But given the power of such a list both to lionize and to exclude, it is worth investigating what criteria were used to ‘pare down’ the list to the key fifty two. The first question we might ask is ‘why a list?’ The answer the editors give is essentially the ‘listomania’ explanation cited above. Given the lack of a more compelling reason, I am left to speculate that Sage thinks compendiums sell, and it is eager to publish as many of them as fast as it can. Although I should acknowledge my inability to comprehend how publishers think, this explanation rings true with me. The second question might be ‘why 52?’ Aside from the chilling parallels to the United States’ ‘deck of cards’ representing their most wanted Iraqis, the only explanation the editors offer is that fifty two is “more manageable” than the several hundred on their “long shortlist” (page 3).

Happily, the editors offer quite a lot more on the logical third question, ‘why *these* 52?’ They say the book is “intended as a comprehensive and critical guide to some of the most important thinkers and intellectuals influencing the contemporary development of spatial theory” (page 1). Immediately we are confronted by what I think is a telling contradiction: the list is “comprehensive”, but it can only include “*some* of the most important thinkers”. The list is unavoidably partial and exclusionary, yet it is represented as “comprehensive”. The editors selected “those who, in our opinion, have contributed significantly to *theoretical* discussions of the importance of space and place”: those who are “dominating debates about space and place” (page 1). It remains vague what, in the editors’ opinion, constitutes a “significant contribution” or what it means to be “dominating” a debate.

They do say something about what they think the list is *not*. It “should not be regarded as some barometer of influence for those for whom space and place are central foci of analysis” (page 3). Yet they also say it is a list of those who are “key”, dominating, and “most important” in these debates. They argue “our selection of thinkers should not be read as a guide to who’s currently hot (and who’s not) in human geography” (page 3). Nevertheless, it is a “guide to some of the more important thinkers informing current debates”, one that excludes, presumably, the less important thinkers. In addition to virtual certainty that the book *will* be read as a ‘who’s hot’ list, the editors leave little doubt that the book is exactly that: a guide for “the uninitiated” (that is, students) to learn which thinkers are currently more important and which are not (page 1). It is only a very short step for students to get the message

that they should be engaging and citing *these* fifty-two thinkers if they want to rise in the discipline. Although they are welcome to throw their lot in with thinkers *not* on the list, they should do so only at their own risk.

But the selection criteria get more confusing when we explore the question of space and place. The editors state clearly that the list aims to include “figures currently dominating debates about space and place”, and the “spatial contributions” section of each entry seems to signal a commitment to explaining fully their contributions. Yet a substantial number really have not made key contributions to how we think about space and place. Benedict Anderson, for example, is clearly important for his theorization of the nation, but his original formulation lacked serious attention to the spatial nature of nations. Bizarre as it sounds, it is common throughout the book to see thinkers criticized for not thinking spatially. Pierre Bourdieu’s work is characterized by “a paucity of references to space or place” and he is “not an explicit theorist of space and place” (pages 62–63). Moreover, “Judith Butler herself has very little to say about space or place” (page 65). The work of Amartya Sen, one entry offers tentatively, “pays attention to space, through inter-area and inter-state comparisons and through specific reference to places and historical events” (page 253). Surely this does not qualify him to be on a list of fifty-two key thinkers on space and place. A key thinker on poverty absolutely, but not space and place.

The book is replete with such well-known but not very geographical theorists whose ideas geographers have tailored to achieve spatial ends (Iris Marian Young, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, etc). Even for those thinkers whose work does contribute significantly to space and place, the entries often do not discuss their contribution in depth. The piece on Michael Dear, for example, is preoccupied with how his postmodernism affects his status in the discipline rather than with what specifically he has contributed to ideas about space. By contrast, the entry on Neil Smith details how his notion of space as socially produced differs from the more abstract notions of the spatial scientists, and why that difference might matter. But the Smith entry is one of the few that really develops robustly what contributions the subject has made to debates about space and place.

As geographers, each of us can easily and quickly produce a ‘snubbed’ list of people left out of the book who have made a far greater contribution to thinking about space and place than many included in the book. But such a list is beside the point, because the basis for choosing the fifty two really isn’t their contributions to debates about space and place. Readers are left to extrapolate from the list just what principles *did* guide the editors as they narrowed the long shortlist to fifty two. Let me both (1) acknowledge that my extrapolation is as good as anyone’s and (2) offer my extrapolation.

I think the list is the outgrowth of a particular and positioned narrative about the discipline. The narrative is strongly teleological, it is outlined by the editors in the introduction, and, oversimplified, it looks something like this. In the 1950s and 1960s the quantitative turn rendered regional geography insignificant, then in the 1970s the humanistic and Marxist critique supplanted spatial science. In the 1980s feminist, antiracist, queer, and poststructuralist approaches supplanted Marxism (which had already more or less squeezed out humanistic approaches). These successive hegemonies were achieved through a series of ‘turns’, which, as the word implies, involve most geographers realizing the current path is imperfect and abandoning it for another, more productive, one. The original path, like an oxbow lake, is left a ‘stagnant backwater’. Becoming a key thinker is therefore, a matter of taking the correct turns, of remaining, to continue the metaphor, in the ‘main stream’. In the editors’ imagination, we find ourselves today in a discipline where spatial science is important only for its

---

historical role, Marxism still exists but is declining rapidly, humanistic geography is more or less a quaint curiosity, and almost everyone who matters has adopted some combination of poststructural, postcolonial, or postmodern sensibilities.

The constellation of key thinkers is shaped to this narrative. They are included on the basis of their role in moving this narrative forward. A few spatial scientists are included for their historical importance (Waldo Tobler, Brian Berry, Peter Haggett, Reginald Golledge), but these are discussed quite plainly as remnants of an older generation, even when they stubbornly refuse to step aside. For example, even if analytical behavioral geography is still “widely practiced”, it is “clearly no longer considered at the cutting edge of geographical theory and praxis, despite the efforts of Golledge to re-inspire a return to its ideas” (page 140). Humanistic geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan are similarly, if more fondly, narrated to the margins. The book includes more Marxists (for example, Manuel Castells, David Harvey, Neil Smith, Michael Storper, Peter Taylor, Peter Dicken). They are not quite so clearly relegated to history, reflecting the not-yet-dead influence of (reformed) Marxist thought, especially in urban geography. Most of the rest of the list is reserved for those who have adroitly ‘turned’ to the various forms of critical social theory, feminism, and postmodernism. Derek Gregory here comes off brilliantly, as his work “paved the way for post-structuralist theorizing in geography” (page 145). The reason the list includes so many relatively aspatial thinkers (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Homi Bhabha, Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Arturo Escobar, Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Edward Said, and Iris Marion Young) is because inclusion is more about fitting the narrative than about contributing to spatial thought.

Returning to the ‘snubbed’ list, we can now better understand the exclusionary process. Making insightful contributions to thinking about space and place is not the point; the key is to resonate with the narrative. Key thinkers are those associated with particular turns or fashions (for example, deconstruction, the body, postcolonialism, or actor-network theory). The rest are left out. For example, all of physical and biogeography is out, not because the editors decided to focus on human geography, but because those thinkers did not fit the narrative. Physical geographers “have ignored”, the editors reason, “postmodern, postcolonial, or poststructural attempts to deconstruct, critique, or reconstruct languages of space and place”. As a consequence, the book “does not include any who would identify themselves as a physical geographer” (page 3). The exclusion here is telling. They are excluded not because they have not engaged with space and place, but because they have not engaged with space and place in the right way, a way that fits what the editors’ see as the dominant traditions in geography.

I should say at this point that I feel entirely unthreatened by this narrative. My own intellectual values support including, say, Iris Marion Young and excluding less radical but more geographical thinkers. But even if my particular perspective gains from this narrative, I worry greatly about its long-term effects. The book implies strongly it is simply reporting reality rather than actively shaping it. Yet, the idea that critical and/or postmodern geography is somehow dominant would come as quite a surprise, for example, at most nonelite and many elite departments in the United States, at the Geography and Regional Sciences division of the National Science Foundation, or at any of hundreds of sessions at the Association of American Geographers conference. Although critical geography may have taken center stage in particular contexts in Britain, contexts the editors are apparently immersed in, it is certainly debatable whether it has “superseded” other traditions in the discipline as a whole, as the book frequently asserts.

---

The book is therefore extremely ripe for the kind of deconstruction that Spivak advocates. It presents a particular view of geography as self-evidently dominant, but really it is a political attempt to canonize a particular set of values at the expense of others. Again, I generally share the values and so do not have a personal stake in preventing their dominance. But I think for geography as a whole this kind of teleological narrative—in which the cream has risen naturally to the top—is suffocating. And it is suffocating whether it is accurate or not. It constructs a discipline in which some camps have won out over others; not a discipline in which competing perspectives exist together in tension. It therefore, ironically, runs against the values of radical writers like Young and Chantal Mouffe.

In imagining a more radically democratic society, Mouffe distinguishes between what she calls “antagonistic” and “agonistic” politics. Antagonistic politics involve one group rejecting the other as a viable political adversary, one that must be eliminated from the political community. In agonistic politics, different groups struggle to advance their particular positions, but they accept the presence of others as comembers in the same polity. The latter approach produces a healthy democracy, Mouffe argues, because it stimulates a pluralism that produces more vibrant democratic debate.

I think the same holds true for an academic discipline. An antagonistic discipline works to squeeze out perspectives, and it therefore undermines generative debate and intellectual vibrancy. It disciplines thinkers to write within a particularly narrow tradition, and it punishes those who stray. It therefore stifles independent and creative thinkers, and, especially among graduate students, it smothers a priori any innovative ideas that might reinvigorate the discipline. In short, it breeds a radically closed, rather than radically open, discipline. Although in the short term this benefits those who toe the line (like the editors and me), in the long term it will lead to disciplinary stagnation and atrophy.

DOI:10.1068/a37356

## Key thinkers, disciplines, and knowledge productions

Elsbeth Graham

School of Geography and Geosciences, University of St Andrews, Irvine Building, North Street, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL, Scotland; e-mail: [efg@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:efg@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Received 13 October 2004

I have to admit at the outset that I approached *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* with a degree of suspicion. I have an antipathy to lists that promise a crib to the essentials for aspiring students because short encyclopaedic entries so often do violence to the complexity of ideas, submerge debate, and leave the reader with a very imperfect grasp of thinking in a particular field. Moreover, there are the attendant dangers of a cult of personality that creates academic heroes by privileging authors over texts, while writing others out of the script. The inclusions and exclusions necessary to any identification of 'stars' have the potential to impact on the production of knowledge in much the same way as the awarding of prizes and research grants by established authorities in the academy. Judgments of who is (especially) worth listening to and who is not are both unavoidable and hold the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Now that I have read the book, some of my initial worries have been allayed. Most of the entries are informative in ways that highlight, rather than submerge, controversy and debate. Most are also eminently readable—a considerable achievement given the strictures of encyclopaedic compilation. Nevertheless, the nature of the project raises a number of questions and reflections that deserve further attention. I address only three of these here. All are concerned with conceptions of geography as a 'disciplined' space for the production of knowledge.

*Key Thinkers* follows a small flurry of similar books in other areas of the academy over the last decade or so (including Collinson, 1987; Evans, 2002; Griffiths, 1999; Lechte, 1994). Among these, the most pertinent comparison is with Martin Griffiths's *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* because the two books share some named entries: Anthony Giddens, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Benedict Anderson are identified as key thinkers in both volumes. Griffiths's confidence in authoring a book that "fairly represents the scope of the field" can be contrasted with the multiple authored collection *on Space and Place* in which the editors make much more partial claims to speak for and about geography. Hence the first of my three reflections concerns the relationships between the project of the book and geographical scholarship more generally. As editors, Hubbard et al are careful to emphasise both the focus on theoretical understandings of space and place, and the bias towards human geographers. The absence of physical geographers among the selected key thinkers is explained by their almost complete silence in debates over spatial theory. Less evident are the silences of other human geographers who may share a taken-for-granted conception of space with their physical colleagues but, if pressed, might take issue with notions of space as socially produced. This fissure within human geography tends to be hidden simply by being excluded from the book project at the outset. Whatever the importance of theorizing space and place, there are tracts of human geography which are either atheoretical or where theoretical thinking is directed at different targets. The avoidance of the disciplinary label in the title of the book is probably deliberate but leaves the question of how the contributions of the fifty-two key figures to this important set of debates on space and place relate to the wider compass of geography.

My second reflection calls attention to the simultaneous presence and absence of normative prescriptions in this *Key Thinkers* project. The inclusion of Brian Berry, Reginald Golledge, Peter Haggett, and (more puzzling given the emphasis on theorization)

Waldo Tobler hints at ways of understanding space which largely ignore the multiple contestations and debates represented by the work of the majority of those who make the list. Despite an explicit ambition on the part of the editors to eschew a linear narrative, the tenor of the commentary on this minority group—Berry's work is "unfashionable" and Golledge's contribution is "no longer considered at the cutting edge"—reinforces the message of the brief introductory history of space and place: the debate has moved on. Theoretical constructions of space and place, seen as the twin building blocks of the disciplinary enterprise of geography, may still be matters of disagreement (page 3) but both the selection of thinkers and the commentary on their work are implicitly directive. Thus, although the book's project is not overtly prescriptive, it could prove as potent in silencing certain voices within geography as was the so-called paradigm shift of the quantitative revolution.

At the same time, there is a lack of direction in another sense because there is no attempt to organise the key thinkers into recognisable 'schools of thought' as Griffiths chooses to do for international relations. This may well mark a view of ideas as always embodied, always situated within broader coordinates of history and geography, which resists treating ideas as free-floating entities that can be grouped and labelled. Yet the editorial introduction attempts to place some structure on the evolution of ideas and each entry in the alphabetical list of thinkers guides the reader to other entries by cross-referencing in bold type, thus revealing a "rough genealogy of ideas" (page 12). This approach succeeds in illustrating the diversity of contemporary geographical thinking but, arguably, encourages a postmodern celebration of diversity which precludes further judgments between different genealogies or 'traditions'. Not only does this raise questions about the wisdom of abandoning notions of progress but it also undermines one of the basic tenets of the whole project. There would surely be a contradiction in providing a guide to "those figures who have *progressed* our theoretical understanding ... of space and place" (page 13, my emphasis) while at the same time denying the possibility of further progress. The critical question then becomes whether an emphasis on authors and their texts encourages or discourages the kind of resolution of conflicts and incongruities that Martha Nussbaum seeks in relation to Judith Butler's writings on gender and performance (page 69).

Third, I want to reflect on what I found to be the most disappointing aspect of the book, which is its handling of the notion of situated knowledges. The introduction identifies this particular understanding of knowledge production as a major rationale for adopting a biographical approach (page 11). We are told that situating productions of spatial thought reveals the extent to which place makes a difference to knowledge creation (page 12), but there is very limited evidence in the text that the authors of the entries suppose that place matters in this way. Indeed the cursory nature of the basic bibliographical information provided (in common with other 'key thinkers' texts) generally gives no indication of its significance. For example, the brief bibliographies of Wallerstein in *Key Thinkers* and in Griffiths (1999) are very similar. In neither case is the import of Wallerstein's long-time base at SUNY–Binghamton made apparent to the reader. The difference is that in Griffiths does not claim any special place for such biographical detail in the understanding of knowledge production. Even accepting the necessarily cursory nature of biographical sketches in such compilations, it is possible to give greater insight into the complex web of interconnections that inform knowledge production than many of the entries in *Key Thinkers* do [compare, for example, the entries on Gilles Deleuze in Lechte (1994) and in *Key Thinkers*]. At the end of *Key Thinkers*, the reader is left little wiser as to how and to what extent place does make a difference to the creation of knowledge.

---

There are other 'biases' evident in the book that are worthy of reflection. Most of its voices speak from an Anglo-American tradition and the ethnic and gender composition of the selected thinkers is depressing. Nearly half the entries are about those working outside geography and, however welcome the disruption of disciplinary boundaries might be, it is notable that none of those speaking from within geography is included in John Lechte's (1994) *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*. All these observations have implications for the understanding of geography as a space for knowledge production. Although I remain unconvinced that the project of the book as set out by the editors in the introduction has been fully realised, one of its strengths is to make a difficult and diverse body of writing on space and place accessible to students. *Key Thinkers* will surely become a standard student reference text. Its value, however, will depend on whether, as the editors hope, it does indeed inspire its readers to develop their own thinking on the varied geographical imaginations so lucidly summarised in its pages by moving beyond the book and turning to the works of the key thinkers themselves.

**References**

- Collinson D, 1987 *Fifty Major Philosophers* (Routledge, London)  
Evans G R, 2002 *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (Routledge, London)  
Griffiths M, 1999 *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (Routledge, London)  
Lechte J, 1994 *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: from Structuralism to Post-modernity* (Routledge, London)

DOI:10.1068/a37357

---

## Editors' reply

### Phil Hubbard

Department of Geography, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leics LE11 3TU, England;  
e-mail: [P.J.Hubbard@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:P.J.Hubbard@lboro.ac.uk)

### Rob Kitchin

National Institute of Regional and Spatial Analysis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth,  
Co. Kildare, Ireland; e-mail [rob.kitchin@may.ie](mailto:rob.kitchin@may.ie)

### Gill Valentine

School of Geography, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds LS2 9JT, England;  
e-mail: [g.valentine@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:g.valentine@leeds.ac.uk)

Received 13 October 2004

First, we would like to thank Mark Boyle for organising this review forum and providing us with the right of reply to the six reviews. Second, we would like to express our gratitude to the reviewers who, from a variety of writing positions, have engaged with our text in a thoughtful and constructively critical way. These reviews provide a useful counterpoint to the book as they open up important questions concerning how the history of geographical thought should be mapped out. Moreover, they detail how and why the biographies and the intellectual genealogies presented in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, and the overall project itself, should be read critically and not simply as fact. We therefore hope that course leaders who use it as a reference text do so in conjunction with these reviews.

Collectively, these reviews also raise a number of important questions about the inclusions and exclusions that characterise *Key Thinkers*, not least the apparent bias towards particular Anglo-American, male, postpositivist thinkers. However, we do not want to offer a point-by-point response to these questions here, partly because space precludes the detailed response that these thoughtful reviews warrant. Indeed, such questions about the representativeness of the individuals profiled in our text are not simply questions about our own positionality and editorial authority, but rather pose wider questions as to whether it is possible to write histories of geography that do justice to the rich diversity of geographical traditions that exist both within and without hegemonic Anglo-American geography. As these questions are being considered more fully elsewhere (Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Lorimer, 2003; Minca, 2000; Monk, 2004; Samers and Sidaway, 2000), here we will merely recount our motivation for editing this book, by way of justifying why we think a book like *Key Thinkers* was worth publishing, despite the obvious dangers of it being read as a uncritical hagiography.

We knew from the outset that *Key Thinkers* would be a fascinating project to work on. Though biographical approaches to documenting disciplinary histories are widespread elsewhere, the absence of such texts in geography meant we were uncertain as to how contributors would approach the task of profiling specific individuals. Rightly, we surmised that a biographical approach would pose particular issues for contributors as they struggled to do justice to the background, career, and key contributions of specific individuals within a rigidly imposed 3500 word limit. Yet all our contributors rose to the challenge, and produced profiles which were often highly nuanced, carefully researched, and shot through with critical insight.

Yet, although the biographies our contributors produced were insightful, the project was troubling and unsettling from its conception. From our first conversation about proposing the book, we were aware that, although there were many merits in such an endeavour, the finished book would inevitably attract criticism. Although we imagined that some would question the inherent merits of a biographical approach, we knew that the criticism was primarily going to be about our selection of thinkers.



---

Foremost in our minds were the kinds of issues that have been flagged up by the reviews published in this issue—questions concerning the dominance of particular Anglo-American traditions, the gender imbalance, the ratio of geographers to non-geographers, the exclusion of certain key practitioners, and so on. Such questions of inclusion and exclusion troubled us greatly, and, consequently, we would wish to refute the accusation that we exercised a “careless power” in our choice of key thinkers. Indeed, we were acutely aware that *our* selection of key thinkers would inevitably be read by many as representing *the* most important thinkers in the discipline. As such, we constantly interrogated our own power, positionality, and authority, mindful of the problems inherent in writing geographical histories from particular vantage points (see especially Kitchin, 2004). So why did we go ahead with the book irrespective of these concerns?

*Key Thinkers* had two primary aims. The first was to provide a pedagogic text that would make the history and philosophy of geographic thought more accessible to undergraduate students. Our own experiences suggest that students find courses on philosophical approaches and traditions in geography both boring and difficult. In part, this is because they find the ‘-ologies’ and ‘-isms’ approach of most textbooks staid, difficult, and abstract, and only engage with philosophical debates when they are grounded in everyday geographies that they can relate to (whether the grand sweep of global geopolitics or the microgeographies of domestic reproduction). Two of us (Hubbard and Kitchin) sought to address this issue in an earlier text (*Thinking Geographically*) cowritten with Brendan Bartley and Duncan Fuller. This text sought to offer a nonparadigmatic history of geographic thought and to demonstrate the difference philosophy makes to geographic thought and praxis by demonstrating how particular geographic concepts (for example, globalisation, governance, finance, the body, texts) have been understood through the lens of particular ideas and philosophies.

On the same lines, we believed (and still do) that a text such as *Key Thinkers* would provide an interesting way of communicating ideas about the unfolding of geographic thought because it is grounded in the lives of academics as people. We should perhaps stress at this point that the book was explicitly aimed at undergraduate students (rather than the faculty inevitably charged by journals with reviewing books). Clearly, there are a number of texts which follow the well-trodden formula of presenting an episodic and paradigmatic history of geographic thought (for example, the books by Johnston, Holt-Jensen, Cloke et al, Unwin, and Peet). *Thinking Geographically* went some way to offering students an alternative way of approaching geographical thought, yet here the ideas and philosophies remained largely disembodied. In *Key Thinkers* we wanted to ‘flesh out’ geographical thought by focusing on intellectual genealogies. Consequently, we would argue that *Key Thinkers* is not a teleological project, as suggested by Mark Purcell’s review. To the contrary, it is the complete opposite. It is a book that tries to trace out genealogies (as opposed to history) to suggest there is no predestined progression of geographic thought. As such, our second major aim was to stress that every geographical idea, theory, or text emerges from a messy (yet traceable) network of people and places, and is a synthesis of charisma and context.

Irrespective of this aim, it was still evident to us that we needed to take difficult decisions about which personalities and genealogies to highlight. After all, a student text of this type would not work if we chose to profile an arbitrary selection of geographers past and present, both celebrated and less well known (though that too might constitute an interesting project). Clearly, we had to profile thinkers acknowledged as pivotal in the definition and conceptualisation of some *key* concepts if the book was going to be read alongside extant courses in philosophies of geography. Our initial aim was therefore to produce a biographical dictionary of

human geography. This would have included geographers and nongeographers drawn from different countries, traditions, and centuries with upwards of 350 thinkers. Entries would have been of variable length (between 1000 and 3000 words).

By having such a large list, thinkers representing a wide variety of disciplinary specialisms (for example, economic, social, cultural, political, demographic, health, and development geographies) would have been included. In order to compile such a list of thinkers we approached a number of colleagues in our own and other universities and asked them to produce a list of whom they thought should have entries. We then used these lists to produce a list we felt represented a broad range of disciplinary traditions and theoretical positions. After undertaking this task and writing a proposal we could not find a publisher willing to commission such a book because of its production expense. Sage, however, was interested in contracting the book, but only if it were much reduced in scope. Pragmatically we decided that we would proceed with this offer, with the aim of expanding future editions or producing companions.

Our rationale in trimming the content down to around fifty thinkers (the number the publisher felt was feasible) was to consider the target audience and on what courses the text was likely to be used on. Given the book's main target audience is primarily Anglo-American (a reflection of both our own positionality and the publishers' marketing strategy), we felt that it would be most useful to focus on Anglophone geography. Rightly or wrongly, we would anticipate that students in both the United Kingdom and the United States are expected to read work published in English. Until the works of key thinkers publishing in other languages is translated into English, introducing students to them seems relatively redundant (and remember, we are talking here about undergraduates, not postgraduates or faculty). A further criterion for selection was to focus on those who have made an important contribution to the theorisation of space and place in the last forty years (a rather arbitrary cut-off, yet one based on the judgment that many educators focus on the evolution of geographic thought in the aftermath of the 'quantitative revolution'). This was reflected in the original title: *Key Contemporary Thinkers on Space and Place*—the 'contemporary' being deleted after the cover designer asked for it to be removed as the word took up too much space! The selection of the terms 'space' and 'place' also reflects the harsh realities of publishing with a commercial publisher and seeking a wide target audience: the word 'geography' in a book title apparently kills sales, particularly in North America, where geography is a relatively weak discipline. 'Space' and 'place', however, are terms in vogue across the social sciences. Some of the contingencies of knowledge production revealed!

Given the compromises the production process required, we would not claim that the thinkers in the book are the fifty-two most important thinkers on space and place: this was never a ranking exercise, as the introduction makes clear. Rather, the ultimate selection comprises fifty-two thinkers who publish in English (or have had their work translated) and are likely to be referred to in courses considering the way that geographers theorise space and place (even if some have actually said little explicitly about space and place, and others are clearly not geographers). Clearly, the final selection is open to critique: maybe some important traditions are unrepresented; maybe there are not enough women profiled, and maybe our selection includes too many who are currently 'fashionable' at the expense of those who are not. Such criticisms are legitimate, and may be levelled at both our own editorial selection process and the discipline as a whole (which is of course riddled with inequalities and exclusions).

As such, we are pleased that *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (together with *Thinking Geographically*) is being read by some as a provocation to critique the ways that geographers document and teach the histories of geographic thought. It should come as no surprise that we are the first to admit that *Key Thinkers* represents a

---

compromised and flawed project. That said, we believe that the book provides a useful pedagogic tool for students seeking to understand the histories and philosophies of geography and, read in conjunction with these reviews, we feel that it raises a variety of important questions about the politics of the discipline. To that end, we are gratified that the reviews in this issue address a number of these important questions rather than simply taking issue with our selection of key thinkers. If the book continues to provoke this type of debate, it will have more than fulfilled its purpose.

**References**

- Garcia-Ramon M D, 2003, "Globalization and international geography: the questions of languages and scholarly traditions" *Progress in Human Geography* **27** 1–5
- Hubbard P, Kitchin R, Bartley B, Fuller D, 2002 *Thinking Geographically* (Continuum, London)
- Kitchin R, 2004, "Disrupting and destabilising Anglo-American and English-language hegemony in Geography" *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* in press
- Lorimer H, 2003, "Telling small stories: spaces of knowledge and the practice of geography" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **28** 197–217
- Minca C, 2000, "Venetian geographical praxis" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **18** 285–289
- Monk J, 2004, "Women, gender and the histories of American geography" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **94** 1–22
- Samers M, Sidaway J D, 2000, "Exclusions, inclusions, and oclusions in 'Anglo-American geography': reflections on Minca's 'Venetian geographical praxis'" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **18** 663–666

