

Re-placing the Past?

Richard H. Schein

...it is essential to try to make clear at the beginning what it is that we wish to teach and learn. This need is real and great for two reasons: first, there is much popular lack of precision in the definition of the field of geography and, secondly, the historical geographer in particular must have the geographer's purpose and design always in mind if he [sic] is to use historical material successfully.¹

There really is no shortage of theoretical and methodological statements about the practice of historical geography. Certainly every major figure in the (sub)discipline, broadly defined, has felt constrained or moved at some moment to commit to paper the foundational theoretical premises and subsequently defined “methods” of the craft, or to at least ruminate about some of the more vexing philosophical underpinnings of scholarship in historical geography.² There are those who eschew such philosophical introspection of course. I suspect they would rather simply “get on” with the business of interrogating past places. But it is precisely against such naïve empiricism that the tradition of methodological reflection within historical geography is (and has been) aimed. Methodology in its broadest understanding is not simply about method—or perhaps more specifically, technique—but encompasses questions of epistemology and, ultimately, ontology, to which method, or technique, is inextricably linked.

The essays that follow below may be seen as part of a longstanding conversation, or as part of a scholarly tradition that is recognized as historical geography and concerned with the manner in which it is practiced. These contributions to that conversation originated when Matthew Kurtz and Katherine Jones, Ph.D. candidates in geography at the University of Kentucky, organized two sessions on methodology and power for the April 2000 national meetings of the Association of American Geographers (AAG). Their call for participants took its cue from the Historical Geography Research Group

Richard H. Schein is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. *Historical Geography*, Volume 29 (2001): 7-13.

of the Institute of British Geographers, which previously had organized conference sessions along the same theme. Kurtz and Jones suggested the following potential topics for cohering the sessions:

- *Elision: the frequent truncation of subaltern voices from public records*
- *Collection: constructions of the archive*
- *Categorization: constituting similarity/difference in organizing/collecting materials*
- *Periodization: the politics of representing continuity/change in narratives*
- *Obscuration: regarding concealing the identities of vulnerable informants*
- *Relation: dynamics between disempowered communities and scholarly/historical praxis*
- *Misprision: defining and practicing graft as situated public professionals*
- *Representation: strategies regarding “recovering” voices in the past*
- *Persuasion: institutional contexts vis-à-vis “evidence”*

These are, of course, broad and somewhat vaguely defined topics, divorced here from their intellectual genealogies (which range from post-colonial studies to feminist theory to Marxian analysis to critical social theory). The topics stand as abstractions that can be appropriated in many ways. Nevertheless, they signal a certain engagement with contemporary critical and reflexive scholarly practice across the social sciences and the humanities and thus in some ways represent new directions in, and perhaps even a break in tradition for, historical geography more generally. A glimpse of those new directions may perhaps be seen in the phrasing of the call for papers that linked “methodology and power in the practice of historical geography.” While historical geographers have always written about power, it generally has been in the sense of power in or upon the landscape—the power to shape land and life, the specifics of colonial or imperial power, and so on. The direct link here between power and our own scholarly practice draws upon several intellectual roots, most notably Foucauldian ones, and claims that power and methodology are at least imbricated, and that issues of power are inevitable through methodology in the practice of historical geographical scholarship. Thus, the session organizers were able to suggest a post-positivist turn in, or perhaps to, historical geography. They noted in the call for papers that “historical geography has come to face some exciting challenges at the millennium as post-positivist geographers turn more frequently to a ‘historical geography’ approach for their research design and presentations.”

A session on post-positivist methodology may suggest a “paradigm shift” in the practice of historical geography. But a methodological departure, even a radical one, is not necessarily a break with tradition. Too often, the notion of

“tradition” itself is essentialized or naturalized to the point that our telling of core (sub)disciplinary narratives elides the normal course of challenge or change to dominant scholarly practices, whether methodological or in terms of “substantive” or empirical focus. Alan Baker once noted in an essay titled “On Ideology and Historical Geography” that “no scholarly discipline or philosophy remains static and each reflects the cumulative complexity of the conditions of its conception and maturation.”³ One could, then, claim that a post-positivist methodological turn for historical geography reflected the process of maturation of the (sub)discipline; that much of what follows in this collection of essays and individual statements stems from just such cumulative complexity. At the risk of promoting a teleological historiography for an often disparate (sub)discipline, it is only honest to note that many of the ideas presented in the following essays are at least foreshadowed in the annals of historical geography. This is especially true since the early 1970s, when attention to methodological issues followed a burgeoning of scholarly interest in historical geography more generally. That decade, for example, saw the founding of both the *Journal of Historical Geography* and this journal’s predecessor, and a number of landmark volumes incorporating attention to the (sub)discipline and its practice as well as substantive writings on particular empirical cases.⁴

If there is a break with tradition afoot (not just in the essays that follow, but in other publishing venues as well), then it may perhaps lie not only in a methodological turn, but in the manner of who is defined and defines themselves as a historical geographer. I recall a meeting more than 10 years ago of the Historical Geography Specialty Group at the AAG wherein the members in attendance were perplexed as to the dramatic rise in (voluntary) membership of the specialty group, which could be joined simply by ticking the appropriate box on the AAG membership application form and submitting a small fee. There seemed to be, according to the meeting, more historical geographers than “we” were training. The members present asked, “Who were these folks?” I suggested at the time that the reason for the membership rise we were seeing was a “coming to time” of many in the discipline, as geographers at large were redefining some of their fundamental conceptions of space, place, and landscape through ideas about the social construction of space. In particular, the turn to historically geographically specific explorations of the production of space, especially as part of our discipline’s critical reflection upon the “project of modernity,” were engendering not only the “reassertion of space in critical social theory,” to borrow a phrase, but also demanded attention to the *long duree*.⁵ What the following essays may represent is a broadening of what constitutes “historical geography” *per se*. We are witnessing an increase in the attraction, even in the considered importance, of the place of the past in geographical understanding and interpretation, as well as the attraction and importance of past places.

We might approach the following essays as part of a time-honored tradition, namely a sometimes-reluctant, introspective methodological inventory taking. And in that introspection, there is the potential here for a radical re-

thinking through the posing of alternative and perhaps competing epistemic frameworks for historical geographical practice; that is, some claims for a kind of historical geography that might be unrecognizable to many in the discipline. At first glance, there are those who might dismiss some of the topics suggested by the session organizers as arcane, esoteric, and jargon ridden—unnecessarily obfuscatory in the use of language. One does not have to travel far in the halls of the academy or the meeting rooms of national and international geography conferences on several continents before disparaging comments about the jargon of social theory can be heard. This may be especially true of historical geographers. But the message of post-positivist social theory is, in part, that language is never transparent and that language inevitably carries the burden of representation regardless of implicit or explicit statements regarding theory and methodology. And in the long run, there is a challenge to dominant paradigms—to use a somewhat hackneyed term—underway here; any such paradigm challenge/shift inevitably requires a new language, or as Jonathan Smith has written, the beauty of the interrogation often lies in the “slightly different thing which is said.”⁶

This small contribution to ongoing discussions of methodology and historical geography can thus be seen as part of the (reinvigorated and reclaimed) dynamism of historical geography in practice—a re-placing of historical geography. That claim of re-placing carries a double meaning in the sense of bringing to historical geography both the theoretical and methodological debates of post-positivist scholarship, as well as the bringing to historical geography a number of self-identified scholars who may not recognize the traditions of Carl Sauer, Clifford Darby, Fred Kniffen, or Andrew Clark or even (for example) Alan Baker, Robin Butlin, Cole Harris, Don Meinig, Jeanne Kay, Carville Earle, or Mona Domosh. Nevertheless, these self-identified scholars have a contribution to make to the practice and definition of the (sub)discipline and are central indeed to the very existence of a relevant and timely historical geography. There are longstanding debates about the “separatism” or provincialism of historical geography versus its posited once and future place as central to the practice of geographical scholarship more broadly and, by implication, to the greater concerns of the social sciences and the humanities.⁷ Trends afoot suggest that as part of geography’s reassertion of the centrality of space, place, and landscape to social processes, historical geography is poised to contribute a sense of the past in the themes that pervade contemporary geographic thought. In the United States, at least, this might signal a move beyond a historiography based in large part upon hagiography toward one more grounded in central theoretical, methodological, and empirical concerns of the discipline, and the social sciences and humanities as well. There may be, in short, a rapprochement of sorts underway, undertaken by newly self-described historical geographers interrogating the past in relation to and as a part of the present, and future, of geographical scholarship.

There are a number of thematic inquiries wherein historical geographers, especially in the last 20 years, have engaged larger debates in the social sciences

and the humanities. One need only peruse the section headings of Butlin's 1993 book as well as the pages of the journals to see the centrality of debates about environmental histories, symbolic landscapes, questions of imperialism and colonialism, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization to briefly name a few; or to find as well as a concern for methodological history and methodological practice.⁸ Or scan the progress reports written by Miles Ogborn throughout the 1990s for connections between historical geography and landscape, memory, geographies of knowledge, modernity, empire, environmental history, and heritage.⁹ And, after all, historical geographers might claim the likes of David Harvey and Derek Gregory and Denis Cosgrove as well as Don Meinig or Earle or Baker or Domosh. Such themes emerge, in part, in the essays in this volume of *Historical Geography*. Given the session organizers' charge, however, it is not surprising that questions of power are foremost among the methodological concerns raised throughout—the power to write history and geography, the power of the archive, in both its “presences” and its absences, the power of the researcher to define and guide the study, or to tease from reluctant records the “other” side of past power relationships, the lack of power on the part of colonial subjects who are often the subject of historical geography, or the attempt to read the power of agency and resistance into their actions.

Empirically, the following essays are diverse, and in fact they fall into two categories by design. The first five essays were presented as abbreviated (in the interests of time, at the AAG meetings, and space, in these pages) versions of larger research projects. They also happen to be written by younger scholars who have newly professed affiliations with the (sub)discipline of historical geography. Their projects are not presented here primarily as empirical research contributions to their respective substantive literatures (such as racialized southern cities or the playground movement in America) but as grounded examples of particular sets of methodological problems. Thus, we can read through real cases about many methodological concerns, many of them imbricated, and many of them reappearing repeatedly in the following pages in various guises. The explicitly research-based essays by Laura Cameron, Liz Gagen, Jim Hanlon, Matthew Kurtz, and Jamie Winders explore, among many other issues, the notion that the traditional archival concerns of the historical geographer might be enriched through oral history methodologies as in the case of a dream from the Sigmund Freud Archives; postcolonial methodologies to engage the representational politics of the archives toward a better sense of children's agency in the past; how many of the traditional data sources of the historical geographer—fire insurance maps, city directories, deed records, oral histories, city maps—elide the presence of subaltern voices, as their presence is also erased from the cultural landscape; the actual practice of “archiving” and its direct implication with questions of societal representation and power explored through the specific archive of a small New England historical society; the boundaries between insider and outsider as methodologically defined by the practices of traditional social science through the voice of a woman

who does not want to be a part of the researcher's project. Along the way, of course, any number of subthemes are raised with import for the practice of historical geography.

The second set of essays, five in total, derive from panelists' comments at the AAG sessions. "Seasoned veterans" of historical geographical research were asked to reflect upon the practice of historical geography, drawing more comprehensively, yet no less rigorously, upon a set of research agendas and experiences. These essays really are almost methodological notes or commentaries, and capture issues on the minds of the essayists at the time they were asked to join the panel session (and the authors were far more restricted in page space, and encouraged to focus on only an idea or two). These "methodological notes" were written by Mona Domosh, Jim Duncan, Peter Goheen, Heidi Nast, and Karen Till. Their concerns, too, result from varied empirical experiences, and are meant to raise methodological questions as much as answer them. Many of the panelists address the archive as socially produced and thoroughly embedded in particular social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. They speculate on the possibilities of alternative readings of archival materials, readings that work against re-inscribing the dominant categories of longstanding power relationships such as that between colonizer and colonized, or in the context of burgeoning imperialisms, colonialisms, and nationalisms. Several raise the possibility of collaborative research, not only in the traditional scholarly sense of two (or more) academics working together, but as in working with our "subjects." They are concerned about presentism. In some cases there are conscious attempts to link with the concerns of earlier generations of historical geographers (as in a discussion of a re-formulated sense of the diffusion concept, or attention paid to the importance of the visual, especially in the landscape tradition); in others there are posited radical breaks with past practice. There are concerns raised about the audience for our work, as well as the (re)identification of core (sub)disciplinary research foci. In short, the panelists' comments are wider ranging, but like the longer essays that precede them, they are not presented here as the last word. Rather, they are presented here as part of a longstanding and ongoing conversation, albeit one that has taken many different directions over the years, and will undoubtedly take a few more in our lifetimes. But the conversation is the final goal. One of the underlying lessons of a post-positivist turn in the human sciences is that we are not necessarily always in search of definitive statements or interpretations or analyses, but are seeking open conversations, ongoing discourses in which ideas can always be broached and discussed without threat of (fore)closure.

Notes

1. J.B. Mitchell, *Historical Geography* (London: The English Universities Press LTD, 1954): 1.
2. See, for example, D. Brooks Green, *Historical Geography: A Methodological Portrayal* (Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991) for a compilation of such examples.
3. A.R.H. Baker, "On Ideology and Historical Geography," in Alan R.H. Baker and Mark Billinge, eds., *Period and Place: Research Methods in Historical Geography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 233.
4. See, for examples, *ibid.*; Alan R.H. Baker, *Progress in Historical Geography* (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1972).
5. The phrase is borrowed, of course, from Ed Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso, 1989). See also work in the 1980s by Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Neil Smith, David Livingstone, and John Pickles, among many, many others.
6. Jonathan Smith, "The Slightly Different Thing That is Said: Writing the Aesthetic Experience," in Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan, eds., *Writing Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 73-85.
7. See, for example, Baker, *Progress in Human Geography*, 15, for a claim about the isolationist and provincial quality of some research in historical geography; or Baker, *Period and Place*, 234, for a depiction of historical geography as "separatist." See R.A. Butlin, "Theory and Methodology in Historical Geography," in Michael Pacione, ed., *Historical Geography: Progress and Prospect* (London: Croom Helm, 1987): 16-17 for claims about the once and future *centrality* of historical geography to the discipline of geography at large.
8. Robin Butlin, *Historical Geography: Through the Gates of Space and Time* (New York: Edward Arnold, 1993).
9. Miles Ogborn, "History, Memory and the Politics of Landscape and Space: Work in Historical Geography from Autumn 1994 to Autumn 1995," *Progress in Human Geography* 20:2 (1996): 222-229; Miles Ogborn, "(Clock)work in Historical Geography: Autumn 1995 to Winter 1996," *Progress in Human Geography* 21:3 (1997): 414-423; Miles Ogborn, "The Relations Between Geography and History: Work in Historical Geography in 1997," *Progress in Human Geography* 23:1 (1999): 97-108.

