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On the relations of geography and history

Intentions

Richard Evans, in his powerful ‘*defence*’ of history against its attack by postmodernism, claims that the 1960s saw ‘the *invasion* of the social sciences into history in Britain’ and that in the post-war years in France the *Annales* historians aimed to make history far more objective and scientific than ever before by ‘incorporating the methods of economics, sociology and especially *geography* into their approach to the past’ (Evans 1997: 38–9). The writing of regional histories and of histories which addressed geographical concerns became such a distinctive characteristic of the *Annales* school that some observers claimed that its historians had ‘*annexed*’ geography (Harsgor 1978; Huppert 1978). A geographer, Etienne Juillard (1956), had written earlier of the ‘*frontiers*’ between history and geography. Use of these military and territorial metaphors (in all cases, the italics are mine) is indicative of the tensions which have long existed between historians and geographers, tensions which cannot be made to disappear simply by counter-citing pleas made for greater collaboration between the two ‘rival’ camps. We need to engage with the relations of geography and history in a more sustained fashion. How can that objective be achieved?

Let me initially approach the question negatively. It is not my aim to provide a history of historical geography, although I will employ a historiographical approach to the problem of the relations of geography and history. I have provided a brief history of historical geography elsewhere (Baker 1996a; see also Butlin 1993: 1–72). Nor am I setting out to present a critical appraisal of the sources and techniques available for researching and writing historical geography: some such already exist (for example: Morgan 1979; Hooke and Kain 1982; Courville 1995; Baker 1997; Grim et al. 2001). Nor is it my purpose to review recent progress in historical geography: such reviews are published regularly in an international journal, *Progress in Human Geography*. Nor is it my aim either to police the boundaries between geography and history or to promote the autonomy of historical geography as an academic discipline. When I identify categories of geography

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and of history I will not be doing so in order to fence them off from each other, providing each with its own demarcated intellectual territory. On the contrary, my purpose in labelling different kinds of geography and history is simply to promote a common language in which their practitioners can conduct meaningful dialogues. I am seeking connection not closure.

Now to expand my aims positively. I am writing mainly for a senior undergraduate and graduate student audience, both in geography and in history, but what I have to say will also be of interest more generally both to historians seeking more knowledge and understanding of the ideas and practices of geographers and to geographers wishing to improve their knowledge and understanding of the ideas and practices of historians. My central aim is to contribute to the long-standing discourse on the relations of geography and history, doing so through a critique of the practices of their two intellectual hybrids, historical geography and geographical history, but primarily that of the former and only to a lesser extent that of the latter. I seek to identify both the potential for, and the achievements of, close relations between geography and history. I want to bridge what one place-sensitive historian has described as ‘the Great Divide’ between geography and history (Marshall 1985: 22).

Indeed I see contact rather than separation between the aims and methods of geographers and historians. That contact will be demonstrated sometimes in terms of common interests and at other times in terms of collaborative projects. Beneath the passions of individuals and even the enthusiasms of each generation of historical geographers, there lie some basic characteristics of historical geography and of its relations with history. My concern is primarily with those fundamental characteristics. I maintain that the changing subject matter of historical geography does not of itself matter: that beneath the changes there can be detected structural continuities. Moreover, as the baton is handed on to a new generation of historical geographers, I want to make it clear that there is not one, monolithic, prior tradition of historical geography to be replaced. Historical geography is better viewed as a dynamic discursive formation. New interests and new directions being taken up by a new generation of practitioners are to be both welcomed and expected, and they are also needed if historical geography is to continue to flourish.

So, to outline my basic argument. History, historical geography and geographical history have a shared experience over a wide range of matters. They address very similar, and often the same, problems and sources; they employ very similar, and often the same, research and presentational techniques; they straddle, not always without difficulty and sometimes with great discomfort, knowledges and understandings from both the natural sciences and the social sciences while they themselves are part of the broad spectrum of humanities or historical sciences. But, given the different epistemological positions of geography and history, they provide distinctive perspectives upon the past. Every object, phenomenon or idea – such as sugar, singing and sorcery – has its own geography and its own history as well as its own structural forms and associated functions. To consider this

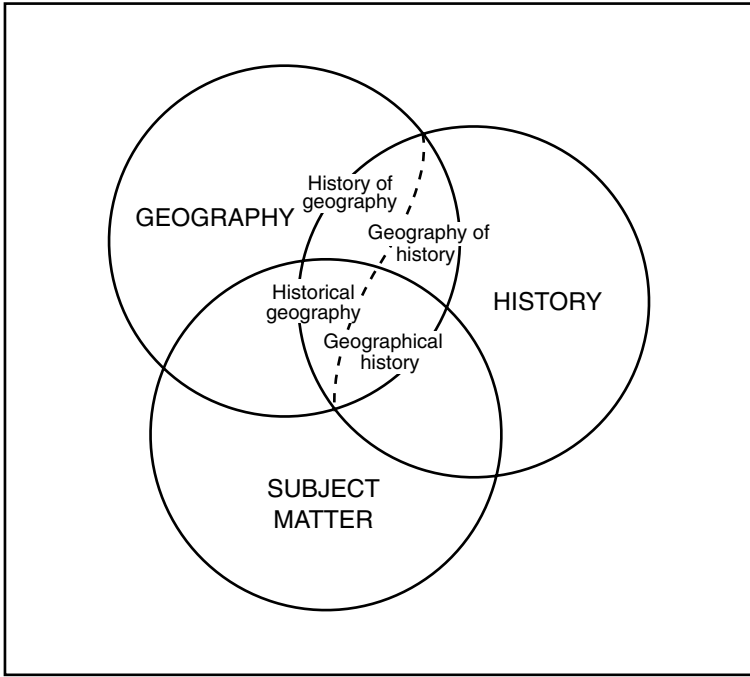


Figure 1.1 Venn diagram of the relations of geography, history and their subject matter

trilogy – of subject matter, geography and history – as three sets, overlapping in Venn diagrammatic form, is to appreciate the central roles of historical geography and geographical history, poised at the intersection of all three. In this light, historical geography may be viewed as being concerned with the historical dimension in geography and geographical history with the geographical dimension in history (Fig. 1.1).

Geography and history are different ways of looking at the world but they are so closely related that neither one can afford to ignore or even neglect the other. Moreover, each of them offers not just one perspective upon the world but multiple perspectives upon the characters of peoples, places and periods. It is sometimes argued that historians focus upon people in past periods and historical geographers upon places in past periods (Mitchell 1954: 12). But contrasting history and geography as being concerned respectively with people and with places is a distorted representation of their concerns. The fundamental difference between them is better expressed in terms of history's focus upon periods and geography's focus upon places, fully recognising that both periods and places were (and are) peopled and were (and are) constructed and experienced by people. Historical geographers tell us stories about how *places* have been created in the past by people in their

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own image, while historians tell us different stories about how *periods* have been created in the past by people in their own image.

While the difference between the perspective of the historian and that of the geographer is significant, it can too easily be exaggerated. There is a substantial overlapping of interests between history and geography. If period, place and people are represented as overlapping concerns, then where all three intersect may be described as both historical geography and geographical history: any difference in practice between those two will reflect the specific intellectual origins, distinctive cultural baggages and personal preferences which individual researchers bring to their enquiries. We do not all – and do not all need to – ask exactly the same questions: there are many ways of journeying to even one destination and there are also multiple historical and geographical destinations.

Geographers and historians have expanded enormously the range of subjects they study. They embrace not only almost every conceivable aspect of human activity but also many features of the natural world: for example, not only canals and criminality but also cotton and climate, not only mining and music but also marshlands and malaria, not only factories and fears and but also forests and furs. Moreover, histories and geographies embrace both the actions and the attitudes of individuals and of groups, and they do so taking into account the shaping and experiencing of histories and geographies by people who differ, for example, in terms of their class, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth or education. In addition, histories and geographies are drawing upon a widening spectrum of social, cultural and literary theories and so are adopting increasingly diverse perspectives upon historical geographies.

To take just one example, the emergence of a feminist historical geography and of a historically informed feminist geography. Mona Domosh (1990) and Gillian Rose (1993), drawing upon feminist theory, highlighted critically the foregrounding of white males in historiographies of geographical knowledge and thus the gendered nature of that knowledge. They argued for greater recognition of the roles of formerly marginalised groups, especially women. Similarly, Jeanne Kay (1990: 619) argued that ‘the US historical geography literature is unintentionally yet largely racist and sexist’ and pleaded for ‘more rounded and diversified presentations of our heritage’. The challenge of establishing closer links between feminism and historical geography (Rose and Ogborn 1988; Domosh 1997) is being taken up in a variety of ways, as exemplified in a set of geographical essays on gender and the city in historical perspective (Mattingly 1998). For some it means focusing more sharply on the gendered use of space, on the spatial and material expression of gender relations and power struggles between women and men; for others it embraces the role of women in the making and in the observing of past geographies; and for yet others it involves trying to understand those geographies from a feminine perspective and listening to the voices of women in the past. For example, Kay (1991, 1997) specifically explores attitudes to nature revealed in the writings of nineteenth-century Mormon women and she has argued more

generally that historical geographers of rural Canada and the United States are to some extent limited by their frequent use of one narrative form, the national epic, that cannot readily portray women as important actors unless its essential plot line is reinterpreted in ways less familiar to geographers. Taking examples of three western frontier women, Kay discussed how their narratives indicate ways of providing a more balanced impression of both women and men in studies of regional economies and landscape modification.

A particularly fruitful avenue in feminist historical geography leads to the ways in which places and their landscapes have been experienced and represented by women. For example, K. M. Morin (1999) examines English women's 'heroic adventures' in the nineteenth-century American West while Mary Kingsley's travels in West Africa at the end of that century have been given differently nuanced, gendered, readings by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), Alison Blunt (1994) and Gerry Kearns (1997). That men and women saw things differently has been forcefully argued in relation to landscape painting in the Western world where, in the eighteenth century, it was a product of a 'male gaze' upon a landscape considered to be a natural and feminine body, a subject unsuitable for women to paint. But in the colonies white women were freer to paint landscapes because they assumed the colonial authority of white men, the advantaged position of their ethnicity counting for more than the disadvantages of their gender (Blunt and Rose 1994). While feminist historical geography emphasises the gendering of spaces, environments, landscapes and places, it also stresses the importance of acknowledging the diversity of women and of not treating the category 'woman' as unitary. Alongside this feminist discourse within historical geography one could lay the colonial and post-colonial discourses which address the geographical practices, experiences and imaginations of both the colonisers and the colonised (Lester 2000; Ploszajka 2000; Yeoh 2000).

This increasing attention to the multiple voices in the past and to multiple perspectives upon the past could be a cause for celebration or grounds for gloom. While some might find the new pluralism and interdisciplinary perspectives challenging, others might deplore what they see as the intradisciplinary fragmentation and even disintegration of history and of geography into more and more divisive specialisms. Can we find a balance between these two extreme positions? I believe we can.

I will try to do so – as an aspirant *Annaliste* – by identifying some of the *événements*, *conjonctures* and *structures* in historical geography and then listening for resonances within history. Each individual historical researcher pursues his or her own interest, each of us becomes personally involved with the period, place and people we choose to study in the past, often doing so to an extent and with a passion that others find difficult to comprehend. Thus one nineteenth-century historical geographer might be excited by covered bridges in one American county, a second by marriage fields in a few French communes, and a third by Owenism in a handful of English parishes. It is certainly the case that individual historical

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geographers have been animated by some very specific topics, as H. C. Darby – one of the founding fathers of historical geography – was by the architectural geography of south Britain, the birds of the undrained English Fenland, the geographical ideas of the Venerable Bede and the regional geography of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex (Darby 1928, 1934, 1935, 1948). Such ‘one-off’ and essentially autarchic studies conducted by individual researchers giving rein to their own interests and enthusiasms are examples of *événements* in the practice of historical geography. Such individual work stands on its own merits and undoubtedly possesses intrinsic interest and value. It may, but does not necessarily, provide a stimulus for similar research by others. Its contribution to knowledge and understanding could be considered to be more additive than cumulative, making advances arithmetically rather than geometrically.

When the product of historical researchers is viewed collectively, then it becomes possible to identify patterns of research interests in both the medium and the long term. The research foci of one generation are often abandoned or at least neglected by the next, which prefers setting out its own agenda to inheriting that of its elders (who are, rightly, not deemed always to be their betters). As Aidan McQuillan (1995) points out in his progress report on historical geography, research interests – what he terms ‘research clusters’ – wax and wane over time as the intellectual climate changes. All historical and geographical research (like all research) reflects the ideas and techniques of its own time: each generation seeks answers to questions which are framed in terms of the concerns of its own ‘present day’. Like McQuillan, Deryck Holdsworth (2002) sees generational vitality in the emergence of ‘new directions’ in historical geography which respect rather than reject ‘old ways’. The considerable current interest in historical geographies of modernisation and modernity may be seen in this light as also connecting with intellectual trends in contemporary human geography and in the social and historical sciences generally (Dunford 1998; Ogborn 1999; Graham and Nash 2000). New ideas and interests and the use of new sources or the reinterpretation of familiar sources made possible by the use of new techniques combine with an understandable desire on the part of a new generation to prosecute a ‘new’ history or a ‘new’ geography to produce a different – if not always entirely ‘new’ – kind of history and geography.

Conjunctures of research in history and in historical geography can be identified and used to impose a pattern on the work of scholars as an academy. This assumption underpins the designation of ‘schools’ of history and of geography, which wax and wane to varying degrees and which are often grounded in clusters of influential individuals. But it also relates to specific research agenda. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, many historical geographers in Britain were working on field systems and on urban systems, and many were exploiting the Tithe Surveys and the manuscript enumerators’ returns of the Population Census; by the 1980s and 1990s, many were more concerned with issues flowing from debates about modernity and postmodernism and excited by exploiting a wider range of literary and pictorial sources. But I would not expect researchers even in the near future – in

the 2010s and 2020s – to be enthused by the same problems and to be restricted to using the same sources and techniques as those currently attracting attention – and if some are, I would not expect them to be addressing ‘our’ problems and sources in the way we are now doing. Innovations come in waves that break, and of course (as physical geographers know well) waves can be both destructive of existing features and creative of new ones. Historical geography is constantly seeking and finding new research realms, it is constantly renewing itself, constantly moving on to new periods, new places and new topics. Thus Richard Schein, as editor of a set of methodological essays on practising historical geography, argues that the topics embraced in his collection ‘represent new directions in, and perhaps even a break in tradition for, historical geography’, because ‘they signal a certain engagement with contemporary critical and reflexive scholarly practice across the social sciences and the humanities’. Schein’s edited essays are presented as reflecting the post-positivist turn in historical geography. He sees them as ‘a re-placing of historical geography’, with the double meaning of bringing to historical geography both the theoretical and methodological debates of post-positivist scholarship and a new generation of scholars prosecuting a non-traditional form of historical geography. But even Schein admits that many of the ideas presented in these essays – such as the problematic nature both of archives and of geographical description – ‘are at least foreshadowed in the annals of historical geography’ (Schein 2001: 8–10).

While I will from time to time refer to the *événements* and *conjonctures* of historical geography, they are not my main focus. I am not concerned here principally with ephemeral enthusiasms. I employ instead what might be considered to be the *structures* of geography, because they give coherence to the increasingly diverse and expanding output of historical geography. While it is appropriate to acknowledge the exceptionalist position of those who are fascinated by *événements* and to celebrate the changing character of historical geography’s *conjonctures*, I will argue for the fundamental significance of some of its underlying *structures*. Here I concur with D. W. Meinig (1997: 8) that while every generation rewrites its history, this is ‘not to say that everything in history is mutable’. While the interests of individual historical geographers and of generations of historical geographers change, there are some basic continuities in the theory and practice of historical geography. Fundamentally, and perhaps surprisingly, the subject matter of historical geography does not matter. Viewing the intersections of *événements* and *conjonctures* – of individual historical geographers and of successive generations of historical geographers – within the wider intellectual *structures* in which they have been and are situated moves towards a structurationist approach, with its emphasis on both the human agents and the social and intellectual systems and structures in which they are necessarily imbricated (Giddens 1984). I will use these *structures* as a platform from which to explore the relations of geography and history. My argument is grounded in the major discourses of geography. The three ‘deviant’ or peripheral discourses – of location, environment, and landscape – can

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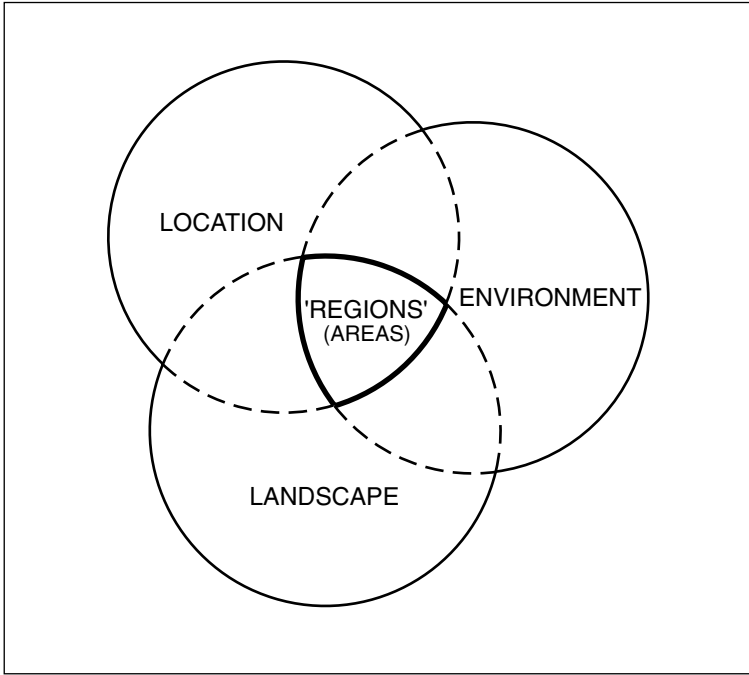


Figure 1.2 Venn diagram of the four principal discourses of geography

be overlapped in Venn diagrammatic form to create a central discourse of regional geography at the intersection of all of those three (Fig. 1.2). These four discourses are interconnected: there are no impermeable boundaries between any of them. Individual geographers and their writings are unlikely to be situated exclusively within just one of these discourses. They serve, none the less, as a useful framework for discussion of the nature of historical geography and of the relations of geography and history.

I shall illustrate my argument with reference to selected examples of ‘best practice’ in historical geography, those examples being drawn not only from burgeoning recent work but also from historical geography’s bulging library of classical studies. It would be easy, but in my view misleading, to draw just upon work published during the past dozen or so years. Easy, because there has been a great flowering of new work in historical geography during this period, with new problems, new sources and new analytical techniques enriching the quality of the increasing quantity of studies being undertaken. Misleading, because even the most original and novel of recent works have been constructed – knowingly or otherwise – on foundations laid by earlier generations of scholars. I am reminded of Julian Barnes’ comments on developments in French cinema and cuisine:

The *nouvelle vague* was a revolt against *le cinéma de papa*, but it was less a matter of mass patricide than of selective culling. The wisest innovators know – or at least find out – that the history of art may appear linear and progressive but it is in fact circular, cross-referential and backtracking. The practitioners of the *nouvelle vague* were immersed (some, like Truffaut, as critics) in what had preceded them . . . Like the *nouvelle vague*, twentieth-century *nouvelle cuisine* was a noisy, useful, publicity-driven revolt: one against *le cinéma de papa*, the other against *la cuisine de maman*. Both resulted in temporary forgetting of just exactly what Maman and Papa did; and of how ineluctable genetic inheritance is. (Barnes 2002: 38–9 and 56)

There are lessons here for advocates of any ‘new’ departure. Accordingly, before entering into my main discussion of the relations of geography and history, I want briefly to consider both specific possible forerunners to this present book and the general intellectual context within which it is situated. How has historical geography been conceptualised? How have historians regarded geography and how have geographers viewed history?

Legacies

There have been very few book-length treatments of historical geography as a field of study as opposed to books on the historical geographies of particular places, periods, and topics. Books bearing the title ‘historical geography’ have been published since at least the early seventeenth century, such as those by Edward Wells on the historical geography of the New and Old Testaments (Butlin 1992, 1993: 1–72) and many such works were published in the closing decades of the twentieth century, too numerous even to exemplify judiciously. But there have been remarkably few endeavours to write at length about ‘historical geography’ *per se*. It might, therefore, be instructive to consider those works briefly but individually, to ponder the approach which each adopted to its subject matter.

In 1954, Jean Mitchell published her *Historical Geography* in a series of books under the general title ‘Teach Yourself Geography’. The bulk of the work comprised essays on important themes (such as ‘the peopling of the land’ and ‘the evolution of villages and farms’) in ‘the changing geography’ of Britain from prehistoric times to the early twentieth century, but it also included a chapter on the data of the historical geographer and two others on general issues. In her introductory chapter, Mitchell posed the question: ‘What is historical geography?’ She considered that both geography and history were difficult to define and concluded that historical geography was ‘a still greater mystery’. She continued:

few go further than a belief that it is about ‘old’ maps, and perhaps concerns itself too much with tales of ancient mariners, medieval travellers and merchant adventurers. Some feel that it is an unsound attempt by geographers to explain history, and think that the historical geographer is most certainly trespassing and probably should be prosecuted. That is not so, the historical geographer is a geographer first, last and all the time . . . (Mitchell 1954: 1–2)

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But the object of geographical study was, for Mitchell, no mystery: it was the study of places, both in their individuality and in their generality, of places as products of interactions between peoples and their physical environments. The central geographical question for Mitchell was to describe and explain the distribution, the location, of phenomena. Accordingly, for Mitchell, ‘historical geography is, simply stated, a geographical study of any period in the past for which a more or less ordered and dated sequence is established in human affairs’. To Mitchell, historical geography was the geography of the past, but the historical geographer was always a geographer and never a historian. She argued that just as a historian could write a history of France without becoming a geographer, so a geographer could write a geography of some place in the nineteenth century or the ninth century and remain a geographer. Mitchell was absolutely clear that historians and geographers have different perspectives:

There is much in common between the historian and the geographer, both are attempting to see the pattern in a multitude of facts in order to appreciate the world about them, but there is a fundamental difference in outlook between them. The ‘world’ to the historian means civilisation; the ‘world’ to the geographer means the surface of the earth. (Mitchell 1954: 12)

Thus Mitchell argued that many books with the title ‘historical geography’ would be better titled ‘geographical history’, ‘for they are concerned essentially not with the place but with the civilisation . . . It would seem that the attempt to examine historical events in relation to their geographical setting is best left to the historian’ (Mitchell 1954: 11).

For Mitchell, history and geography had different objectives, they occupied separate intellectual territories. That exclusive stance was reinforced by her view that the historical geographer is concerned mainly with the geography of an area at some past time: ‘the historical geographer is not concerned with the survival of geographical patterns [into the present] or with the evolution of geographical patterns in time, but with the establishment and study of their design at any one particular time [in the past]’ (Mitchell 1954: 14). Here Mitchell was not only exclusive but also confused, because much of her book was in practice a consideration of changing geographical patterns, of their evolution through time. But, as Mitchell made clear in her final chapter, she had no doubt that the analytical work of a historical geographer should ultimately be seen as contributing to a geographical synthesis, to a study of place in both its physical and human aspects. ‘If every historical geographer must be versed in all parts of geography, every geographer must be to some extent a historical geographer’ (Mitchell 1954: 328). She argued for the necessity of a historical approach in all geographical work; for her, historical geography was not an ornamental coping to geographical study, it was instead with physical and biological geography the foundation upon which the geography of the modern world rested (Mitchell 1954: 332).

For thirty years, Mitchell’s survey remained the only book-length, English-language treatment of the nature of historical geography. It was a remarkable