

## On the Significance of History for Geography: Historical Geography as Holistic (or Total) Geography

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### **Abstrakt:**

A. R. H. Baker: *O významu historiografie pro geografii: Historická geografie jako holistická (nebo totální) geografie*. – *Klaudyán*, 4, č. 1, s. 7–12. Tento článek je výtahem některých závěrů z významné knihy jedné z předních osobností britské historické geografie Alana R. H. Bakera (byl mj. vedoucím katedry geografie University of Cambridge, editorem časopisu *Journal of Historical Geography*), nazvané příznačně „*Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*“ (Cambridge, 2003). Autor prezentoval hlavní teze tohoto článku při své přednášce pro pedagogy a studenty geografické sekce PřF UK v květnu 2005. Článek nemá poznámkový aparát – autor zde odkazuje na svou knihu. Rozsáhlejší informaci o diskusi, hlavních závěrech a názorech A. Bakera obsažených v této knize čtenář najde ve studii Chromý, P., Jeleček, L. (2005): *Tři alternativní koncepce historické geografie v Česku*. *Historická geografie*, 33, HÚ AV ČR, Praha, s. 327–345. Mottem Bakerova názoru o postavení a úloze historické geografie je, že „...na začátku 21. století geografii nepochopíme bez historiografie“. Jinak řečeno: zkoumaný geografický obraz místa, regionu různého řádu nebude zcela srozumitelný či přesný bez uplatnění historického přístupu. V tomto kontextu A. Baker považuje historickou geografii za holistickou geografii a zdůrazňuje její přínos pro moderní geografii, její usilování o holistické přístupy.

### **Klíčová slova:**

metodologie geografie – historiografie – historická geografie – holistická geografie

"History is not intelligible without geography". Thus wrote an Oxford historian more than a century ago. But I want to argue, as a Cambridge geographer, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century geography is not intelligible without history. I want to ask a basic question: why is understanding history so important to the pursuit of geographical enquiry? There are many views of the nature of geography, but I consider it appropriate to work within its four main intellectual traditions: the three "peripheral" discourses concerned respectively with distributions, with environments, and with landscapes, and the one central tradition, concerned with places, areas, and regions. I will consider the need for historical perspectives in each of these four traditions and then reflect upon history as geographical change and upon geography as place history.

## 1. Changing distributions

Describing and explaining the specific location and general distribution of both "natural" and "cultural" phenomena has long been and remains a major theme of much geographical writing. For some of its practitioners, geography is the science of location and distribution; it is the art of describing the spatial or geographical patterns of phenomena in particular places. All phenomena have their own geographies at a moment in time, and also geographies that change over time. Mapping distributions and changing distributions is thus a key form of geographical description, a first step towards geographical understanding. Reconstructions of geographies of the past based on clusters of historical sources can be justified either for their own intrinsic interest. They provide snapshots of the geography of a particular place at specific moments in time, and when employed in series they provide an indication of the changing geography of a place through time. Recent advances in data-management and in cartography, the application of geographical information systems (GIS) analysis to historical sources, are enhancing enormously studies of past distributions.

But maps tend to tell us more about geographical patterns than about historical processes. Alongside the maps of geographical distributions we need graphs of historical events. Such maps and graphs maybe used as bricks of knowledge with which, working with a mortar of theory, we can build new understandings of past and present-day geographies. Reconstructing time series of data enriches our historical understandings by itself but geographical value is added when it is used in combination with reconstructions of spatial series, with distribution maps. The relations between history and geography are especially close in studies of the development of a phenomenon through time and its diffusion over space.

## 2. Changing environments

Studies of the earth as the home of humanity have for centuries been a major concern of geography. The differential encounters of peoples with their physical environments, of "culture" with "nature" as well as with other "cultures", have intrigued generations of geographers and underpinned legions of geographical studies. A significant component of that tradition has been a set of studies focusing on the interactions between people and their physical environments, examining both the impact of physical environments upon human activities and attitudes, and the impress of those ideas and actions upon physical environments. The environmental discourse in geography of necessity involves a historical approach. Studies in historical environmental geography have taken a number of forms. Some have aimed to reconstruct natural and primitive physical environments before human activities had much, if any, impact on them. Many more have addressed the human impact often damaging on key components of natural environments, such as vegetation, soils, water, landforms, climate and atmosphere. Others have studied past environments from the perspectives of contemporaries giving rise to a set of studies labelled as "historical geosophy", the history of geographical knowledge but as possessed in the past by all sorts and condition of men and women (and even children) and not just by geographers. Given that such knowledge, whether academic or otherwise, was (and is) the basis for action, for exploration and for exploitation, it has much more than intrinsic interest: its recovery is fundamental to our understanding of the cultural perception and misperception of environmental opportunities and hazards.

Many such studies intriguingly examine what they consider to be the gap between the "image" and the "reality" of an environment at some historical period (past or present). Some of the most interesting work in historical geosophy has emphasized that "false" geographical knowledge has been as significant historically as "true" knowledge.

## 3. Changing landscapes.

The landscape discourse in geography is fundamentally concerned with the visible appearance of surfaces of the earth; it recognises landscapes as cultural constructions and also as cultural representations realised in imagination, in literary forms, in art and on the ground itself.

The geographical literature demonstrates two main approaches to landscapes: the making of landscapes and the meaning of landscapes.

Many geographical studies have started with reconstructions of natural landscapes and then traced the impact of human activities upon them and the consequential construction (as well as destruction and renewed construction) of a series of cultural landscapes. Such thinking has especially permeated studies that focus upon the creation of primitive landscapes as a result of early encounters of people with natural landscapes, in effect upon cultural landscapes within which natural features continue to play an important role. But such thinking is also influential within studies that emphasise the dominant role of culture and the almost total destruction of nature in the development of almost totally "unnatural" urban-industrial landscapes.

The making of cultural landscapes has often been seen in materialist terms, interpreting landscape structures straightforwardly as the products of work, as the results of people labouring to meet their basic needs for food, water, clothing and shelter, and transforming landscapes in doing so without consciously incorporating ideas about landscape. Many landscapes are indeed by-products of economic activity, unintentional products of the struggle for survival and the need to make a living. But even that activity is engaged in by conscious human beings who have sometimes incorporated and applied explicitly stated design principles into changing landscapes. This necessitates discovery of the meaning of landscapes. Landscapes have come to be seen as the richest of our systems of signs: a landscape is a cultural message that has to be decoded. Ideologies underpin landscapes, unintentionally or intentionally. All forms of social tension including political, economic, class, ethnic, religious and gender conflicts are inscribed in landscapes. A modern landscape is thus a palimpsest of past ideologies.

#### **4. Changing areas and regions**

The region is a core concept in geography. Geography as an academic subject has been developed over more than two thousand years to meet in a disciplined way people's curiosity about places and why places differ and change. The idea of the region is a synthesising concept, unlike the three analytical concepts I have considered so far. It focuses not upon a special category of phenomena but rather upon the totality of phenomena in an area. Thus the synthesising concepts of "total history" (as propounded especially by the French Annales school of history) and of regional geography have much in common. They approach the same problem but from different perspectives. Period history and regional geography are closely related synthesising concepts.

The prosecution of historical regional geographies has itself taken a variety of forms. For some it has involved characterising the distinctive geographical personality of an area, while for others it has involved detecting and explaining the development of distinctive culture areas. Area studies in geography are conducted within a range of scales that extends from the local through the regional and national to the continental and the global. They are concerned as much with processes as with patterns of change. Geographies take time while histories take place.

Understanding places requires a historical perspective, and understanding (historical) periods requires a geographical perspective. Each needs the other; each is impoverished without the other. More importantly, each is enriched by the other. Historical atlases provide a distinctive way of bringing the two perspectives together. They provide both a geographical perspective upon the history of an area and a historical perspective upon the geography of an area. They do so using maps as the primary (but not the only) means of communication. An excellent example of this genre is the Atlas of Czechoslovak History (Prague, 1965) published some forty years ago, this atlas has now itself become a historical source.

#### **5. Why is historical understanding in geography necessary?**

Many contemporary human geographers are coming increasingly to reject the presentist and functionalist mode of interpretation and to recognise once again the necessity for a historical mode of explanation. Why? There is one basic reason: today's geography becomes tomorrow's history - geography is a victim of history. The present is the past of the future. With the accelerating pace

of cultural change today's geography is ever more rapidly becoming contemporary history. Modern human geography takes two fundamental forms: either it is retrospective, concerned with the historical evolution of the present, or it is prospective, focused upon the future development of present-day geographies.

But it is possible to identify another use of history by geographers. In addition to the two forms just mentioned, the past may be studied for its own sake, addressing geographical questions in historical circumstances (historical geography *sensu stricto*). But geographers who focus on the 'present-day' must of necessity also consider both the past and the future: both impress themselves on the 'present', the former as inherited legacies and the latter as prospective aspirations. The ideas and actions of people are shaped both by legacies from the past and by their aspirations for the future. Contemporary human geographers of a region who ignore its past are unlikely to be reliable guides to its present form and function, and even less reliable guides to its future.

## **6. History as geographical change**

The understanding of geographical change lies at the core of geography. In the broadest sense, Western historical geography has been basically concerned with the geographical impact of the growth and spread of capitalism and of liberal democracy throughout the world, with the impact of the Industrial Revolution and of the French Revolution upon different countries and continents. Historical geographers have been concerned with describing, explaining and understanding the changes that have taken place historically in the localities and regions, the countries and continents, of the world. In parallel, the concern of contemporary human geographers with changing geographical structures has required them to adopt an historical perspective in their studies of the present-day modern world. Thinking historically is an essential part of doing human geography.

Today, as contemporary human geography comes increasingly to reject the presentist and functionalist mode of interpretation and once again to recognise the necessity for an historical mode of explanation, there are renewed calls for a rapprochement between historical and contemporary human geography. In order to understand the geography of a place in the present it is necessary to take its past into account, to situate geographies historically. Even the so-called 'new cultural geography' (with its social theoretical emphasis), developed during the last twelve years or so in Britain and North America in part as a reaction against the against 'old cultural geography' (with its empirical emphasis), has come full-circle to stress that culture is constructed, that it is a process, so that it must be viewed in its historical context.

The increasing incorporation of historical perspectives into human geography parallels a broader tendency towards diminishing the distance between the social sciences and the humanities. The process may be viewed accordingly as part of the broader 'historic turn' in the human sciences. What is remarkable is the increasing attraction and importance both of the place of the past in geographical understanding and of past places themselves. There is considerable common ground for contemporary human geographers and historical geographers in what might best be termed 'place histories'.

## **7. Geography as place histories**

Historical geography is fundamentally concerned with place synthesis, not with spatial analysis. Historical geography is more sharply focused upon period and place than it is upon time and space. Geography is no more the science of space than history is that of time: both space and time are as much the concerns of natural and social scientists as they are of geographers and historians. Concepts of spatial organisation and of temporal organisation are essentially interdisciplinary rather than quintessentially geographical and historical. Ideologies shape time and space, so that temporal and spatial structures must be seen as reflecting the decisions and actions of individuals and of social groups.

Historical geographers examine the social organisation of space and time, not the temporal and spatial organisation of society. Time and space are viewed as being culturally appraised, like other resources and phenomena. This means that it is possible to research and write historical geographies

of time and space with the same justification as researching and writing historical geographies of, say, timber, taxation and taboos or of sugar, sexual behaviour and socialism. Both history and geography clearly possess many systematic or 'vertical' divisions. But analytical studies of such individual forms, processes or ideas have value added to them if they are seen not as ends in themselves but as contributing towards a synthesis, towards a holistic understanding of particular 'horizontal' periods and places, towards the construction of period histories and regional geographies. Such a broad interdisciplinary approach should be our 'ultimate aspiration' because it is the most culturally relevant to the historical and geographical education of our fellow citizens.

Historical geography highlights the historical specificity of particular places. Historical geography emphasises the distinctive and varying geographical patterns and geographical processes identifiable in particular places; it seeks to situate places within their own historical contexts. Each place is seen as being historically and geographically distinctive, with its own personality, its own history and geography. There is here an important role for historical geography as applied geography. The increasingly important tourist industry is founded upon a desire for both a change of place and a change of time: tourists are in search of both geographical and historical experiences that are different from those associated with home. One significant role for historical geography is to reveal those differences.

Differences among places are of intrinsic interest and concern to historical geography, be they differences between the 'same' place at separate times or periods, or differences among separate places at the same time or period. The comparative method is employed to highlight both differences and similarities in order to enhance understanding of particular places rather than to contribute to some grand historico-geographical theory.

The historical geography of individual places (and of the world as a whole, seen as the largest place available for geographical study) is not pursued necessarily as part of some grand, developmental narrative, nor of some unified, modernisation or other historical theory. Instead, historico-geographical studies acknowledge the immensely varied routes of geographical change taken by different places in the past. The practice of historical geography, aiming primarily to situate and to understand geographical patterns and processes in particular places, involves generalisation at a variety of historical and geographical scales. It recognises the interdependence of places at a variety of geographical and historical scales, but it does not necessarily include on its agenda theoretical abstraction for its own sake and is even sceptical about any 'theories of history' or philosophies of universal evolution.

During the last decade or so there has been a remarkable revival of interest in the geographical concept of place, both by geographers and by historians and other scholars in cognate disciplines. Considerable attention is being given to interpreting the meaning of places from a cultural perspective and to examining the construction of places by social forces. In this, they are reflecting the view that places recall events, that geographies summon histories. 'Present' places are palimpsests of past events: they have been repeatedly written on, partially wiped out, and written on again. Some place histories focus on the sense of place, others on the perceptions and representations of places, still others on the symbolism of place and the role of place in the construction of social identities, and yet others on the consumption rather than the production of places. The past of a place is open to a multiplicity of readings in the present.

Moreover, debate about the present character of a place depends in almost all cases on conflicting interpretations of its past. The past can be present in places in a variety of ways, both materially and by resonance. The past, therefore, helps make the present but it is a two-way process. Thus in trying to understand the identity of places we should not separate geography from history. But we can go beyond that to argue also that because places are culturally invented and reinvented historically. It might be useful to think of places not as areas on maps but as constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time. 'The description and identification of a place is', as Doreen Massey concludes, 'always inevitably an intervention not only into geography but also, at least implicitly, into the (re)telling of the historical constitution of the present'.

Every place or region "arrives" at the present moment trailing long histories of economics and politics, of gender, class and ethnicity; and histories, too, of the many different stories which have

been told about all of these. Without a memory, without a past, a place just like a person has no identity. Historical geographers thus have a significant role to play in the (re)construction of place identities. Moreover, most of us live our lives forwards, planning our futures, but we make sense of our lives backwards, by reflecting on our pasts. A painstaking acquaintance with the past makes possible a better understanding of our present condition. Our increasingly deracinated societies need constantly to be reminded of their historical and geographical roots.

Hence the social importance of historical geography's role in (re)constructing the histories of places. The relevance of historical geography lies in its contribution to the construction of historically and geographically literate societies (and especially historically and geographically literate decision-makers). Historical geography empowers individuals and societies, enabling them to know and understand not only their own historical and geographical identities but also those of others.

Telling place histories for people is what historical geography is really about. There are so many stories to tell, so many ways of telling them, and so many audiences to whom to tell them. This is a socially relevant and socially important task.

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**Note:** This lecture draws upon some of the arguments presented in my book *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, 2003). No bibliographic references are included here because they are set out in full in the bibliography of my book.