

# Introduction

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## The Importance of Space and Place

The twenty-first century has already been characterised as one defined by a series of global 'crises'. Since the turn of the millennium, we have witnessed at least three major pandemics (SARS, COVID-19 and swine flu), economic shocks and recessions, migration crises (in Europe and elsewhere) and warfare and bloodshed in Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen, as well as countless other conflicts. In world cities there is a crisis of affordability as working people struggle to secure housing, whilst racialised inequality continues to be endemic. Precarious working is the norm for many, and though technology is advancing to create a more democratic public sphere in which individual voices and minoritised populations can be heard, there are concerns that the new media remains controlled by vested interests and the global capitalist class. The super-rich appear increasingly cut off from the rest of society, insulated in new elite enclaves that are distanced from the workers their prosperity relies upon. And all the time we are reminded of an ongoing climate crisis which ultimately will displace many from their homelands but which politicians and policymakers seem unable to tackle with any degree of effectiveness or conviction.

Human geography is about all of these things – and many more besides. More so than any other social science, it offers an integrative understanding of the world that uses methods derived from both science and the humanities, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to understand how the world shapes society, and how society shapes the world. As such, it is a heterodox discipline, one not afraid to borrow ideas and methods from other disciplines. Indeed, human geographers often work with concepts and techniques derived from other social sciences – most notably, Economics, Gender Studies, Politics, and Sociology – and contribute to ongoing debates in Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Ethnic and Migration Studies, International Relations, Psychology and Urban Studies, amongst others. Many who teach and research in Geography departments were often trained in these disciplines rather than Geography *per se*.

This given, Human Geography is a highly diverse, contested and complex discipline that is often accused of lacking a clear history or identity. Yet at the heart of the human geographical 'tradition' is a particular interest in the role of space and place in the making of society. This focus on space and place, and an insistence on understanding social, economic and political processes as always

grounded in specific milieux, gives human geography its *raison d'être*. Other terms – region, environment, locale, landscape, mobility, scale – ripple out from these, but space and place are the 'building blocks' of geographical thinking. In essence, contemporary human geography develops theories about the social world in which space and place need to be taken seriously in explaining phenomena. As a discipline, it is not simply concerned with 'mapping' the distribution of human activities – though this is an important part of the discipline's methodological toolkit – rather, it takes place and space seriously as constitutive of the world, imbuing them with explanatory power.

Yet what space and place are remains a matter of debate. Not all geographers subscribe to the same definitions of these terms. For some, space and place are seen as interchangeable. Others are at pains to conceptually distinguish between space and place, though again the ways in which they are differentiated vary and have been the matter of sometimes fierce dispute. One version characterises space as objective and measurable, and place as subjective and intangible. Another describes space as nomothetic (concerning the general) and place as ideographic (concerning the specific). Yet another version sees space as progressive and open, with place as conservative and bounded. And others still, while recognising differences between space and place, emphasise their relationality and interconnectedness, viewing both as produced contingently through social relations and practices.

Moreover, both space and place are often understood through their relations to time. Geographer **Nigel Thrift**, for example, fused the concept of space with time to speak of *timespace*, recognising these as mutually constituted rather than separate but related entities. This emphasises that space is always

*becoming*, having rhythmical qualities. Place, too, has complex relations with ideas of time (and memory). For example, place can be understood as an assemblage that makes it distinctive and meaningful at a specific time only for its essence to be destroyed subsequently (through forms of 'place annihilation' that are often experienced as traumatic). Here, relational understandings of place emphasise how different places are connected through unfolding processes such as capitalism and globalisation, as in the 'progressive politics of place' approach taken by **Doreen Massey** or **Cindi Katz**, noting the capacity of places to change and alter the processes that shape them. Alternatively, place can be understood through the personal and embodied experiences that unfold over people's lives, as examined by **Yi-Fu Tuan** and **Tim Cresswell**, noting that 'sense of place' is both individual and sometimes idiosyncratic, changing over people's lifetimes.

These debates about space and place are then about more than just semantics. Space and place can be conceptualised and thought about differently, and whilst for some geographers this is not of particular concern, most think carefully about how they use these terms, with geographical theories being based on particular understandings of them. This matters because it changes the way we think about the world, and the conclusions that we draw about the processes shaping it. Take the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. As the global spread and ubiquity of this pandemic became clear, the value of a geographical perspective became obvious. Nationally compiled data on mortality and morbidity was assembled, and mapped, allowing everyone to become an 'amateur geographer', poring over data to try to understand the aetiology (i.e., the natural history) of the virus as it spread across the globe. Geographers, however, generally offered more

sophisticated analyses. Some, for example, drew on understandings of space as the surface across which the virus was transmitted, developing spatial diffusion models that could explain the pattern of spread, helping inform strategies of lockdown designed to halt its seemingly inevitable ubiquity. Others worked with a more striated view of the world, thinking about the global corridors of transmission and the networks that connect seemingly distanced places (e.g., through aeromobility), and noting the border closure strategies designed to rupture these networks, albeit only temporarily. Yet others focused more on the particular risks and exposures that occurred in specific places such as public transport hubs, supermarkets and sporting stadia, some bringing this down to the scale of the household to reveal the importance of density of living in making some more likely to become ill: see, for example, the special issues of *Dialogues in Human Geography* (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020), *Urban Studies* (Orford et al., 2023) and *Social & Cultural Geography* (Maddrell et al., 2023) for contrasting overviews. Different conceptualisations of space and place can then result in very different understandings of the world, leading us to emphasise different materialities, meanings, networks, differences, solidarities, (in)justices and (in)equalities.

## Why Key Thinkers?

There are many ways of understanding how the 'geographical tradition' has unfolded (Livingstone, 1992). One is to focus on the *sites* where geographical thought has been developed and circulated, and where it has maintained a dialogue about its form and content: the field, the lab, the lecture room, the library and so on. This would be a story of

geography's institutionalisation, and its incorporation within higher education as a legitimate sphere of study (see, for example, Berg et al., 2022). Another is to focus on geographical *technologies* and devices which allow us to see the world in different ways (Brunn et al., 2004). For example, a history can be written of the way in which the emergence of supercomputing in the 1960s led to geography's 'quantitative revolution', with statistical and mathematical conceptualisations of space leading to particular ways of modelling spatial processes. In the twenty-first century new forms of remote sensing, wearable technology, satellite technology, virtual mapping and various forms of spatial media (e.g., virtual reality, geolocated smartphone apps) allow us to see our world in new ways, again changing conceptions of space and place (Kitchin et al., 2017). Yet perhaps the dominant approach to writing the history of geography is to adopt a *paradigm* approach that considers its dominant intellectual framing and philosophy: this considers the emergence, and then decline, of successive forms of thinking that have come to be accepted as legitimate ways of understanding the world (see, for example, Johnston and Sidaway, 2016).

The paradigm model is attractive, and widely taught, as it gives the impression of order and progression: a paradigm emerges as a new way of thinking, replacing the preceding status quo in knowledge production, only for it to be critiqued and discounted. The discipline moves forward and develops, often at a fast pace. For example, many histories of geography trace a dizzying progression through the quantification of the 1950s and 1960s and the rise of a positivist paradigm (based on the scientific method and certain scientific principles such as a rejection of metaphysical questions) through a humanistic, behavioural and radical critique of positivism in the 1970s and

1980s. At this time, humanistic geographers like **Yi-Fu Tuan** rejected spatial science in favour of a more phenomenological approach to how people produce and experience space and place, and radical geographers promoted critical historical and geographical materialist approaches that challenged the predominant understanding of space as merely a backdrop for human activity. Instead, theorists of space and spatiality – in and beyond Geography – argued that space and social relations were intimately connected. **Henri Lefebvre**, for example, conceived of space as a (social) product, articulating an understanding of space as shaped by, and in turn shaping, broader social processes, such as capitalism and urbanisation. Related perspectives emerged in the work of Marxist geographer **David Harvey** and his one-time student **Neil Smith** on the uneven production of space, and also in **Milton Santos'** conception of space as an active moment. 'New' cultural geographers, such as **Denis Cosgrove**, invigorated discussions of place in the 1980s by drawing attention to relations of power, inspired by the work of cultural theorists like **Stuart Hall**. Later, a renewed focus on place as embodied brought attention to the power dynamics of embodied experiences in registers that included gender, race, class and sexuality, evident in the work of **Gill Valentine**, for example, on sexual geographies, or **Linda McDowell's** work on the gendered performativity of doing business in the City of London.

In the twenty-first century, human geography has been shaped by two major challenges. The first may be broadly understood as a move towards decolonisation that draws attention to and challenges the colonial nature of knowledge production within Geography, within the academy and within the English-speaking world. These challenges are clearly articulated by thinkers based in former

colonies in the so-called Global South, such as **Akin Mabogunje** and **Milton Santos**, and by others who emphasise the spatiality of the violence associated with colonial projects, such as **Arturo Escobar**, **Achille Mbembe** and **Eyal Weizman**. Thinkers such as **Sara Ahmed**, **Gloria Anzaldúa** and **Ruth Wilson Gilmore**, highlight the lasting legacies of colonialism in the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in diverse contexts. Other thinkers, such as **bell hooks**, **Audrey Kobayashi**, **Katherine McKittrick** and **Eve Tuck**, draw upon feminist approaches born from the experiences of those who have been or are marginalised to articulate new and liberatory epistemologies.

The second major challenge may be framed as a response to growing environmental and societal crises and a challenge to the human-centred thinking that has amplified these crises. Political ecology, advocated for by **Paul Robbins** among others, attends to nature–society relations, developing critical analyses of power relations that intersect and shape access to natural resources, while **Laura Pulido** emphasises the connections between racialisation and environmental justice. Meanwhile, more-than-human theorisations of space and place can be seen in the multi-species ethnography of **Anna Tsing**, in the 'inhuman' geography of **Kathryn Yusoff**, and in the Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies articulated by **Bawaka Country**.

Described in this way, the development of thinking on space and place is then a story of so many -isms – positivism, humanism, behaviouralism, critical realism, Marxism, feminism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, materialism, vitalism – all presented as if they are successive episodes in the discipline's development. There are of course clear limits to such an approach: it is hard to say that any given approach is

dominant at a given point in time considering the sheer diversity of ways in which geography is taught and practised globally, and suggesting that only the 'latest' knowledge is legitimate or useful often does violence to forms of scholarship that have value in the context in which they are pursued. The paradigm idea, originally developed in relation to the natural sciences, appears much less applicable in geography because of this multiplicity.

This book is designed to engage with theoretical debates in human geography but does so through a focus on certain thinkers who exercise a degree of influence over the shape and form of contemporary thinking. We do this because we believe that the *biographical approach* offers important insights into how ideas are shaped by contexts, and how those ideas in turn effect change. Following the often convoluted career paths of key thinkers offers insight into how people's theoretical discussions of space and place are shaped by ongoing (inter)disciplinary debates and may be linked to important political moments. It shows how theoretical understandings evolve, shift and change. It also highlights the connections between different thinkers, whose ideas are developed in collaboration with or in reaction to others. The biographical approach situates thinkers in geographical, social and intellectual contexts. It highlights the material realities of knowledge production (such as the political economy of the University sector, and the particular pressures on academic time which can steer them in particular directions). And it demonstrates that spatial thought is never developed in a vacuum, but is always constructed by individuals and groups of people located in particular institutional and social structures, with their own sets of personal and political beliefs. A biographical approach reveals how individual thinkers draw on a rich legacy of ideas

from past and contemporary generations. The courses they took as students, the discussions they had with peers and mentors and the texts they read have played roles in shaping their intellectual development. Similarly, key thinkers on space and place are shaped by broader political struggles that influence how they experience, think about and engage with the world.

The biographical approach is very useful for demonstrating the genealogy of intellectual ideas, revealing, for instance, the ways in which personal history affects intellectual development. For example, **Edward Said's** experiences of being born into an Arab Christian family in British-occupied Palestine, and his subsequent fight throughout his adult life for Palestinian causes, undoubtedly shaped his thinking about the relationship between culture and imperialism. Likewise, **bell hooks** has attributed her work to theorise the problems of Black patriarchy, sexism, and gender subordination, as well as her reconceptualisation of home and belonging, to her experiences of growing up as a young Black woman in Kentucky (US) during the 1950s and early 1960s. **Anssi Paasi's** thinking on regions and regional geography has been shaped by the nature of Finnish academia and his strong empirical focus on Finland, while **Jennifer Robinson's** contributions to the spatiality of theory and comparison draw from her experience of growing up in and researching South Africa, as well as her subsequent migration to the UK. A biographical approach then enables an appreciation of both the roots (origins) and routes (directions they have evolved) of thinking on space and place.

A biographical approach also helps us understand how individuals travel not just between places but also within and between academic disciplines. Many of the key thinkers on space and place included in this

collection identify, or are identified, as academic geographers, yet began their career in different disciplines or have enjoyed sojourns where they worked outside of academia. Others have never formally studied Geography, but rather have worked in other disciplinary or interdisciplinary contexts, including Architecture, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Development Studies, Education, Ethnic Studies, Literature, Planning, Political Science, Sociology, Women's Studies and Urban Studies. The fact that over half the thinkers profiled here are not conventionally defined as 'geographers' is an acknowledgement of the by now well-established centrality of spatial thinking in a wide range of disciplines.

For all the strengths of a biographical approach, it also has limitations. We are particularly mindful of the pitfalls of constructing a hagiography or perpetuating the 'great man' approach to telling the stories of academic disciplines and intellectual thought. Here, the concern is that certain individuals (most often, white, Anglophone male scholars) are singled out as having a disproportionate influence on shaping thought and approaches, while the work of others (for example, Black or female scholars, or scholars from the Global South) is marginalised and dismissed. For these reasons, it is important to acknowledge that around the world, not every thinker has access to formal education or to the institutions that constitute academia and that, even among those who do, there are vast inequalities in opportunity and access to resources (including language) that still shape who gets considered to be among the ranks of 'key thinkers'. Moreover, concepts are usually developed by several people working in concert or competition, engaging and critiquing each other's ideas, while also drawing on a rich intellectual heritage. Indeed, it should be clear from the cross-referencing between

entries that no theorist develops their view of the world in an intellectual vacuum. Ideas develop across thinkers and generations and charting these connections reveals a genealogy of thinking. For example, **Gillian Rose's** ideas about the privileging of male ways of conceiving of space and place have been heavily influenced by psychoanalytic and post-structural writing. One major source of inspiration was the works of the feminist philosopher **Judith Butler**. Judith Butler, in turn, while again drawing from a diverse set of philosophical texts, has extensively utilised the writings of **Michel Foucault**. Likewise, when developing his critical philosophy, Foucault was influenced by (amongst others) the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Of course, Gillian Rose's thinking is not the end point in this lineage but is rather a node in a complex web of interconnections, and it is no surprise that her ideas are cited as influential sources in other entries. Equally, it is important to challenge the exclusions and marginalisations of the past by acknowledging a wider range of key thinkers and their significance, such as **J.K. Gibson-Graham, Richa Nagar, Kathryn Yusoff** and **Bawaka Country** who actively seek to co-create knowledge in collaboration with others both within and beyond the academy.

Though not all would agree with the list of 'key thinkers' profiled in this book, the chapters capture, we feel, the exciting reorientation of the discipline of Geography towards new forms of knowledge production in the last decade, as well as the expanded register of spatial thinking that has emerged in relation to crucial societal challenges. We hope that each entry inspires you to explore the references and develop your own take on the varied geographical imaginations deployed by these key thinkers on space and place.

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