

Historical geography between geography and historiography*

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Abstract:

Z. Kučera: *Historical geography between geography and historiography*. – *Klaudyán*, 5, No. 1, pp. 5–13. The main purpose of the paper is to point out the significance of the discussion about the character of historical geography, its form and future development. One of the basic problems which bother historical geography from its very beginning as a field of science is its insufficient definition in relation to other disciplines, specifically geography and historiography. What is, or what should be, the subject matter of historical–geographic research? Unless we are able to answer this basic question, we can not define a competitive field of science featuring sufficient internal integrity and identity. Thus several deficiencies of current historical geography are being identified and discussed. And in conclusion, after the discussion of selected literature, several statements regarding future development of historical geography are being formulated.

Key words:

historical geography – geography – historiography – Czechia

One of the basic problems, which has accompanied historical geography, throughout the world as well as in Czechia, from the beginning of its formation as a scientific discipline is its insufficient distinction from other disciplines, especially geographical and historiographical disciplines. What is, or what should be, the object and subject of historical geographical research? Without being able to answer this fundamental question, it is impossible to clearly define a competitive scientific branch with a high level of internal integrity and a sufficiently strong identity.

While general questions regarding the definition of historical geography have not escaped notice, its position has not yet been sufficiently defined. This is true in spite of the fact that significant attention has been devoted, in particular, to the history of historical geography and its relationship with geography and/or historiography (see, for example, Baker 1987, 2003, 2007; Butlin 1993; Carter 1971; Chrastina 2005; Chromý 1999, 2001; Chromý, Jeleček 2005; Darby 1953, 1983; Guelke 1997; Holdsworth 2003, 2004; Jeleček 1983, 1987; Naylor 2005, 2006; Norton 1980; Ogborn 1997, 1999; Sauer 1941; Semotanová 1995; Trávníček 1983). The insufficient distinction of historical geography mentioned above is a direct result of the absence of a broader, theoretical-methodological debate.

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This is expressed not only in the low level of cohesion and eclectic nature of historical geographical research, but also in various definitions of historical geography, which can be considered to be too general (see, for example, Baker 2003; Butlin 1993; Jeleček 1996; Kašpar 1990; Semotanová 2002; compare the concept of historical geography in the publication Graham, Nash 2000; the lack of clarity regarding the position of historical geography was very concisely characterized, some time ago, in Vaniš 1969). Consequently, historical geography does not come across as a strong and internally integrated scientific discipline and as a result the findings of historical geographical research are not always taken seriously (compare, for example, Earle 1995; Kay, Hornsby, Meinig 1990; Meinig 1989; Semotanová 2002). Historical geography can also be accused of having problems, in particular such as: 1) an unclear position between historiography and geography, or rather on the object and subject of its research; 2) the unclear purpose of historical geographical research; 3) excessive fragmentation of research and weak internal integrity in the discipline; 4) research of an excessively descriptive nature which is rarely focused on explanation and seeking regularities; 5) insufficient applicability of research results.

In what follows, we will attempt to briefly elaborate on a number of the critical points mentioned above and also shed light on some of their possible solutions. Our intent is one of reflection on possible changes in historical geography that could contribute to the development of this discipline.

According to Eva Semotanová (2002, pp. 11–12) historical geography can be established, in accordance with today's prevailing opinions, as an "independent, interdisciplinary, border discipline, which concerns earth and man, combines space with time and natural with social sciences. It seeks learning and new directions, how to live with nature in a symbiosis acceptable for earth as well as human society. It studies the status, development and change of the geographic environment in the past, the causes behind these changes, their consequences and corresponding regularities. It reconstructs formerly existing landscapes in light of the mutual relations between man and nature, both positive and negative. It is located in between the social and natural sciences, primarily between historiography and geography. It attempts to clarify the historical roots of the present state and character of the landscape and to determine the development of the system of mutual relations between man and the landscape as well as relations among landscape regions of all varying, size levels." Similarly, we can also view the branch of historical geography as follows: "historical geography is the study of the geographies of past times, involving the imaginative reconstruction of a wide range of phenomena and processes central to our geographical understanding of the dynamism of human affairs, such as change in the evaluation and uses of human and natural resources, in the form and functions of human settlements and built environments, in the advances in the amount and forms of geographical knowledge, and in the exercising of power and control over territories and peoples" (Butlin 1993, s. IX; compare with Chromý, Jeleček 2005).

Most recently Baker (2003) attempted to define the position and research orientation of historical geography with the formulation of seven fundamental principles for the discipline. He places emphasis on historical geography's research focus on the past (1). He points out the problem of interpretation and creation of facts (2), emphasizes the significance of dialogue on developing the discipline (3), emphasizes that historical geography deals with research of geographic changes in time (4), that it is a central discipline in a holistic comprehension of geography (5), it deals primarily with the geographic synthesis of place and not with spatial analysis and is focused on "period and place" rather than on "time and space" (6) and promotes the historical specificity of certain places to the forefront, emphasizing the peculiarity and distinctiveness of geographical phenomena and processes identified in historically and geographically specific and unique places (7).

If we begin with the claim that historical geography is an interdisciplinary branch that combines space with time and social with natural sciences (see the above-mentioned Semotanová 2002), there is clearly no doubt that historical geography must, by its very nature, be an interdisciplinary branch. Nonetheless, this should not be allowed to justify its currently rather eclectic character. Historical geography should not merely be a synthesis of geography and historiography. It should be something special, something more. It may seem that this problem could be resolved by designating historical geography as the "geography of the past" (Butlin 1993).

However, even by doing so, we would not resolve the independent problem of whether historical geography is a geographical or a historical discipline. In other words: are we dealing with attempts to apply geographical approaches in historiography or is it rather geography, which is naturally using geographical methods to address similar topics in the past as those addressed by the so-called “geography of the present”? I think that the fundamental problem of the self-definition of historical geography does not lie in comprehending the meaning of “historical” in the two-word title, but rather in the fact that it remains unclear, what we mean by the “geographical”. The historicalness of historical geography seems to be emphasized too often, while its relation to geography remains completely unnoticed.

However, dividing geography into a so-called “geography of the present” and “historical geography” seems to be a very artificial treatment that does not correspond with reality. The world around is continually changing and our nearly non-apprehensible present (which can be perceived as a never-ending small point on time axis) continuously moves from the past into the future (see, for example, Lynch 1972; Pred 1984; Třeštk 2003). In other words, we are always researching something that has already happened and not what is now. Moreover, due to its nature, geography must and does deal with the changes and development of certain expressions in time (Ogilvie 1952; Hägerstrand 1970, 1989; Pred 1984; Sauer 1974; Thrift 1977a,b; compare, for example, Bednář 1969; Darby 1962; Dodgshon 1998; Jones 2004; Pred 1977; Pumain 2000). And, of course, in terms of the above-mentioned claim, it also pays significant attention to the past and to the ways we deal with it (see, for example, Howard 2003; Lowenthal 1975, 1985, 1998). Why should we even separate historical geography from geography? Is it not possible to agree with the opinion that if historical geography deals with the study of the development of the geographical environment in the past in relation to the present, then all geographical topics are historical geographical (Butlin 1993, s. 25; srovnej Baker 2004; Johnston a kol. 1994, s. 337–341)? The connection of space and time is not what makes historical geography unique. Space and time are connected in geography as well as in historiography.

Implementation of a different way of understanding the present, referred to as “embedded time” could represent a certain methodological point of departure in resolving this dilemma. “Embedded time (...) suggests that there is no clock sharp present common to everything. Instead the full life-time or the whole time of existence for each corpuscle stands out as its present. The past is what happened before the point of birth and the future what will happen after death or destruction. There is a story about this difference. Some years ago (...) famous slalom skier, Ingemar Stenmark, who comes from a small village in northern Sweden, was asked by a journalist if he had lived in Tärnaby all his life. Stenmark instantly replied, ‘Not yet.’ The journalist referred to life from birth to the moment of the interview. Stenmark saw his life in one piece from beginning to end” (Hägerstrand 1989, p. 6). Shouldn’t historical geography construct its research topics on this type of an understanding of the past? Or rather, shouldn’t it deal with the direct geographical reconstruction of the past (see Butlin 1993), which is understood as phenomena no longer existing? We can clearly see that understanding the concepts of time and space should be one of the fundamental topics discussed in attempts to define historical geography.

From this discussion on the time and the past we can easily move into contemplation of the seven principles of historical geography (Baker 2003) listed above. Their author places emphasis primarily on the concept of historical geography as an idiographic science concerned with the singularities and peculiarities of specific places during certain periods. In so doing, he resigns the possibility to generalize research findings, whereas he reduces historical geographical research to the mere creation of case studies emphasizing the uniqueness of a place and a time period. The results of such studies, however, are very difficult to apply in practical ways. Moreover, historical geography cannot simplify its extent to the mere historical geographical research of spatial phenomena without losing its competitiveness and its distinctiveness from other better established scientific branches such as historiography and archaeology. If historical geography is to attempt to clarify its current status (Semotanová 2002) and to practically apply knowledge arising from its own research (Chromý 2004), it must be, to a certain degree, nomothetic. That is, it must attempt to seek regularities in the development of the geographical organization of the past, in which case studies are perceived

only as one of the possible methods in the given research context (see, for example, Hendl 2005). In other words, it must be, by definition, geographical and it must integrate both idiographic and nomothetic approaches. The former, idiographic, focus our attention on the specificity of this world and life on earth and remind us that our life is not only composed of generally valid rules and laws. When making decisions, we should always be aware that we are making a decision in a specific context and our decisions will never be completely ideal. The latter, nomothetic, lead to the knowledge that it is possible, at a certain level of abstractness and generality, to attain a degree of consensus, agreement, regularity, and in so doing to live, to some degree, in symbiosis with the surrounding world. They help us to find some direction in the world around us. Each place is, naturally, specific, but all are not so unique, as to not have something in common.

So, now we come to the dilemma of using the terms “geography” and “geographical” in historical geography and to the claim that historical geography combines social and natural sciences, especially historiography and geography (Semotanová 2002). Such a claim, of course, contains the assumption that historiography is considered as a social science and geography as a natural science. Can we really separate these branches of science so clearly? History itself is the social construction and interpretation of the past, but just as we can write the history of the human race, we can also describe the history of any other species, expression or object. A good illustration of this position on history is found in the increasingly popular environmental history (about this, see Jeleček 1994a, b, 2000; Winiwarter a kol. 2004; Worster 1984; též Williams 1994). This can be conceived not only as the history of relations between society and nature, but also as the story of nature in historical periods. In a similar way, we cannot consider geography to be a purely natural science. In terms of its subject and object of interest, geography has always existed outside of natural and social science. To a certain degree, it has integrated the knowledge, goals and interests of both of these broad scientific research fields. While today, naturally, we often hear, especially in the context of so-called human or, in Czechia, social geography, an opposing claim: that geography is a social science (Massey 1995). We can perhaps more easily agree with the claim that the classification of sciences according to their focus on societal or natural is inappropriate for characterizing the position of geography in the system of sciences (Gardavský, Hampl 1982; Hampl 1998a). For example Hampl (1998a) proposes an alternative concept of classification of the sciences according to principles of evolutionary complexity and comprehensiveness, which better pinpoints the position of geography as a comprehensive science in light of its object and subject of study. The landscape sphere is the object of study and relations between the various components comprise its subject. Geography is not about clarifying the internal composition and organization of these objects, but about describing their mutual relations. Today’s prevailing division of geography into a social and natural component (i.e. the dualism of geography), which can lead to understanding geography as a social or natural science, is a result of the discipline’s unique historical development (Bird 1993; Cloke, Philo, Sadler 1991; Hampl 1998a,b; Holt-Jensen 1999; Johnston 1997). Nonetheless, we must be aware of the fact that both strengthening and converging geography’s social science and natural science components, leading to a conception of geography as one whole (so-called monism; see, for example, Holt-Jensen 1999), are necessary for the internal integrity and continued development of the discipline.

This brings us to discussion of the last dilemma in the definition of historical geography: the meaning of geography in this two-word term. What do we mean by the “geographical”? At this point we have limited ourselves to a basic discussion of the problem as it is a very extensive topic, exceeding beyond the scope of one article.

Geographical knowledge, whose goal is often simplistically considered to be the explanation of the spatial organization of the landscape sphere, is often confused with topography. Gould (1985, pp. 4–5) offers a poignant example, which clearly arises from the difficulty of defining geography itself: “The scene was typical of that extraordinary ritual known as the Cocktail Party. Groping for something else to fill the silence, she got in her word first. ‘And what do you do?’ she said. ‘Oh’, I said, grateful for the usual filler, ‘I’m a geographer.’ And even as I said it, I felt the safe ground turning into a familiar quagmire. She did not have to ask the next question, but she did anyway. ‘Oh really, a geographer ... and what do geographers do?’ It has happened many times, and it seldom

gets better. The awful feeling of desperate foolishness when you, a professional geographer, find yourself incapable of explaining simply and shortly to others what you really do. One could say, 'I look at the world from a spatial perspective, in a sense through spatial spectacles,' or 'Well, actually I'm a spatial analyst,' both of which would be true up to a point. But such phrases convey no meaning to most people, and leave them suspecting that you need a new oculist, or perhaps an analyst of a different sort. In a desperate attempt to build a bridge with familiar words, one ends up saying, 'Well, actually, I teach geography.' 'Oh really?', and laughing. 'What's the capital of North Dakota?' (compare with Kühnlová 1997). And in the same fashion, historical geography, if we admit that it is primarily geography, cannot be characterized only as historical topography (on this, see, for example, Kašpar 1990). Geography seeks to explain the organization of the landscape sphere and its variation. It involves much more than the mere description of the spatial positioning of phenomena. For example, Holt-Jensen (1999, p. 119), citing the work of Granö (1981), points out that "the focal point of geography as an holistic science is neither the relation between humanity and nature as the object of study, nor the explanation of humanity's activity in terms of nature, nor the integration of humanity and nature in regions or landscapes. The focal point lies in the reciprocity between humanity's mind, which is the subject, and humanity's environment (...): Man's perceptions, experience, knowledge and action form, together with his environment, a totality, a unity which constitutes the basic premise of geographical enquiry" (compare with Lowenthal 1961; Tuan 2003; Wright 1947). From this we could summarize that geography is not merely spatial science or topography, but rather teaching on the ability to orient oneself in the surrounding world, our environment, landscape. To be truly capable of orienting ourselves in these surroundings, we must simultaneously also attempt to understand them.

So, what should historical geography be? A simple and declarative answer to such a question does not exist. Moreover, such was never the goal of this essay. We have only attempted to shed light on some of the key dilemmas faced by today historical geography and we subsequently analysed a number of fundamental problems, regarding its definition. This paper's intent was primarily to point out the importance of further dialogue on the nature of historical geography, its character and its further development. In conclusion, I shall attempt to define several remarks and opinions on the further orientation of the branch:

- 1) First and foremost, historical geography is geography, a geographical science. As such, it should not be merely topography. This, naturally, assumes that it will seek regularities (Hampl 1998a).
- 2) Even though it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish historical geography from other geographical disciplines, its uncontested contribution lies in the fact that it deals primarily with the reconstruction of phenomena that no longer exist and, in so doing, contributes to our understanding of the current state of the landscape. Much the same as historiography, it becomes, in this way, a sort of "bridge" between our past and present.
- 3) In order for historical geography to be distinguishable from historiography, it should place a greater emphasis on space than on time as well as on the contemporaneity of the expressions being studied. Whereas, in this case, with contemporaneity we mean the simultaneity of existence of observed expressions throughout the researched time period, in the given time segment. Historical geography is primarily a science on the geographical organization of the landscape sphere in the chosen time period, and not a science dealing with the chronological description of the development of a certain phenomena. We can agree that while historiography, with its emphasis on linear development in time and chronology, is more a "time-space science" and that historical geography is more a "space-time science".
- 4) Nomothetically oriented historical geography should study the status and development, causes and mechanisms of landscape variation or their various components in a certain time period in the past in a geographical manner. And, in doing so, contribute to seeking and verifying general regularities. If certain regularity is to be considered generally valid, it must apply not only in the present as we perceive it, but also in the past.

5) However, to achieve this, it is necessary to expand dialogue on the nature of perceiving time and the past in historical geography. To attempt to more definitively define the object and subject of its research. We have noted above the possibility of an alternative conception for perceiving the past.

6) The aim of historical geography is not to describe and explain in detail the development of selected landscape elements in time through a retrospective method. Its aim is understanding the complexity and the functioning of past landscapes or landscape spheres. Only this type of historical geography can become a true geography of the past. It could contribute, among other things, to expanding the reputation of historiography as well as geography and, in so doing, help their popularisation. Or, in other words, lay the foundation for development of interdisciplinary cooperation of geographers with specialists from other branches (see, for example, possibilities of cooperation between geography and archaeology, referred to by, e.g. Anschuetz, Wilshusen, Scheick 2001; Gojda 2000; Renfrew 1983; Roberts 1996).

7) Last but not least, the concept of historical geography described above also enables the practical application of historical geographical knowledge, especially in fields such as the maintenance of monuments; nature and landscape protection and spatial, landscape or regional planning.

In conclusion, we can make only one remark. It is clear that even if none of the above-mentioned changes to historical geography are realized, historical geography should be, first and foremost, an open platform for interdisciplinary discussion and cooperation. And, as such, it should contribute to the mutual understanding and edification of the parties involved.

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