

Commentary

Battleground geographies and conspiracy theories: a response to Johnston (2006)

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Introduction

In *Thinking Geographically* (Hubbard *et al.* 2002), a student-centred guide to the theoretical landscape of human geography, we began by noting the different ways of writing geography's histories. One way, we suggested, was to present the disciplinary landscape as a battlefield populated by warring factions, each led by totemic figureheads who fire intellectual potshots at one another in the attempt to overwhelm other forms of geographical thinking. While alliances may be drawn, and truces occasionally brokered, the overwhelming picture is one of intellectual spats, simmering resentments and outright hostility between those situated in different 'camps'. In short, if we follow this metaphor through, we reach the conclusion that geography is a discipline riven by division, with the clash of personalities and intellectual positions manifest in constant battles. Even when the war is seemingly won, and a particular way of thinking becomes dominant, civil wars break out, and the cycle of violence begins again.

In 'The politics of changing human geography's agenda', published in *Transactions* in 2006 (vol. 31 no. 3), Ron Johnston sets out a model of disciplinary change which positions textbooks as a key part of the armoury employed by those who would battle for students' minds. His argument is for a situated political analysis of what textbooks set out to achieve, and a subsequent consideration of their effects on the production of geographical knowledge (via an exploration of how they present Geography's diverse theoretical traditions). By implication, he suggests that there is a need to explore how textbooks *convert*

students to think in specific ways, and subsequently mobilise them as 'foot soldiers' fighting for particular ways of thinking geographically.

Johnston's primary focus is the contribution of spatial science to the practices of human geography and its apparent emaciation in contemporary human geography textbooks, in particular *Approaching Human Geography*, *Introducing Human Geographies* and *Envisioning Human Geographies* by Cloke *et al.* (1991 1999 2004), *Thinking Geographically* and *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* by Hubbard *et al.* (2002 2004) and *Thinking Space* by Crang and Thrift (2000). In each case, Johnston argues that these texts marginalise spatial science and associated packages of positivist thought, and serve the interests of those allied to other traditions of geographic thought, whether structural, post-structural or otherwise 'radical'.

Notwithstanding obvious criticisms of geography's frequent introspection, there is clearly much to be gained by reflecting on practices of writing geography's histories. In this regard, Johnston's analysis usefully extends debates about the production and reproduction of geographical knowledge by eschewing the normal focus on monographs, papers and keynote conference presentations to consider textbooks. We concur that textbooks are characterised by silences, absences and biases which deserve to be noted, acknowledged and, in some circumstances, rectified. As Johnston argues, all textbooks are both mirror and mould of contemporary syllabi, and do not simply reflect the *status quo*. But in this short Commentary, we want to suggest Johnston's analysis is considerably undermined by his apparent devotion to a 'battlefield' metaphor and the related notion that textbook

authors are seeking to attack particular approaches to promote their particular way of thinking. As such, in this brief response we want to advance a more productive and balanced assessment of the 'politics of Geography', and demonstrate that Johnston's own view of geography as battleground leads him to draw possibly erroneous conclusions about the role of textbooks in shaping the discipline.

Setting the record straight

The dominant theme of Johnston's article is that of 'setting the record straight' by highlighting how a set of human geography textbooks have produced partial and partisan histories of human geography. His basic line of argument is that these books, and by conjecture their authors, are virulently anti-spatial science and, what is more, that they are engaged in a thinly-disguised attempt to secure resources and gain power by deploying a set of tactics; that is to say, their authors have an explicit political agenda and *limiting* intentions. Two of our own books (Hubbard *et al.* 2002 2004) are discussed alongside a limited range of texts written and edited principally by UK-based geographers.

Quite why Johnston alights on the texts he discusses is unclear, given all textbooks no doubt have their silences and absences (how could it be otherwise?); suffice to say, he selectively quotes from his chosen texts to develop an argument that they downplay the contribution of spatial science and/or quantification (and here it should be noted that Johnston makes no distinction between spatial science and quantification, despite the fact that many geographers employ quantitative method without subscribing to the tenets of spatial science). Ultimately, Johnston appears to believe that the (no-doubt) thorough treatment of spatial science in his own works (e.g. Johnston 1986; Johnston and Sidaway 2004) means that he is one of a few select commentators able to step outside the 'battleground' of human geography to construct a fair and objective history of the discipline. As such, Johnston presents the textbooks he reviews as 'Other' to his own objective and exhaustive reviews of the discipline (i.e. as partial, simplified, distorted). To demonstrate this, he seeks to expose the tactics that academic writers use when seeking to persuade readers as to the merits of their ideas over those of others: denigration, critique, dismissal, silencing, accommodation and misrepresentation.

In his consideration of the politics of textbooks, Johnston suggests tactics of misrepresentation are

particularly important. For Johnston, this equates to textbooks presenting a duplicitous account of geography's disciplinary landscape. For example, rather than the reader being presented with arguments for a variety of approaches, coherently and clearly set out, one set of arguments is consistently misrepresented. This is not the power of debate, but a tactic of propaganda. Johnston argues there are several modes of misrepresentation that can be deployed, including quoting out of context, factual errors, misdirection, misinterpretation, and guessing supposition or intention. Unfortunately, the tactic of misrepresentation is, in its many guises, one Johnston uses extensively throughout his article, one he resorts to because his evidence is too weak to support his argument otherwise.

Misrepresentation of material

Thinking Geographically is criticised by Johnston for only grudgingly acknowledging spatial science and overemphasising 'newer approaches'. Given this 'partial' coverage, Johnston feels students are not being given the full picture, and cannot make informed choices about the particular strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. And yet, *Thinking Geographically* never set out to provide a 'full' picture. Rather it is a book about the utility of different theories designed to illustrate to students why they should engage with theory. The first three chapters of the book provide an introduction to theory, a short history of geographic thought, and an overview of contemporary approaches and debates in order to provide context for the rest of the book. The next five chapters centre on five particular concepts (the body, texts, money, the state and globalisation) to show how each has been approached through different theoretical frameworks. This range of concepts is used to demonstrate that alternative theories lead to quite different ways of thinking about the same object of study; for example, in the chapter on money we contrast classical notions of money as unit of exchange with Marxist notions of exchange value and post-structuralist emphases on economies of signs and symbols. In this case, we say relatively little about the value of feminist, queer or post-colonial theories as they might be deployed in economic geography; however, such theories are highlighted in the chapter on the body. As such, each chapter is selective, yet the value of positivist, quantitative and scientific approaches are noted at various junctures (so that, for example, in the chapter on

the body we discuss the biomedical model of the body and also explore some of the ways bodies may be enumerated via quantitative approaches). If this book is to be accused of only grudgingly admitting spatial science, it is also equally guilty of partial coverage of structuration approaches, critical realism, feminism, queer theory, subaltern studies, behaviouralism, humanism, post-structuralism, actor network theory, regulationism, post-colonial approaches, Marxism, political economy and non-representational theory. But then it never set out to comprehensively document the historical development of these approaches within the discipline or to systematically compare and contrast them.

The co-edited text *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* is also criticised by Johnston, principally for not including enough spatial scientists as a proportion of the overall total. Johnston identifies five inclusions among the 52 entries. A significant proportion of post-war Anglo-American human geography has been in the spatial science idiom. But given the book explicitly states that it did not seek to profile a representative range of disciplinarians, but rather a selection of thinkers to cover the wide diversity of approaches that have characterised post-war geography, just under 10 per cent being spatial scientists sounds entirely reasonable (and many others profiled have worked with quantitative method). To have produced a book where the majority of those profiled had developed the concepts and methodology of spatial science – as Johnston would perhaps have wished us do – would have failed in our aim of introducing students to a range of thinkers who have changed the ways we think about space and place. Further, if we had not included thinkers from across the social sciences and humanities – which Johnston also criticises us for – we would have failed to demonstrate to students that many important ideas about space and place originate beyond the discipline. Given the intention was not to produce a biographical dictionary of human geography, we feel that many of Johnston's claims about our tactics of dismissal are misplaced (for a further discussion of the selection criteria in this book, see Boyle 2005; Hubbard *et al.* 2005).

Johnston also claims that the introduction to *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* denigrates the contributions of spatial scientists, quoting Hubbard *et al.* (2004, 2); however, our quote is taken out of context, and in fact simply states that notions of absolute space have, for many geographers, been supplanted by notions that space is socially produced. There

was no implication here that work underpinned by the methods and concepts of spatial science is any less valuable because it holds to an objective or scientific conception of space. As we detail in our text, the quantitative revolution has also been described as geography's theoretical revolution, and the conceptualisation of geography as a science underpinned by a positivist philosophy remains an important touchstone for many researchers (see Fotheringham 2006; Kitchin 2006). Spatial science is, as Johnston would attest, thriving, with much significant work being undertaken in that idiom. Nonetheless, we do contend that spatial science is not as dominant as it once was and other approaches have emerged, often as a reaction to or outgrowth of spatial science approaches. To make this kind of observation is not to be anti-spatial science – it is to celebrate the theoretical diversity of contemporary human geography (an argument and strategy developed at greater length in Kitchin and Sidaway 2006). Just because spatial science has featured large in the post-war development of human geography does not mean that it should receive proportional treatment when discussing the history and philosophy of *contemporary* human geography.

Misrepresentation of viewpoint

This section presents an examination of the politics of 'anti-spatial science'. (Johnston 2006, 291)

The main argument Johnston presents is that the texts he analyses are anti-spatial science, and since they mobilise support for a new agenda, so too must be the authors/editors. For the authors of this response to be labelled as anti-spatial science is somewhat surprising. Hubbard has published papers based on analyses of census data, police crime figures and questionnaire surveys, and argued vehemently for the value of quantitative approaches in social geography (Hubbard 1999). Kitchin undertakes a wide range of quantitative and mapping research and was instrumental in helping to establish a National Centre for Geocomputation, is a lead investigator on a cross-border regional research observatory project, and has published several papers on spatial statistics! In fact, his last paper written prior to this Commentary was on data interoperability and the modifiable areal unit problem (Gleeson *et al.* 2007). To be sure, we would both be critical of the implicit philosophy underpinning much quantitative geography and the relative lack of engagement of quantitative geographers

with wider philosophical debate (see Kitchin 2006). But we are not anti-spatial science, rather favouring critically framed quantitative geography as exemplified by Mei-Po Kwan (2002), Nadine Schurmann (2006) and others.

Misrepresentation of intent

Thinking Geographically and *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* were written as pedagogic texts, intended to help students engage with theory and to understand the work theory does in the world. Johnston's argument is that they also had an equally strong intention, that of mobilising support, power and resources for ourselves and the kinds of geography we favour. In order to do this we supposedly employed the political tactics of misrepresentation, critique and silencing, and in so doing advocated a geography that is avowedly anti-spatial science and post-positivist. Johnston's attempt to position these texts as part of a larger programme of change suggests this is part of a well-organised and coherently-planned strategy to reframe geographical thought and research. It seems remarkable to us that never once in the article is our agenda detailed. We are only ever told what it is not – spatial science. Presumably, this means we are promoting all number of incommensurable approaches to the discipline. It is unclear to us how power and resources can be mobilised across such a wide agenda – especially when this agenda contains many approaches that would be extremely uncomfortable bedfellows. We are thus prompted to ask: what is the hegemony within the discipline that is supposedly being created through our texts?

We are not going to deny that our texts are political in their nature – inevitably, they are (see next section). However, to argue that both books were intended to recreate geography in our own image and to mobilise support for an anti-spatial science agenda is a leap of imagination. Johnston's selective reading and citation of his chosen texts means he jumps to erroneous conclusions about the intentions underpinning their production. The problem stems from inferring intention from a narrow base of evidence and the fact that Johnston reads supposed silences as *deliberate* attempts to lead students away from particular approaches. Can any omission be regarded as an attempt at silencing? If a text fails to discuss the contribution of queer theory to the geographical canon is it homophobic? Should every single article on a topic be cited whenever one is discussing it for fear of silencing

someone? Clearly choosing thinkers for *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* was a political exercise (see review forum in *Environment and Planning A* 37 161–87), but to argue that certain thinkers were excluded because we were seeking to inculcate students into a particular way of thinking is to read too much into the processes of editing.

In simple terms, no text can be exhaustive. All authors or editors make decisions about what may or may not be included, albeit rarely in circumstances of their own choosing (e.g. proposals are refereed and commissioning editors/publishers influence style and content). In our own work, we have set out the criteria for inclusion and exclusion as clearly as possible, noting when lack of space precludes a more fulsome discussion and steering students towards appropriate supplementary reading (also see Hubbard *et al.* 2005). This is not to say that omissions from textbooks are never deliberate attempts by authors to silence particular viewpoints. It is to say, however, that any suppositions concerning omissions need to be framed within a wider context and be subject to careful scrutiny, otherwise they are merely conjecture. And omission can never be simply read as silencing.

Without the requisite consideration of authorial intention, Johnston's argument becomes rather like a conspiracy theory. As in most conspiracy theories, a series of 'facts' are presented to support a wider argument that has narrative appeal and a seeming veracity. Yet surmising intentionality is an extremely difficult task, and Johnston's assertion that silences speak volumes cannot be taken as sufficient evidence of a conspiracy against spatial science. From our own perspective, we hence feel that Johnston's selective reading of two texts leads him to infer agenda-setting and career-based intentions that simply do not stand up to scrutiny.

The politics of textbooks (*redux*)

In an idealized world, where all options are treated equally valid, introductory textbooks . . . should set out all the options and leave readers to determine which they should follow if they are to become disciplinary practitioners. (Johnston 2006, 292)

Johnston's argument that some authors are deliberately marginalising spatial science through the writing of partial, simplified and distorted textbooks is one that he supports through a selective content analysis of contemporary textbooks. But not all texts are apparently open to this sort of

'political' scrutiny. Indeed, Johnston's (2006, 294) article begins by arguing that some textbooks are 'implicated in the politics of agenda-changing' but 'most are not'; likewise, he contends 'all textbooks are necessarily partial to some extent . . . some are much less (and deliberately) so than others' (Johnston 2006, 298). For him, textbooks are either neutral pedagogic texts or agenda-driven, power-seeking texts. The former are characterised by openness, plurality, non-prescription, objectivity and are non-judgmental; they are books that apparently cover all views, considering the pros and cons of different approaches without seeking to influence directly the worldview of readers. The latter in contrast, are characterised by closure, narrowness, prescription; ideologically-riven, they seek to mould students in a formative sense by telling students how they should think and act. The former are positioned as preferable, because they do not police the margins of the discipline but *stretch* them.

We wonder what texts Johnston would place in the former category? *Geography and Geographers* perhaps (Johnston and Sidaway 2004)? *Philosophy and Human Geography* (Johnston 1986)? *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Johnston et al. 2002)? To suggest the textbooks Johnston critiques are any more political, biased or agenda-seeking than his own attempts to document and historicise the discipline is to miss the point that all texts come with a point of view (and we might note here that Johnston's own attempts at writing the histories of geography have themselves been accused of excluding particular forms of knowledge production in the interests of presenting a bounded and *disciplined* account – see Eyles and Lee 1982; Sibley 1995). Hence, we might follow Johnston's lead by noting the forms of post-positivist geographical enquiry that he fails to discuss, and suggest this is because of his own desire to position spatial science as the core of (institutionalised) human geography. Perhaps more unfairly, we might quote extensively from the multiple editions of Johnston's own texts aimed at students to suggest that his own work explicitly promotes spatial science. Johnston would of course counter that his own works are based on tactics of accommodation and unity, but as he notes, these are still tactics through which disciplinary change occurs. As such, there can be little doubt that Johnston's books have – inadvertently or otherwise – played a vital role in opening students' eyes to particular ways of doing geography, while foreclosing other avenues.

Ultimately, we are thus deeply disappointed with the scope and tenor of Johnston's paper, and would have hoped for more from a scholar who has made major efforts to conceptualise the production of geographical knowledge. Indeed, while Bruno Latour's four-stage model of mobilisation, autonomisation, building alliances and public representation offers a potentially useful heuristic for considering disciplinary change, Johnston deploys this model in a rather mechanistic manner, alleging academics consciously and aggressively seek to maximise their career potential by working through these four sequential phases. Such a formulation surely places too much emphasis on the agency of individual academics in what is, as Latour's work notes, a complex network of *actants* (individuals, departments, conferences, associations, study groups, reading groups, research clusters, mailing lists, articles, books, newsletters, etc.). Johnston hence falls into the trap of assuming that academic 'movements' are plotted and performed by key individuals (who, in time, become key disciplinary gatekeepers). Accounts which focus exclusively on the power possessed by individual academics (see also Short 2002) are doomed to failure because they assume that individuals hold and wield power and are able to make the discipline in their own image. As such, Johnston's own account of the so-called 'quantitative revolution' is one that places much emphasis on the charisma of certain personalities rather than revealing the situated messiness of geographical praxis and the relational networks across which geography operates.

In contrast, Barnes' (2004) accounts of regional science suggest the quantitative revolution was a set of multiple, overlapping, interwoven, sometimes competing and contradictory stories all shaped by hundreds of individual paths, luck, accident, networks and coincidences; it was not set to someone's grand plan and it was not inevitable given the tactics employed. To be sure, those pioneering quantitative methods in the discipline may have shared certain ideas and ideals, but to suggest it was a coherent movement led by key individuals is arguably a conceit of those who later sought to document the 'movement'. That is not to deny that individual geographers have been hugely important in the development of new ideas (as our *Key Thinkers* book testifies), and ascended to powerful positions, but these geographers are not fully autonomous and their power is relational not absolute. From this perspective, individuals are afforded power

by a network of contingencies, but in and of themselves do not possess power (see Allen 2003).

Consequently, Johnston's suggestion that there is a coterie of geographers who are actively and deliberately conspiring to denigrate spatial science to further their own power base in the discipline is based on a restricted and partial understanding of how disciplines work. Moreover, such interpretations grate with Johnston's own assertion that the discipline is an open and exciting place to be. Certainly, even within the constrained institutional landscape of geography in UK HEIs, there are hundreds of different individuals and research groups working on different foci, using and developing different approaches. There may be seemingly identifiable turns and fads – for example, recent engagements with post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, the non-representational, the affective – but these 'turns' contain many competing voices. None could be labelled as a movement with an explicit agenda to make the rest of Geography in its image. In reality, collaborations, turns and fads are contingent, relational and non-teleological. They are fluid and unpredictable complexities, open to coincidences, full of contradictions and paradoxes, and are extremely messy unfoldings at best. Turns and fads are always out of control, and people cannot be impelled to join and follow. One could try as hard as one likes, but that does not mean people will either listen or like what they hear.

Johnston is right, of course, to suggest that academics have ambition. Texts are written to be read, to sell, to make money, and, yes, to influence students and peers. But academic careers unfold more haphazardly than his reading implies, with any attempt to mobilise resources to support a particular masterplan inevitably thwarted by the messy contingencies of institutional geography; by happenstance and serendipity; by family moves and personal tragedies. Indeed, one of the key arguments in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* was to show that those whose ideas are respected and engaged with (and who hence often occupy positions responsible for resource allocation, such as editors, society officers, research funding body members, heads of departments, vice chancellors) follow career paths that are rarely predictable, and often surprisingly disjointed. Even if our 'key thinkers' did plan to become the spokesperson for a particular type of geography, it is highly unlikely that their plan unfolded in the way they hoped; most never set out with such grand ambitions.

Putting it bluntly, we cannot see any basis for Johnston's claim that there is a masterplan to persuade human geography to forget spatial science; there is no coherent movement, there are no leaders. If there has been any move away from spatial science, this has been a gradual turning, made over several decades by numerous geographers developing and being influenced by many different post-positivist philosophies. Geography textbooks may be part of this process, but so too are the conversations geographers have with one another in coffee rooms and bars, the conference papers they hear, the seminars they attend, the papers they read. In many instances, discussions with those outside geography, or beyond the academy, may also have been significant (and here we note that Johnston holds to a hermetic notion of a bounded discipline). And when we consider textbooks, it is clear that students are exposed to *multiple* books, with these texts forming only one aspect of a student's education, along with other readings and lectures, practicals, tutorials, fieldtrips and so on that are taught by a variety of lecturers and professors who work across different specialisms, have contrasting worldviews, and have varying preferred ways of doing Geography. Students' geographical knowledge then emerges from a range of influences, including texts and individuals who favour spatial science, and not isolated textbooks. Given this, we would argue that it is simply impossible to imagine that one geographer – or even a collective – could possibly mobilise this diffuse activity to push the geographical agenda in a desired direction.

Given Johnston's paper fails to recognise the sheer complexity of knowledge production in human geography, we might ask if there is a more productive way of researching the 'politics of Geography'? While it is certainly difficult to document the messy, complicated networks that bind Geography through contingent and relational processes, understanding the development of geographical research, and the role of textbooks, requires a form of empirical research that extends well beyond the cursory and perfunctory content analysis which Johnston offers. Johnston himself notes that books are 'mutable mobiles', implying that manifest content or authorial intentionality cannot simply be 'read off' from the text. As such, a politicised account of geography textbooks would require an understanding of how writing collaborations are founded, negotiated, nurtured and maintained; a systematic analysis of how such books emerge from complex interactions between people, ideas and things; and a consideration of how books are marketed, consumed and used. In

relation to the latter, perhaps the key question concerns not what a book says, but what it *does*. Without any consideration of the way textbooks are enrolled in disciplinary networks, it is simply impossible to say anything about their role in effecting change. As such, Johnston's analysis not only reaches false conclusions about the intentionality of a range of authors, it also posits an untenable one-way relationship between author, text and audience.

Conclusions

In this piece we have responded in what we hope is a constructive manner to Johnston's provocative paper. As we have suggested, an uncharitable reading of Johnston's article is that it represents a deliberate attempt to denigrate competing texts and to promote his own claims to have documented *the* recent history of human geography. More generously, perhaps, we can read Johnston's paper as a call for the authors of student texts to think as critically about what they don't write as about what they do. He is right, of course, to note that students' limited exposure to particular forms of geography will influence the directions that future geography will take, yet this influence is not as straightforward as Johnston implies. Furthermore, Johnston's paper clearly implies that he feels able to offer a dispassionate account of the discipline, and is somehow above the careerism and selfishness that he alleges drives other geographers to write their 'unbalanced' accounts. In this sense, it is ironic that Johnston starts his paper with Eric Sheppard's apt warning that 'human geographers [make progress] . . . by standing on the faces of others'. Johnston may imagine himself as the neutral arbiter who is able to step outside the ideological skirmishes that he suggests beleaguer human geography, but his paper suggests that he is more than ready to pick a fight with anyone who offers an alternative reading of the discipline than his own. Round two, anyone?

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