

The History Geography Continuum

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"For (it is well said) as geography without history seemeth a carcase without motion, so history without geography wandreth as a vagrant without certaine habitation."

The Historye of the Bermudaes or Summer Islands, by Nathaniel Butler, Governor Bermuda Islands (1619 -1622)

The quote above is often wrongly attributed to John Smith who also wrote about Bermuda, but that does not undermine the point made. Any geography without history would be static and lifeless and any history without geography, rootless and vain. The relation between geography and history is as natural as it is man made and has caused both to either coexist or not to exist at all; and constantly affect, alter, influence and modify each other. Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) remarked that the only difference between history and geography lay in the different angles from which they view the world, namely, that of time and that of space.¹ Kant's idea was that all academic pursuits could be subjected to the space-time reference frame. So History came to be studied chronologically in time and Geography came to be studied chorologically in space. The main similarity between History and Geography as academic disciplines is that they are both idiographic.

When a German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller made his world map called *UniversalisCosmographia* in 1507. He was under the mistaken belief that Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator himself, had discovered America. It is widely believed that Waldseemüller may have been influenced by letters published by Vespucci² under his Latinized name Americus and could therefore have decided to name the "Terra Incognita" (this term is most widely attributed to Ptolemy and means 'unknown land' in Latin) as America. Columbus's discovery of the great landmass notwithstanding, the history of the name of America began with a mistake. The geography of Americas with the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans on either side, had caused them to be distant from Europe, Africa and Asia, the three 'old world' continents, up until the fifteenth century, and therefore the history of the Americas was discovered much later. It is almost ironical that the Incan, Aztec and Mayan civilizations have some of the oldest histories. The 'modification' of Native American history via Spanish inquisition and British, Dutch, Portuguese and French colonization could be delayed by its Geography, but couldn't be denied by it.

According to Neil Gaiman, a best selling British Novelist: "The biggest difference between England and America is that England has history, while America has geography".³ He may have said it half in jest but it is true that America's geography is such that with Canada in the North and Mexico in the South, both countries that engage with America in a geopolitical manner than in naturally allied; and with Oceans on either side the United States of America has no immediate hostile neighbours. Compare this with India, and perhaps it starts to dawn upon us that we were meant to battle successive invasions. It may look bleak, but it has also shaped the unfathomable depth and enigmatic complexity of our History and the heterogeneity and diversity of our Geography, both human and physical.

Let us examine a fast forward history of a few human migrations. The Homo Erectus moved out of Africa, Hebrews were taken in chains to Babylon, roads connected the vast Roman trading empire, ocean-going Vikings settled in England and France, Europeans extended ocean trade around the world and migrated to America, the steam engine changed the nature of travel and trade, East Germans fled to West Berlin, Kosovars were expelled from Serbia, and Hindus and Muslims crossed borders in South Asia. The history of these migrations is what defines the demographic profile of these regions.⁴ History has shaped human geography and still continues to do so.

Fundamental concepts of geography, such as place and region are intertwined inseparably with fundamental concepts of history such as time, period, and events. Geography and history in tandem enable us to understand how events and places have affected each other across time. It is therefore inevitable that students of one discipline come across and learn to comprehend the key concepts of the other. History is the more expansive broader field, circumnavigating the sum total of all human experience. Geography's brief is

¹The relations between History and Geography by Jan O.M. Broek (University of California Press

²C.R. Markham (1894) "Introduction", in *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and other documents illustrative of his career*. London: Hakluyt.

³American Gods by Neil Gaiman, published by Headline, 2001, UK

⁴Reips, U.-D., & Buffardi, L. (2012). Studying migrants with the help of the Internet: Methods from psychology. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(9), 1405-1424.

somewhat narrower, focused more on human interaction with the physical environment. Therefore, geography is a major constituent of world history along with other human-centered disciplines such as political science, anthropology, sociology, economics and the arts.

There is contact rather than separation between the methods of geographers and historians. History, historical geography and geographical history have a shared experience over a wide range of matters.⁵ Let us take South Asia for example. The Himalayas are a frontier rather than a boundary and therefore the Indian subcontinent has both a uniqueness of history as well as geography. Nowhere else, except for South Asia, will Islam be seen as also demonstrating the caste system. The annual monsoons are also unique to this region. So are numerous other attributes of both academic disciplines. The overlaps and interactions create constant contact and sharing of experiences.

By way of a theory it has also been proposed that the landmass of Eurasia is particularly favourable for societies to transit from the hunter-gatherer model to the agrarian model. The stretch of width of land available at the same latitudes in Eurasia is more than anywhere else and therefore it is much easier to transfer domesticated species. This in turn allows a greater range of plants and animals to choose from.⁶ This geographical advantage, amongst other things, in Eurasia caused a history of great civilizations to emanate from here.

A peculiarity of human history and the people, who have shaped it, has been the desire to expand the geography of the Nation state. Whether it be Alexander's unprecedented military campaign through Asia and northeast Africa, or Adolf Hitler's ideology of 'lebensraum'⁷ and the "Greater Germanic Reich" that was meant to be realized, the intention was to expand the geography of a state. In the book 'War before Civilisation', Lawrence H. Keeley, a professor at the University of Illinois, says that approximately 90-95% of known societies throughout history engaged in at least occasional warfare and many fought constantly. Unfortunately only the victors of these wars, at least for the earlier periods, wrote most of the history. The history of those that were dispossessed of their geography went untold.

West Asia is common geography of the three great religions of the world: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. All three religions are mono-atheistic and Abrahamic. This is a historical attribute; and all these attributes combine to not only make these religions have similarities, for e.g. all trace their origin to Abraham, but also produce differences, which are far too many to be recounted here. Adam Dodds argues that the term "Abrahamic faiths", while helpful, can be considered misleading, as it conveys an unspecified historical and theological commonality that is problematic on closer examination.⁸ A similar analogy works out equally well for Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Geography can sometimes even form the very basis of a historical study. Historians have to turn to geography for some answers. For example, to explain the success of the Egyptian civilization, it is of paramount importance to study the geography of Egypt and the role of the river Nile. Therefore to determine how cultural features of various societies across the planet emerged and evolved, it is imperative that tools of both disciplines be applied in tandem to understand interactions with the environment.⁹

So summarily, we can say that both History and Geography go hand in hand in understanding the evolution and spread of human civilizations and interactions. Tools and methodologies known to both disciplines can be employed to get a more comprehensive understanding of humanity.

Most recently Baker (2003) attempted to define the position and research orientation of historical geography with the formulation of seven fundamental principles for the discipline. He places emphasis on historical geography's research focus on the past (1). He points out the problem of interpretation and creation of facts (2), emphasizes the significance of dialogue on developing the discipline (3), emphasizes that historical geography deals with research of geographic changes in time (4), that it is a central discipline in a holistic comprehension of geography (5), it deals primarily with the geographic synthesis of place and not with spatial analysis and is focused on "period and place" rather than on "time and space" (6) and promotes the historical specificity of certain places to the forefront, emphasizing the peculiarity and distinctiveness of geographical phenomena and processes identified in historically and geographically specific and unique places (7).^{10,11}

To conclude it would be relevant to quote John F Kennedy from his speech in front of the Canadian Parliament: "Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder."

⁵Geography and History, bridging the divide by Alan R.H.Baker, Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

⁶Jared Diamond: Guns, Germs, and Steel : The Fates of Human Societies. W W Norton & Company, March 1997. ISBN 0-393-03891-2

⁷Lebensraum. The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (1999) Allan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, editors p. 473

⁸Dodds, Adam (July 2009). "The Abrahamic Faiths? Continuity and Discontinuity in Christian and Islamic Doctrine". *Evangelical Quarterly* **81** (3): 230–253.

⁹Mitchell, J.B. Historical Geography (Hodder and Stoughton educational, 1954)

¹⁰BAKER, A. R. H. (2003): Geography and History: Bridging the Divide. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 279 p.

¹¹Historical geography between geography and historiography , Zdeněk Kucera, kucera12@natur.cuni.cz