
An interpretative history or historiography of any field is inevitably idiosyncratic and contingent. No history can be comprehensive, nor free from biases, if only those of selection. When such a work is produced by an active agent of that history, it is also, either incidentally or deliberately (or both), an intellectual biography of the author. That is the case here. In his preface, Kevin Cox indicates that *Making Human Geography* is the result of his more than 25 years of teaching a graduate-level seminar in the history of geographic thought, as well as his personal encounters with the various “turns” through which such thought has moved since the 1950s. In documenting and interpreting these changes within the field (as well as the connections between geography and social theory and between geography and other disciplines), Cox is concerned to offer his explanation of “why things happened the way they did; the implications of particular developments in the field as a whole; the pros and cons of various debates” (p.viii). As he readily admits “[t]his is a personal understanding: It is rooted in my own intellectual history…” (p.ix). Just as inevitably, such idiosyncrasy produces both strengths and weaknesses from the (idiosyncratic) perspective of reviewers and other readers.

The title of the book is deliberately multivalent. Cox is simultaneously interested in: [i] documenting the substantive endeavors of (Anglophone) human geographers in constructing and refining their field of study over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries (but with particular attention paid to the past five or six decades); [ii] interpreting the history of those endeavors as comprising an ongoing set of intellectual, political, and
identity/status contests (for individuals and for the field itself); and [iii] understanding the changing contours of concrete human geographies on the ground and the evolving abilities of human geographers to provide useful insights into those processes and outcomes.

In the nine subsequent chapters, Cox provides a review (unavoidably uneven) of the main topics that one would expect to see, as well as his own promised interpretations: modern geography’s first half-century; the quantitative/spatial revolution; social theory and geography (divided into two chapters, the first dealing with Marxism, feminism, and “critical” geography, and the second with humanistic geography and the “posts”); a chapter on changing understandings of space (moving from absolute through relative to relational conceptualizations); a chapter on methods (which takes the reader through several sets of binaries that continue to haunt geographical practice including quantitative/qualitative, analytic/interpretive, categorical/dialectical, and pluralizing/totalizing); a chapter on how and why things happen (focused primarily on varying takes on the persistent structure-agency debate); a chapter on the intersections of human geography and the other social sciences; and a final synoptic chapter which recapitulates some of the arguments made elsewhere. Cox concludes with a very brief postscript that reprises in abbreviated form one of his sustained arguments throughout the book.

This familiar argument (though given special emphasis here) is that the first half-century of the field of human geography was marked by a lack of theoretical and methodological rigor, recurrent identity crises, lack of relevance and stature, and a very precarious position within the academy and society more generally. Approximately 60 years ago, this situation began to undergo a dramatic change. In Cox’s words, “[w]hat set
the transformation in motion was without doubt the spatial-quantitative revolution…it was the great watershed of Anglophone human geography in the 20th century. The field would never be the same again” (p.254). For Cox, as for many other geographic scholars and practitioners, the spatial-quantitative revolution, despite its myriad ideological, conceptual, and application drawbacks, provided the opportunity to reconfigure geography as a theoretically-based, methodologically-rigorous, and useful and relevant intellectual enterprise. According to this formulation, while its embrace of positivism might have been overly enthusiastic and barely critical, and while its pursuit and promise of law-like relations in human activity in and across space(s) might have been overdrawn and naïve, the spatial-quantitative revolution did have the salutary effect of setting human geography on a path of increasingly sophisticated and reflective inquiry. Whether this was the only option that existed to enable this transformation is not a question that Cox addresses.

For Cox, as a dialectician, the contradictions within the spatial-quantitative revolution held the seeds for subsequent (though not predictable or inevitable) changes within the field. Among many other issues, the narrow focus of much of the spatial-quantitative work, its lack of attention to people as human beings and active agents, and its too-easy and uncritical alignment with power structures and other elements of an increasingly problematic status quo began, in the context of the times, to reveal the inadequacies of the approach, as well as possibilities for corrective, new trajectories for geographic thought and practice. From a dialectical perspective, however, traces of the “old” always remain sedimented in the “new”, and Cox chastises subsequent geographic (and other) practitioners for failing to appreciate that reality. In the case of the work of
the spatial-quantitative moment, he laments that too much baby was thrown out with the
change of the bathwater; a point to which he returns repeatedly.

In any event, bubbling up out of the growing uneasiness with the spatial-
quantitative orientations, we see the familiar chronological parade of geography’s critical
“isms”. The varying emphases (and lack thereof) reflects Cox’s own intellectual
engagements. Since Cox’s purpose is both documentation and interpretation, this uneven
treatment is fair, but raises a question of the book’s place within the literature; a question
which I take up at the end. In addition to the spatial-quantitative turn itself, there is
significant attention paid to Marxist geography, to the new economic geography, and to
the structure-agency debate. In these moments of the evolution of the discipline, Cox’s
first-hand experience provides insightful perspective on who was involved, in what ways,
and with what at stake. The continuities with what came before are articulated usefully,
and the main points of disjuncture are made clear along with their intellectual and applied
rationales and implications.

On the other hand, in terms of the disciplinary developments in which Cox was
not a principle protagonist, critically important topics are treated in a superficial,
caricatured, or dismissive fashion. He pays less careful and detailed attention, for
instance, to feminist geography, and to the “posts”—in their structuralist, modernist, and
colonialist forms. Feminist geography, for example, is allotted just under three pages. It
would be fair to say that this very abbreviated (and highly selective) account seriously
underplays the tremendous contributions that feminist geography (and feminist work
more generally) has made to the nature of inquiry. To name just two instances, the notion
of positionality and the related idea of standpoint epistemology (both unmentioned by
Cox) presented fundamental, radical challenges to ways of knowing and navigating the
world, and have done as much to influence scholarship and practice in geography and other fields as any of the other “turns” that Cox presents.

Similarly, the discussion of the “posts” presents a characterization of the main arguments, but never comes to grips with the kinds of ontological and epistemological challenges that these arguments raise. Unlike other sections of the book, in this discussion of the “posts”, Cox cites (or engages with) very few examples of specific work by geographers, and virtually nothing from important scholarship outside the field. Foucault is mentioned several times, and though a few of his ideas are named, they are barely explored. While there is an abbreviated discussion of deconstruction, there is no reference at all to the work of Derrida. At many other points there is a kind of gratuitous feeling name-dropping with no substantive engagement with ideas that have had tremendous import in human geography—Said, Haraway, Butler, Deleuze, Spivak. Conceivably, this could be explained by the fact that these theorists are not geographers, but Cox has no problem drawing upon the work of anthropologists, economists, sociologists, or political scientists when their work is in areas that are more congruent with his own ongoing or developing interests.

Following these chapters on particular developments in the discipline, Cox takes us through a useful excursus on geography’s evolving understandings of space (the previously mentioned journey from absolute through relative to relational conceptions), issues of method and methodology, and then two chapters that utilize several sustained themes (the structure-agency debate, the new economic geography, ongoing developments in quantitative geography) to assess what geographers have learned in the past five or six decades, and what that means for understanding geography (in both senses of that word) and geography’s place in the academy and society. In these terms,
Cox claims, geography has a great deal to offer, and he provides a number of persuasive specific and general examples of the difference that space (and geographers’ understanding of it) makes to social theory and everyday practices.

In the final substantive chapter, Cox presents an assessment of what he thinks the history that geographers have made (and the circumstances under which they have made that history) has added up to, concluding with a short section entitled ‘The Question of Progress’. The first part of the chapter is organized around four themes (the social nature of inquiry; the political and power contexts of intellectual work; the geohistorical conditions of that work; and the theme of continuity within change) that together provide a kind of structure-agency framework for the interpretation that Cox presents. Though there is little surprising in these sections, they do provide the reader with Cox’s perspective on what has mattered (and continues to matter) for the evolution of the discipline. In my view, this would have been the appropriate place end. The chapter, however, continues with several further recaps of the spatial-quantitative revolution, Marxist geography, and geographically uneven development and geopolitics. Given all the attention that Cox has given to these matters previously, these sections seem redundant and misplaced here.

In my view, the final section of this chapter, ‘The Question of Progress’ (as well as the unnecessary Postscript), undercuts the more powerful claims about human geography’s achievements that Cox advanced in the previous chapter. There, his gaze had turned, usefully, from an insecure and somewhat apologetic set of internal measures of “progress” to what geographers’ insights offer for understanding the myriad puzzles that comprise life under late capital. For some reason, however, in this section and in the Postscript, “progress” returns to the much more constricted sense of where geography fits
in the social sciences and the academy. At the very end of the book Cox leaves us with this: “How to insinuate ourselves into the day-to-day thinking of the other social sciences remains a major challenge” (p.256). Given all of the foregoing material, this is a pretty flat finish.

Finally, there is the question of where to place the book in the literature. It is clearly not intended to be a stand-alone volume for the kind of geographic thought course that prompted it. Cox intentionally has limited the scope to human geography, and to particular aspects of human geography at that. For readers interested in a personal account of the changes and continuities that have characterized developments in these areas over the past sixty years, the book has much to offer. Though other participants in these events would undoubtedly highlight other elements of that history, and would present differing observations and conclusions, Cox gives us a lucid account of what the important debates have been about, the grounds on which contest took place, what was at stake, and his sense of the salient implications of particular (if temporary) resolutions. It is a useful and insightful interpretation. I do think, though, a plausible title for the book would have been *The Making of a Human Geographer*.

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