

Editors' Discussion: What are Human Geographies?

Roger Lee, Sarah Elwood, Noel Castree,
Susan M. Roberts, Rob Kitchin

To see the video of the Editors' conversation please visit <http://bcove.me/2po84qex>



Roger

Noel

Roger Lee I wonder if we might start by exploring why and how we came to be human geographers?

Rob K

It seems to me that's an interesting phenomenon in the sense that many people's trajectory of coming to human geography is very diverse. They've come in to it from all sorts of directions – some people indeed from the physical sciences and others not at all from the physical sciences. These are intriguing ways of arriving at a disciplinary or sub disciplinary interest because, of course, it [human geography] too has a very wide basis. So perhaps we could explore that to start with and see where we go from there in terms of the nature of human geography?

Noel Castree I'm going to be a little autobiographical here. I grew up in a very small village in the north of England called Summerseat. It's in a valley incised by the River Irwell which flows into Manchester. Certainly, when I was a child and then a teenager I was very, very interested in the landscape, in why this place was the way it was. So I went to university to study geography. I took a number of regional geography courses which I found absolutely fascinating. My favourite was by a guy called Tony Lemon who was at Oxford and taught a course on Southern Africa and did a fantastic job of explaining the particularity of that region and

Sara

the way in which economics, politics, landscape and nature came together.

But at the same time in that period, something unexpected happened: I went and had some lectures with David Harvey who had come to Oxford in 1987. That added something that I didn't know was missing – the link through the local to the global. Harvey's lectures on global capitalism allowed me to situate my own experience in Summerseat where I was from and the kind of things that Tony Lemon was talking about in Southern Africa into this big global story. And so for me it's that kind of emphasis on the local, a particular somehow situated in this drama of life on Earth. That is what got me excited. So when I finished my undergraduate degree I thought I'd like to do something on these lines as a graduate student which took me to the University of British Columbia. It's probably more complicated than that but I think that's part of the story.

Roger So, you were trying to understand things in a geographical framework – the local in a much wider context and interacting with that wider context in all sorts of interesting ways?

Noel Yes – because, as we all know, we all live our lives in this very, very small day-to-day scale. And even now, 30 years since I left, I've got this very powerful image of where I'm from. But somehow trying to understand that that is situated in this enormous, mesh of relationships, institutions, processes and events. That for me is what really got me excited.

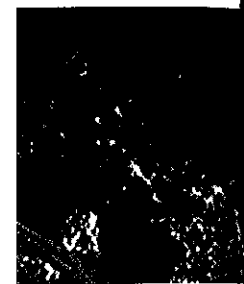
Rob Kitchin I went to university to do environmental science, then swapped into physical geography and swapped again into human geography. I then went off to do a Masters' in GIS and did my PhD in geography and psychology. What drew me more towards human geography was the sense that I could take elements of all those bits and integrate them together. So I could still engage with the physical geography and with environment and nature and so on, but I could link it in with the social, the cultural, the economic, the political ...

So it's [geography] an integrative synthetic discipline in that sense. It pools ideas from lots of different places together and allows you to play around with them. If I was in another kind of discipline, I'd be more constrained to the social, the cultural or the political ... [Geography] has that integrating effect that I like. I'm a dabbler, so it allows me to dabble around quite legitimately.

Sarah Elwood Yes, it was the same for me. When I was at school in the US, there was no geography taught in secondary schools and so it was a real discovery in college. I'd gone off to be a historian, because in some ways that, through the notion of time, satisfied the wish to put pieces together – that integrating synthetic desire. In the first year I took a geography

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class and went 'Oh this is it!' – and it was precisely because of that notion of place in context. I had grown up in western Oregon during the crash of the timber industry which is all about resources, globalization and deregulation. It started to make me think about how those impacts that I was seeing when I worked in the forest service and rolling through tiny town after tiny town where the [timber] mill had closed, how they had come about. How could you tell that story?

Susan Roberts Yes. I think it's also the same with me in terms of where I grew up which was a very privileged space. It was in the 'stockbroker belt' outside London, the end of the Metropolitan line. So all the men would leave in the morning and go to the City, make money and come back, whilst all the women would stay at home and cook dinner for them and us kids would go to school. That was the kind of life it was. But all you had to do was to get on the Metropolitan line [one of the mass transit lines serving London], come into London and the whole world changed within about 10 miles – even more so within about 20 miles – and I always wondered why. I was looking out of the window: why did the houses get smaller and smaller and what did everyone do who lived in those houses? Even as a kid I remember thinking that.

And then I went to university, I'm also a dabbler I suppose, and I did a social science degree, and really liked political science because I was interested in inequality. But I felt fenced in by political science because it had a canon and we were expected to pick a groove to follow as a scholar. I really felt hemmed in by that. Human geography seemed to have doors opening to different ways of thinking about inequality and about why places vary.

Roger Yes, I understand what you say about the sense of place that you came from and the influence that that had. I was born in the middle of Manchester in the north of England and then lived in an inner suburb of Manchester which had no real identity: it was a suburb, it was where you lived and, yes, people came and went and so on and I had my friends there. But I used to go to Manchester and think this is a very different kind of place from where I am living which was only just four or five miles from the centre of Manchester.

That always intrigued me, but I have to say I don't think that I had any thoughts about it beyond that. So I, like some of you, drifted into geography. And even when I was an undergraduate, I wasn't sure that this would go any further. I was intrigued by some things, and particularly by the fact that – although I had never realized it at school of course – that people think a lot about what is the nature of geography, what are the issues that geography addresses? And that really interested me because it got me then into thinking philosophically about issues which I'd never ever done before.

Noel

And then to finish this, very recently I have been acting as the guide to parents and friends when applicants come to my institution for open days – I think I'm too old and grey to be exposed to them, so I am asked to look after parents. On one occasion, one of the parents said that he was very pleased that his daughter was going to read geography but he said 'I really don't see why we need geography any more'. So I said 'What do you mean, "Why do we need it"?' and he said 'Well surely we've found everywhere now?'

Then I had to find a way of trying to explain what it was that geography did: that it wasn't just a question of capital cities and rivers and size of countries ... although that of course is crucially important and we need to have that information, geography is about precisely this integrative process. The world does not work in a series of little silos – politics or psychology or whatever – it is actually constantly interacting. There are no silos and what we need to understand is the connections between those various aspects of life and how they actually come together.

That seemed to me to make sense – the spatial framework within which human life developed became sensible to me – and, like you, I was inspired by attempting to understand global processes but again this is a spatial spatial framework. It made me think, 'Yes of course, you can't separate culture and economy and politics and society and environment. They are all interconnected'. It's therefore necessary to find a way of making those connections sensibly. You could talk about them superficially but how do you make them sensible?

So I think that kind of integrative quality is central. When I told this story to other parents who also asked 'What on earth do we need geography for?' they were convinced by that and understood it, because they realized themselves that life is not a series of boxes: we might live in this box now and then we move to that box, we are constantly in transition all the time and that seemed to me to be what geography was allowing us to do. And that's why I think it's an extraordinarily difficult subject to deal with and a very challenging one to deal with. So that integrative nature [of geography] I think is really critical.

Noel

That sort of challenge that you just described at the end there, I think partly explains why human geography is such an incredibly vibrant field and that comes across in the *Handbook [of Human Geography]* – we are all big fans. But also your comment about those parents does raise a perennial question: why in many countries is there a kind of misperception?

So on the one hand, you've got this really wonderful, rich, vibrant field with lots of practitioners, lots of interesting things going on; then, on the other hand, you have people outside the university system who have very partial ideas about the field. And that's a challenge that remains, I

think. Even in this country [UK] where geography has got a long history and where it is very strong in the university sector, we scratch our heads about this

Rob

That misperception also exists within the academy. Within the USA, for example, geography is weak within the wider academic landscape for various reasons. So we know there's only one 'ivy league' university geography department which probably from the UK perspective seems odd because almost every university has a geography department. There's probably a particular history [in the USA] where people in the universities couldn't quite see a place where geography fitted into the wider social sciences.

And it probably is an unusual discipline in that, depending on which university you are in, you can find it in the faculty of social sciences, the faculty of the geosciences, the faculty of engineering, the faculty of physical sciences, natural sciences, humanities – all over the place. And in universities, geography ends up paired all over the place, you can have geography paired with politics, or geography paired with sociology, or geography paired with biology or somewhere else.

Because it is this integrative, overarching discipline. It's really difficult then to work out where to put it. For some people that means they can't see the logic of where you would have that discipline. Why not just break it up and all the social geographers go to sociology and all the historical geographers go to history and so on? That's why we're asking this question of what is human geography and what is its position. We always feel a little bit nervous about how it's seen and understood, because the question [of what it might be and where it might sit] is important in that sense: it could quite easily disappear in some senses.

Susan

And this not an abstract question at all. Sarah and I would know well that, in the American context, you constantly have to make a case for geography.

Sarah

I had an administrator recently in a meeting who when I had raised that question said 'Well, no, in this institutional context you don't have to worry about making a case for geography'. But my immediate point was that, in the US academy, you always must make the case for geography because precisely those kinds of marriages that begin to partition what we all talked about as valuable – the integrative nature of geography – may cause it to disappear, as often happens, if it is attached to the college/faculty of such and such. And then perhaps some of your human geographers, say, if it's gone to the sciences, end up elsewhere. And that's the beginning of the problem.

Rob

The way I always try and distinguish it is around key concepts. So if somebody asks me what human geography is, I always define it via the concepts. Its key concepts are space, place, scale, nature, environment

Roger

Rob

Roger

and borders ... whereas in sociology it might be identity, community and governments. And those concepts are the lenses through which we look at the world and make sense of it so it can't be that you just split us [geographers] up and move us. It's the concepts that bind us into this notion of human geography.

Roger

Yes and I think that those concepts in geography are really fundamental. We were talking about space and time and you can't get much more fundamental than that: those are the two basic dimensions of our existence. And I think that's probably part of the problem in that people just take them for granted in one sense. They're actually extremely difficult to grapple with and to understand but they are just there and we take them for granted. And so often when I'm watching things on TV for example which purport to be history, I think, actually they're historical geography because, even when they're telling stories about individuals, it's always an individual in a context – in a context of certain sorts of relationships that shaped what they were doing at a particular place and a particular time. But, of course, we think of that as history; we don't think about it as historical geography and yet that's exactly what it is.

We just somehow take it [geography] for granted, and yet at the same time I think it's an extremely difficult concept to deal with – and one which is really, really powerful. I always feel that, had it been geographers that had been influential in terms of understanding the economy, the ongoing banking crisis of 2008 would not have happened because people would have understood the specifics of what was driving that crisis, what led to it. They would have understood that much more readily than economists who were simply using abstract models devoid of any kind of context. Their models simply had an elegance and a logic to them that are very valuable in their way, but they are simply unreal in the sense that they don't have a context.

So I think it's partly to do with the fact that geography deals with such fundamental issues of space and time that, paradoxically, people just take it for granted and so they reduce it to things like capital cities and rivers and countries and so on.

Rob

That's also partly because that's how it was taught in the past – the classic regional geography 'let's open our book and look at Africa, or Asia, or Russia, or wherever ...'

Roger

But then regional geography – as Noel said earlier on – I found potentially really interesting because it did open that possibility for integration. You began to see how that might work. So it seems to me that regional geography – if it is well taught, as it clearly was in your case – was really very powerful if you began to understand it in this integrative manner.

Sarah

If you use the region to illuminate the concept it gets to what you were talking about: the fundamental nature of the concepts. For me, that's always been one of the challenges and the joys of teaching in human geography: to try to use the ideas to make visible what your students are living everyday and what they have lived without understanding the pieces ...

Noel

I like that. I think it's very appropriate that we began this conversation with autobiography because, although it sounds banal to say geography in general and human geography is a real world subject, it is about us. It's about trying to describe this life as it's experienced and lived every day which almost sounds a bit easy. But it's not – as you said it's very challenging to do that well – because modern life is ridiculously complicated and, going back in history, that was complicated too. So, as you said before, trying to find a vocabulary to interpret that never mind gathering the evidence as well, is actually very challenging and quite exciting.

Susan

I have a question here. When Sue was talking about her own background and you said that you found political quite constraining, I think most of us are aware that since the financial crisis there's been a push back in sections of economics against the orthodoxy in economics whatever that may be perceived to be. So my question really is about human geography as a heterodox discipline: what we think perhaps the strengths of that are.

Rob

Seen in one way it's a weakness – it's 'indisciplined' – although I don't think we would see it like that – we see value in that. So it's a good question to ask: In what ways is this kind of diversity a blessing? Because [human geography] has evolved organically over the last 40 or 50 years, it's more diverse now than it was when I was studying geography in school. It is just so much more heterodox. Rob said to me before [this recording] that he'd just done a piece in *Dialogs in Human Geography* on 'Does geography have a canon?' In a way, by saying no, some may see that as a problem. But maybe it's a blessing.

Rob

Yes, for me not being an economist is a blessing to be honest and sociologists are always going back to Weber and Durkheim and Marx and they don't seem to be able to get away from that. We don't really have that, partly because our canon is incredibly problematic because of its colonial roots and some of the ideas that it was promoting would be ones that we wouldn't necessarily agree with either politically or philosophically any longer.

So I agree with you. The 'indiscipline' may seem a problem but for me it's actually is an advantage. I like the fact that it's very philosophically plural and I can play around with ideas and engage with lots of different ideas and I like the fact that it's plural in its topic or its scope which means I can link different material and different ideas together and just to try and get some kind of productive engagement. I would see that

Sarah

very much as a strength in that we're not constrained by constantly having to refer back to a paradigmatic set of ideas that cast this long shadow. We can be out of the shadow.

We need to try get away from the idea that philosophical plurality is a problem. I don't see it that way. As long as it always leads to productive engagement that leads to new ideas, new ways of seeing the world, new ways of making sense of that and can illuminate what it is that we are looking at, I don't see there's a problem.

Susan

I'd agree. And methodical pluralism is also a strength of the discipline even though that's another issue about which people sometimes fight about. But I do think the *Handbook* has actually strengthened that ethos and let the authors push even further in terms of diversifying the discipline. Several of the chapters that I was involved with were, as you say, not just swimming in a mixed sea but trying to engage, trying to push ideas further.

Rob

I also think that's why some disciplines have been turning towards geography. So we have had the 'spatial turn' and that's lasted quite a long time now. I think other disciplines can see the merits in the way in which we are looking at the world.

They are definitely borrowing from us and I see that in my own work – in critical GIS – which might be picked in computer science or picked up in media studies through to sociology and cultural studies and so on. People can see the value of the concepts but also the value of this kind of plural methodical approach. They understand that we're both applied and critical. We can both practice doing the GIS and, at the same time, be reflexive and critique the use of it – an idea with which, I think, computer scientists sometimes have a difficulty.

So some of my work at the minute is both trying to do smart city work, trying to create city dashboards and indicators and so on, and then, on the other side, I'm actually critiquing and trying to think through what are the implications of doing this or the politics of the data behind it and so on.

We are not simply instrumental, we're also critical but we do have the instrumental side. So we can talk to planners and we can talk to people who are policy makers or government officials – people who are actually trying to make things happen in the world in a very practical way. At the same time we can talk to the other disciplines through the philosophy and through the methodology and the concepts and so on.

Sarah

I think that – as I've been listening to all of you – the essence of creativity is that notion of creating, without very scripted pathways. It frees geographers up to – as you say – bring things that might not seem to go together into some interesting conversations. You have to leave a lot of space before something like a qualitative GIS can emerge as a set of

ideas and a set of practices. But if you're scripting written paths, then there are countless other ideas that have already done that. I didn't know at the outset that it [qualitative GIS] was one of the things that I would come to love and find productive. As you say when we leave that [scripted] space it lets some of those collisions start to happen.

Rob

In saying that, I have colleagues who are pretty locked down on the GIS front. When I talk to them and try to persuade them that maybe engaging with post-structural ideas would be valuable, there is just no way they can accept that. There is this old kind of quantitative geography line and they are not for persuading to go off somewhere else. Whilst we may be quite open and end up editing a journal like *Progress in Human Geography* or doing the *Handbook*, there are some people who are quite fixed in their ideas, in how they see the world and their approach to how they tackle particular questions.

Rob

Roger

I think that's an interesting point, I think this plurality derives from the fact that we're dealing with a very complex set of issues. You can't actually say well *this* is the way we are going to do it because it's not containable. You can't think about the three dimensional space in which we all live in that way. I actually remember years and years ago when the Marxist turn was very vibrant within geography and we [at Queen Mary University of London] had an undergraduate student who just really went for this. In his third year every single exam paper was written from a Marxist perspective and he did it really, really well.

Some of my colleagues – when we were discussing the marks the student got, or should get – said 'This is only one perspective.' So I said 'Well, yeah, but it's a ferociously insightful perspective and he's done it extremely well. Sure there need to be other perspectives to provide a critique of what he's doing but at least he's got a view on what the spatial processes that he's been looking at in different fields – urban geography, rural geography historical geography, etc. were'. One of my colleagues – a historical geographer who used to teach wonderful material on rural change, said 'Well, I teach a lot on the enclosures, the process by which land was brought into private ownership at various stages through the history of the British economy and rural society and I can't see what's political about that'.

I thought 'Yes that's precisely the issue: you're seeing this purely as a visual, two-dimensional process that is changing the landscape. It is doing that – and that's profoundly important – but it has all of these other dimensions to it as well. So surely this guy should be given credit for what he's done?' Fortunately, he was given credit for what he'd done. It was a great bunch of work he produced for his exams.

And this is similar to what you're talking about – the disjunction between, 'Well, I'm talking about landscape change. What's politics got to do with that?' and [on the other hand, the notions that politics has got]

Noel

everything to do with it – and that lots of other things have got to do with it as well. And, of course, the change in the landscape affects the politics in just the same way.

So I think this plurality is inevitable. If you try to constrain it then you lose what geography is about – the value of it. What we need to do is to do good work – as you said – to show why it's so important. I think we probably do that but we need somehow to broadcast it rather more cleverly than perhaps what we are doing at the moment.

Rob

To go back to Noel's comments about the regional aspect as one way of doing that. The [current financial] crisis in Ireland has actually provided a big opportunity for geography and we probably have capitalised on it quite well. All the media commentators up until then had come from think tanks or from banks or from government parties or whatever. And so they all got discredited and they had to look for new commentators. And the two that they went for were academic economists and geographers. So everybody in my department [in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth] has done media work. Every single person has done national radio or TV or local newspapers.

Whether that's [to do with] climate change or planning or housing or whether it's economy and job creation and what's happening with companies and so on. And the media have connected to them because they can tell these stories that were from the local to the global. They can connect what's going on in Ireland, what's going on in Europe or what's going on elsewhere. They can talk about what's happening across the country – what's happening in Dublin, what's happening in Galway, or Cork, or Limerick or some of these smaller towns and so on. And they can connect it in with stories about people and places.

So it has led to this opportunity to do that. And I think that is an opportunity that we haven't as a discipline really engaged with. If you think about it within the UK, there are probably very few public intellectuals coming out of geography. And may be that is a space where, if we can get voice in there, then it would help people understand what it is that we do.

Noel

I think that might be helpful and you've been very successful in being noticed for the arguments and ideas that you are making – both as you as Rob Kitchin but also you but as a geographer – which is great for the discipline. In the UK, Danny Dorling has actually done a pretty good job – although, as you say, this is quite unusual. But I think I might have a slightly mixed view about this. We sometimes look at other disciplines – and I always talk about history here as you've got people like Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson – but let's remember these people are rarities in their field anyway. Any discipline would be very fortunate to have people like that who are so visible among a certain section of the wider general public. So ...

Rob ... but they do have a set of documentaries. If you were to look at the documentaries on BBC and ITV [commercial TV] and so on, you are much more likely to see a historian or a scientist than you would a geographer.

Roger And isn't that because they're [historians] able to tell a story? They are telling a story which people like. And it's often a story which has a strong temporal dimension to it or a strong personal dimension to it or both. And that, in one sense, is relatively straightforward whereas if you're trying to tell a story about space and how space influences people's behaviour, you can't start with that idea. You've got to start with some of the concepts or a particular case or whatever to show why and how space actually works and why it's important.

Susan

Rob I think we're quite good at telling stories which is why our students like the subject. That's how most of us probably teach in our classes; that's why we use a whole series of empirical examples to illustrate a particular point.

Noel So I suspect on the documentaries, if we stick with that, I suspect part of the problem – and I'm guessing here – is that commissioning editors who, if they want to do something say on the global economy, don't see it as a geography issue. They see it as a kind of economic history or economics issue so that's why [economists and historians] get invited. So maybe you are right Rob, what some of us need to do a bit better is just get that message out and accept that this is part of our *modus operandi*: this is just what we do. But I do think it's difficult.

Roger

Rob That brings me around to the notion of a public geography. Maybe as a discipline we need to turn more towards social media. Nearly all of us [in Ireland] were picked up through blogging and through Twitter. We were 'discovered' when we started our blog to create a counter-discourse against what the economists were saying and the journalists picked that up. We were providing a lot of facts and figures, we were providing maps and we were providing useful factual information as well as providing a discursive analysis of what that all meant politically, economically, socially and so on. And maybe we do need to get better at creating a public geography.

To go back to why you had to explain to the parent as to what geography is, that was because we still have a problem that people don't necessarily understand what it is that we do as a discipline. It makes perfect sense when you're within it but on the outside we still seem to have this issue.

Sarah What's interesting is that I find our undergraduates immediately seem to understand and are drawn to the notion of public geography. And they seem to come to us understanding that. This is a set of ideas that is talked about across our department in a way that they can see how to engage the world. And it's their parents and broadly that generation where

there's less understanding [of geography] and where they cannot see that link to public geography. For ourselves we know how to teach it in that way. Then there's a next step, as you say, to a broader engagement that makes sense – whether that's in the media or whatever.

Susan

I think that's really important at the moment in the United States in particular. Just recently we've seen quite a strong attempt to pull geography into the state in new ways – and particularly in the form of geographic knowledge for intelligence. And so for a lot of bright undergrads that's their career path – to take their GIS or their big data expertise and go into intelligence. And that's a very practical, applied kind of geography their parents can understand. But it's not the kind of geography that is producing counter-blogs to normative economics and narratives about what's happening for example. So I think, yes I would say in the USA certainly – and I speak for myself, maybe not anyone else – I'm a bit behind in realizing that we have to put out more coherent stories.

Roger

Well that is interesting. In Manchester recently, undergraduate economists started to say 'Look, what are we learning about here? We're not learning about the real world at all. We are learning about formulae and elegant models that are very, very important in their own right but aren't actually addressing in a direct way the real world'. But, as you [Noel] said, we do tend to do just that. That story should actually be very, very clear.

Somehow, intuitively, we get it, the students get it, but it just needs that further step to go beyond that to address what the general public would think about. Here we are we are sitting here and recording this video just on the northern edge of the City of London. No doubt there are massive deals being made just down the road here – billions of dollars being switched around the world.

And we tend to think that that is some sort of ethereal process that's going on. But it isn't an ethereal process. It's real people sitting down in front of real screens, in real offices doing things which are related to the particularities of where they're working – often even whose desk they are sitting next to can influence how they behave. So the geography of the city, the local geography, is affecting the way in which they behave. And this is a classically good example of how this spatial influence, that Noel started off drawing our attention to, works in practice.

And that lesson it seems to me is something which I think other people wouldn't pick up because they still tend to see it [the relations and practices of finance] just as a placeless ethereal universal process about which we can do nothing. But in fact of course it isn't placeless, it's place-full and we can do a lot about it if we chose to do so, if we could just understand it in that way. That kind of message from geography seems to me is really important because it begins to show how and why space is important.

But politically it also suggests a much greater purchase on engaging with some kind of control over the market. The market doesn't work, somehow independently. We make it work the way it does, and we can make it work differently if we wanted to. That kind of lesson from geography – and that's just one – that kind of lesson is a profoundly important lesson in terms of what kind of world we're living in at the moment. And this is why it [geography] becomes so important and why we need to be able to get that material and those ideas out there rather more fully.

Rob Do you think those ideas are penetrating into the school system? I'm wondering where we think the school curriculum is in relation to the university curriculum in that process?

Roger It's a good question. I don't know about the USA but certainly in the UK it seems to me that there is a sense of a return to a canon of geographical knowledge – to use that phrase. The emphasis seems to be increasingly on the local – the circumstances of the local – your own country, for example – and that somehow it's simply a box which is not influenced from outside. Emphasis is placed on information about that box rather than thinking about how you can understand what's going on inside it – how you can understand what's going on inside the UK, or the US or wherever. But you cannot reduce it simply to that particular place because all sorts of other places influence it and it too is influencing them – it goes on all the time

I do worry about that – that there is this sense in which – perhaps because space is such a complicated notion – that we want to reduce it down to simply information *about* space rather than the significance *of* space for shaping social political and economic ... processes. And I think it's possible to teach that quite easily at a very young age. You can do it in all sorts of imaginative ways. And that in turn means the child doesn't become centred. Rather the child comes to see itself as part of a much wider network. I think that would be incredibly helpful – not only for geography and showing why it's so important – but politically as well. It's a really, really important set of understandings as to where the individual sits, as an individual, in relationship towards all sorts of others in the world as a whole.

Sarah I think in the USA, human geography in the school system really gets short shrift. So you find lots of human environment and physical geography sorts of questions and themes and lots of spatial cognition, cartographic representation, GIS, pre-GIS themes but human geography has always been parcelled out in the last several decades into something called 'social studies' in which geography disappears. And the turn to test-based and standards-based curriculum in USA has meant that the integrative stories and exploratory pedagogies that bring together lots of different experiences and knowledge's – that's also fallen out.

Roger

Noel

And so I think there remains a mis-match between what's happening in the school system and what we would like to see happening at the university level. Having just finished a project with 11–14 year olds, that was on citizenship, critical engagement and spatial technologies, to any of the funders and any of the schools that we taught in it was a complete revelation that we would be teaching about politics, the economy – any of the critical questions that for human geographers would be obvious questions to pursue. And that, coming from geography, we were not teaching about cartographic representation or landforms was a complete shock. That anecdote traces a sort of mismatch that haunts the US educational system.

Roger

What do we do about it? Rob's made one suggestion about how we can somehow get these stories – which we know to be fundamental and critically important, not just for understanding but also for political and economic change – into the public arena. So how do these ideas get taken into the mainstream?

I'm reading a book at the moment which, you'd think, has absolutely nothing to do with geography. It's about the significance of the Italian opera composer, Verdi, for German politics. And the first chapter is pure geography – although not written, I have to say, as well as a geographer would write it. It's talking about movement, the flow of ideas from one place to another and the translation of those ideas into a different context and then how those ideas are used through German history, post-Verdi. I thought this is geography. The book has been very, very well received by historians, by historians of music, by sociologists, by others and it's geography – it's a geography book – but it's seen as somehow to do with music and therefore it has a validity.

And yet actually what that story is telling is a story about geography in the way in which geography affects the use, in this particular case, the use of a particular artistic oeuvre. I find that absolutely fascinating because it's geography but it's not written as geography. We need somehow to show just why and how this [the inherency of geography] is important. That's interesting and intriguing question as to how we might move forward.

Noel

I haven't seen this book but it reminds me of a style of writing that's at once was very sophisticated, very academic but very accessible and very public. Alec Murphy, who used to be an editor of *Progress in Human Geography*, has recently written about this in a piece about the need to reclaim grand regional narratives and to write those through to public audiences.

I had some problem with Alec's argument in detail but broadly speaking I think that he's right. I think that there are big tapestry books – about the movement of ideas and people, changing landscapes, local-global

connections – that are there to be written. That we tend not to is all to do with the institutional configuration of geography as a discipline. Even though there are differences between the UK, Canada and the USA, there's something that makes doing that kind of scholarship difficult for people. That must be so because, otherwise, I'm sure a lot of people would be doing it.

We can name on fingers of one hand people who feel they are in a position to write the big books and get them out there in a way that really captures the attention both of other academics but also of wider sections of the public. And that is a real problem because, whilst it would be a joy to research and write such a book, the impact in terms of readership – the positive response you get as a discipline from that – would be really wonderful. So I think, fundamentally, that has to do with institutional configuration: what counts as research, where do the rewards come from.

And unfortunately, like most academics, as a community we are driven by systems that we have partly created ourselves and partly have allowed to be created by others in the wider university world. And so part of this, I think, is a need to push back on the institutional politics.

Noel

And just to take us back briefly to the education question – which a few minutes ago is where we were focused – I've had some experience in this country in the way that GCSE and A-level [the main UK school-leavers' examinations] syllabi were being rewritten periodically. I was actually shocked at how opaque the process was for academics and how difficult it was to be involved. It was people who got degrees at some point in the distant past, working for a curriculum authority, who were suggesting curricula that would then be assessed by government. And there's a real gap between that community and our community and that's partly our fault. We can't just blame other people for that.

So I think part of this is the institutional nitty gritty. The unglamorous stuff of realizing how important that is. If you want to get to these bigger issues, you've got to do that to get to the bigger stuff. If you don't, you'll end up having coffee-room conversations where you lament and complain that things are not the way you want them to be.

Roger

Interestingly, the *Handbook* was written very much with the intention of not simply speaking to geographers – although, of course, it does speak to geographers – but of actually speaking to people outside geography. The way in which the whole thing was designed was that we wouldn't have [the word] 'geography' in any of the chapter titles. The chapter titles are simply one-word titles like 'Economy', or 'Politics', or 'Development', or whatever.

And that I think is interesting because several of the people who wrote it, got back to me and said that this is one of the most difficult things

Susan

Rob

Roger

they ever had to write. They had to think very carefully about how to deal with chapter titles in a book about human geography that were not constrained by the word 'geography'. For example, 'Economy': I'm a geographer how am I going to tackle that? And I think that's the kind of the thing that we need to do as well.

But I think you're right about the institutions. I think they simply don't allow that. A Polish friend of mine who knows probably more about European historical geographies – although he's not a historical geographer, he's demographer – but he has more knowledge and understanding about European historical geography in his little finger than I've got in my brain and he can take you to, say, a museum in Poland with portraits of the great and the good from the Polish past and he'll tell you a story about them which is actually the grand narrative that you were talking about. [Looking at a picture of a Polish noble or king] he can say well this was to do with the Swedish migration and the wars with Sweden and the connections between here and there ...

And I keep on saying to him 'Would you write this down because this is brilliant; this is wonderful European historical geography'. He doesn't of course – and for the reasons that you're saying – because in the institutional framework that he works in that kind of concern is invisible [and seen as unimportant]. And yet these are the fundamental things that we should be doing. We can; but I think it is very difficult given the institutional framework. It's certainly not difficult because of geography it seems to me. It's something to do with the context in which geography works rather than just the subject itself.

Susan

Well I think you made a very good point. You said that people were picking up geographers' work and geographical ideas and crediting them with them. I've just read a book that does exactly that. I think the author is a historian and he's using geographers and using their ideas really well to make arguments that I suppose one could read as geographical but actually that's a part of what he's doing. It's there, it's acknowledged and it's working really nicely.

Rob

I just pick topics that I'm interested in and write about them and, inevitably, I write about them from a geographical perspective. But I don't necessarily foreground that. I've just finished a book on big data, and the last book was about software. I wrote about the internet and so on but it's not 'geography and the internet'. I just write about the topic. And maybe that would be a way of us approaching a lot of these things and not ending up with sticking label on it.

Roger

And it may be that, of course, these ideas are so complicated – as we said at the start – that they are not easy ideas to get across. They are fundamental but they are not necessarily very easy. And therefore maybe this process [of a diffusion of understanding of geography] is a longer process than we are assuming it could be. It won't happen overnight because we

are not saying something simple we're saying something complicated. That slow process of the gradual importation of the ideas from geography into the disciplines, the take up by the media, all of these sorts of processes are not things that happen overnight, they happen over a long time.

Sarah

Maybe that's the whole point about geography. It is such a profound discipline that you can't suddenly get everybody thinking geographically. But they will gradually think geographically with these sorts of individual projects that insinuate these ideas.

Roger

Rob One of the ways I tried to do that was with another Sage book – *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*. It was a way of saying 'Look we have these key thinkers who think about these key concepts – and we also have people outside the discipline who also think about space and place' – as a way of trying to introduce some of our most profound ideas into other disciplines. I think that has happened. There are some whom we would recognize as key geographers who will be cited way beyond the discipline – people like David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift and so on – and I think that's been quite important, I think they're important not gate keepers but door openers. I think that when people engage with David Harvey, they think of him not as a geographer, they just think of him as a very skilled social scientist.

Rob

Roger And that's very important; that inherency of geography is exactly the point isn't it.

Noel One thing we've not touched on at all which I think is a huge absence here in this conversation is the society-environment problematic. For me, this has been one of the great growth areas of past 25 years. So it's harder now I think to distinguish human geography from – OK, maybe you can distinguish it from physical geography – but from something else – the terminology might be 'environmental geography' – that kind of middle-ground. This growth of interest is happening in all sorts of different ways – the impetus being of course anthropogenic climate change which is the big driver of the turn to that kind of research – the fact that some say that we now live in the Anthropocene. So you've got a mass of research. I think it's particularly strong in the UK, but I think there's lots of it in the USA as well – on climate change adaptation, mitigation – some of it has got an urban focus, some of it has got coastal focus or looking at river basins and so on.

A very wide range of theoretical perspectives has been brought to bear from neo-Marxist through to more mainstream managerial. It's very, very exciting and people are getting on with it and doing it and often not waving flags – and that's fine. Some of it is policy relevant, some of it is purely academic but it's a really vibrant and, I think, a big strand of what we're doing now. Maybe that wasn't nearly as big nearly 25 or 30 years ago. We've got to know that and recognize that it is good.

Roger

Sarah

I think there's a number of things around us right now in which geographers are playing central roles. I suppose scholars at any time might point to what's happening right now in whatever their time is. But to have a broad-based interest in climate change – and geographers play a central role in that – the rise of big data and spatial technologies, the economy and the persistent interest in inequality, all of those are things that are critical in the contemporary world and in which human geographers are central, I think is productive for us.

Roger

We should be confident as well. We are dealing with something which is profound. We are not talking about these issues from the edge; we are actually talking about them from the centre. And I think we should always remember that and be confident in what we are doing. As you say there's no need to wave the flag about this. You do good work – and the work is bound to be good if you take the geography seriously and think imaginatively about geography. And gradually this process will, I think, have a very profound effect on the significance of geography and people's understandings of it in the wider world.

Rob

I think what's important about the climate change stuff as well is that it has brought people back into the policy sphere. For some time, it was away from the policy sphere – partly as you say because of the institutional leavers and mechanisms that push people towards a particular kind of work. Policy work fell out at the bottom – it wasn't valuable or measured and rewards were not attached to it. I think there has been a switch back into that realm. Policy makers do like geographical work – again because it's integrated and also it's grounded and it can be both instrumental and philosophical. And it also has a wide range of useful methods both from a qualitative and quantitative side and also from the GIS side of things. It provides a whole raft of useful data and ways of interpreting those data and making sense of them and then offers a view on how to fit that in to more normative considerations – what *should* we do? I don't think we shy away from normative questions but what we've done it more in the literature as opposed to doing the policy. I think the climate change work is a good example of where we started to switch back into policy.

And the crisis is also a mechanism whereby we can do that. I think that the impact [of research] agenda in UK is going to push that back in any case. The institutional levers are about to change back to teaching, back to impact and away from more abstract research. I think that will actually suit us as a discipline. We will be able to step into that realm much more easily than some of the other disciplines.

Roger

Good. And that's a very positive way to finish.