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CHAPTER 24

Evidence and Representation

Introduction

This final chapter focuses on the key determinant of doing any research: the *evidence*. Research in human geography involves the employment of evidence from any number of sources in the contemporary world; all of which pose significant challenges. Historical geographical research, however, incorporates yet more challenges given that its (re)presentation relies on the remnants, records and recollections of past worlds that we can no longer personally encounter or verify. From Alan Baker's plain observation that 'the dead don't answer questionnaires', we can begin to reflect on the difficulties of evidence in researching and writing historical geography (Baker, 1997). This chapter outlines some of the key challenges of doing historical geography by concentrating on four crucial aspects of research and representation: the field, sources, interpretation and narration.

The field

Traditionally, historical geography has been concerned with a number of important issues in its *field* of study: from population and migration to colonial expansion and settlement; from agriculture and agrarian change to industrialization and urban morphology. Within this field, a 'long-standing empirical tradition' of doing research has been focused on 'reconstructing' past environments and highlighting material historical changes in landscape and society (Nash and Graham, 2000: 3). However, recent years have witnessed new perspectives and themes within historical geography

that have been consonant with a broader concern in human geography for theorizing the production of knowledge about nature and culture. This has resulted in three key developments: (i) a widening of what constitutes the historical geographical field; (ii) recognition of the diversity of meaning within it; and (iii) subsequently a closer theorization of context and situatedness in the narration of historical geographical knowledge.

Thematically, historical geography has seen a recent broadening of research foci, with new political, cultural and symbolic questions of power, ideology, race and gender, for example, being developed from traditional concerns with the material worlds of the past. This has been achieved by theorizations of historical spaces that recognize the complexities of contested pasts, which in turn require careful situated interrogation. The notion of *situated knowledges* of the geographical field (which had come to the fore in human geography by the mid-1990s) resulted in work in historical geography becoming more differentiated, contextualized and self-reflexive of the theoretical and methodological production of knowledge (Ogborn, 1996). This development brought into sharp relief the limitations of atheoretical historical geography or what has been described as the *self-evident* school (Harley, 1989b). In historical landscape studies, for example, George Henderson (1998: 94-95) notes that the move to situated knowledges about nature and culture was ‘rather grim news for the ‘self-evident’ school’, arguing instead that ‘the more the meaning of landscape moves away from object toward context the more powerful it is as a concept for the study of social life’.

Efforts to situate more nuanced knowledges of the past in historical geography has coincided with a growing reflection on *fieldwork* and how its *practice* has generated specific historical geographical knowledges over time. Hayden Lorimer (2003: 197), for example, has shown how ‘the practice of learning geography, and the arenas in which knowledge-making takes place, can be usefully positioned within changing histories of the discipline’. Elsewhere, with Nick Spedding, he has used the example of one family’s expedition and field trip to Glen Roy, Scotland, in the 1950s to highlight the import of the embodied practices of fieldwork, such as ‘travelling’ and ‘residing’, which serve ultimately to alter ‘the ways in which the site of scientific investigation is experienced and understood’ (2005: 13).

Sources

What comprises the field in historical geography has of course implications for how that field is encountered in terms of evidence. Recent debates in geography more generally about ‘what constitutes the ‘field’ and the practice of ‘fieldwork’ has occurred in conjunction with a ‘growing respect for methods that are less constrained by ‘field-orientated’ empiricism and the ‘rigour’ of science’ (Aitken, 2005: 235). In historical geography, the development of a wider thematic field has coincided with the emergence of a broader delineation of what constitutes valid *sources*; whose diversity has in turn prompted the employment of new techniques for their effective examination (including more qualitative methods such as textual analysis, discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, as discussed in the previous chapter; see also Hannam, 2002b, Shurmer-Smith, 2002 and Black, 2003).

The study of historical geography can be based on a wide range of written, visual, oral and material sources. As Miles Ogborn (2003: 101) notes, there is a 'huge variety of historical data', spanning various forms of 'written and numerical material', 'oral history', 'dendrohistory', 'visual images' and 'maps'. Kevin Hannam (2002a) distinguishes between *formal* and *informal* sources (others make the distinction of *official* and *unofficial* sources; see Cloke et al., 2004). For Hannam, formal sources encompass national archive materials, census records, state documents and other official governmental and institutional documentation in the public realm. Informal sources include *published* materials such as memoirs, chronicles and biographies, and *unpublished* archives not produced for public consumption such as letters, diaries and photographs. Hannam's working distinction is useful if only to remind us of the alternatives available when attempting to recover the human geographies of the past that do not feature prominently (or are perhaps invisible) in formal historical records. Indeed the limited scope of employing solely official sources has prompted historical geographers to increasingly use what Cloke et al. (2004: 93) term *imaginative sources*. The imaginative use of such sources as literature, travel writing, newspapers, cinema, photography and electronic media are now commonplace in the sub-discipline.

Using any source material in historical geography places particular methodological demands on the researcher. It is vital to critically evaluate sources prior to employing them. Iain Black (2003: 479-480) identifies four key considerations to bear in mind: (i) the authenticity of the source; (ii) the accuracy of the source; (iii) the original purpose of the data; and (iv) how the specific archiving imposes a particular

classification and order upon historical events. Thinking through questions of accuracy, authenticity, political and ideological underpinnings and power relations (which are often implicit) for all sources is an essential part of doing historical geography. These issues, together with the persistent problem of incomplete, sparse or non-existent sources, render *cross-referencing* wherever possible an invaluable component of effective research. Kevin Hannam (2002b: 191), for example, reminds us that since all sources are ‘to some degree inaccurate, incomplete, distorted or tainted’, the best way to ‘understand the significance of an event or a representation’ is to appraise ‘as wide a range of sources as possible’. Finally, as outlined in the previous chapter on visual sources, the effective examination of any source depends upon a careful and informed interpretation that attempts to historicize and spatialize context and meaning.

Interpretation

Historical geographers have long reflected on the unavoidable problem of partiality or bias in source materials. Jim Duncan (1990), for example, in his exploration of the Kandyan Kingdom in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, observed the interpretive problems of his sources, outlining issues of officialdom, power relations, empowerment and dispossession. Others, too, have underlined the historiographic asymmetries between dominant elite voices and marginalized powerless ones in foremost, official government archives (Withers, 2002; Ogborn, 2003; Morrissey, 2004a). Ignoring this issue, as Kevin Hannam (2002a: 115) points out, typically results in the following scenario:

In uncritically adopting an ‘official’ government archive as the primary source of knowledge, a researcher may adopt the view of the established government and ignore, or at the very least treat as secondary, the voices of marginalized people.

In the colonial context, the difficulties of examining the political, social and cultural productions of those opposed to a dominant hegemony (productions of the colonized as opposed to productions imposed on them) has been identified by various historical geographers as a central research concern (Wishart, 1997; Nash and Graham, 2000; Black, 2003). In many cases, the absence of *official* historical documentation of particular forms of resistance, for instance, does not necessarily mean that reactions were undemonstrative. However, it is important to bear in mind Jim Duncan’s caveat on this point: that ‘overly ambitious theorizing’ can serve to ‘obscure and bury even deeper indigenous knowledges and practices’ (1999: 127). Cross-referencing other kinds of sources (such as diary accounts, poetry and oral history, for example) is perhaps a more effective way of illuminating skewed pictures that emerged from official empirical archives.

A prominent critique of traditional historical geography is that its dominant empirical tradition of doing research has been largely atheoretical (see also the ‘Historical Geographical Traditions’ chapter). With little theorization of key concepts such as landscape and culture, for example, a self-evident nature of explanation prevailed, which often served to negate the intricate complexities of how places and events were experienced differently through history – depending on a multitude of issues such as class, race, gender, disability and so on. However, it is neither entirely fair nor fruitful

to posit traditional historical geography as atheoretical. The sub-discipline has a long-established tradition that reflects theoretical influences from cognate disciplines and more broadly social theory. These have altered and continued through time and indeed, as Kevin Hannam (2002a: 113) notes, '[h]istorical cultural geography based on archival research has arguably been at the forefront of [recent] theoretical advances in geography'.

Broader theoretical concerns always form an integral part of interpreting sources. Even those that claim a self-evident position based on their empirical focus are in fact orientating a positivist stance. Empiricism is after all a theory. In recent years, a variety of theoretical positions have informed historical geographers in different ways, prompting particular interpretive frameworks and concerns when in the archives. Marxism, for example, has facilitated the mining of archives with a view to revealing such issues as historical class power relations, and the structural framework of mobility in capitalist economies. Feminism has effected a concentration on the gendered, racialized and sexualized spaces of the past, which in turn has raised important questions of historical geographical knowledge production, epistemology and research methods. Postcolonialism, too, has been instrumental in problematizing totalizing discourses that are dominant in official government archives. Postcolonial interpretations of such sources have revealed the fallacy of scripted senses of natural or scientific order to societies; an order in fact dependent on power, politics and prejudice.

Narration

The endgame of historical research is to (re)present a knowledge, to resurrect a world from the past, to write its story. Once we have done our research, rendering visible the historical geographies at the heart of our inquiry can be a wonderfully fulfilling exercise, full of considered thought, passion and empathy. *Narration*, however, is not unproblematic, procrastination aside.

To begin with, it is important to remember that our ‘representations’ are not ‘regularities of nature’ but rather ‘conventions of a situated-geographic-imagination’ (Duncan and Ley, 1993: 13). In other words, our story is a *partial truth*, reflective of our knowledge community, theoretical position, methodological techniques and idiosyncratic choices made in narration. As David Wishart (1997: 114, 116) reminds us, ‘there is no objective way of judging the ‘truth value’ of a narrative’, with the ‘facts’ being determined ‘as much by the narrative as the other way around’. Moreover, if we accept the unavoidable selectivity and subjectivity of the narrative process, ‘we might be able to put the objectivist fallacy to rest, opening the possibility for many legitimate interpretations of the past’ (Wishart, 1997: 117).

Since the 1970s, geography has witnessed a strong critique of representation, heralding the so-called *crisis of representation* in an ostensibly more relative and fluid postmodern world. More recently, geography has seen a rise of *non-representational* research strategies that seek to negate the primacy of *representations* in understanding space, and focus instead on the everyday *practices* and *performativity* of social productions (Thrift, 1996; Somdahl-Sands, 2008). As Ola Söderström (2005: 14) asks,

‘[d]oes this mean that the era of representation in geography has come to an end’? ‘Certainly not’, according to Söderström. For him, the critique of representation may not have impacted on some geographers, who continue to model their writing on a ‘Cartesian mirror conception of knowledge’ in ‘producing ‘truthful’ and univocal images of the (geographical world)’; however, on the whole, it has resulted in geographers increasingly ‘analysing the interplay between different forms of representations of space – in maps, photographs, cinema, etc. – and fields of practice, such as patterns of behaviour’ (Söderström (2005: 14). The important prompt here for historical geography is to not use representational sources unproblematically or privilege their explanatory role in narration. Evidence of everyday practices, performances and spectacle may be difficult to find in the historical record, but they can add richly our understanding of the functioning of historical spaces.

In writing the worlds of the past, a key strength that historical geography has orientated over time is its ability to situate *localized* research in *broader* contexts (a key concern for anyone embarking on a research project):

‘Historical geography has a long tradition of locating local studies within broader processes operating at wider spatial scales, of paying attention to both the specificity of the local and the wider economic, cultural and political processes’ (Nash and Graham, 2000: 1).

Situating the localized contexts of our representations does not lead to mere relativism or to a defeatist conception of historical inquiry. Andrew Sayer and Michael Storper

(1997: 11) have argued, for instance, that a call for sensitivity to context is not ‘by any means equivalent to a plea for particularism or relativism’, and that ‘it is possible to conceive of situated universalism as a form of normative theory’. Gary Bridge (1997: 633, 638), too, has shown that ‘local or situated knowledge and culture can be universally understood, but in a way that is implicated in the constitution of situated knowledges’; he suggests that ‘it is time we released the conceptions of conscious social action that enable us to realise the partiality and localness of our knowledge and make them explicit’ (see also Katz, 1996).

Conclusion

In thinking through the narrative practice of historical representation, the chapter concludes by considering the degree to which we can hope to make known our *positionality* to the reader of our research. Ian Cook (2005: 22) argues that ‘researchers’ identities and practices make a big difference’, and given the ‘politics and ethics’ of research and representation, he poses the question ‘why not be more reflexive?’ in making known our biases and impartiality. David Wishart (1997: 115) wonders if this is ‘achievable in any meaningful way’. Certainly, the recognition of the selectivity and subjectivity of historical representation has led scholars to situate their research position and context. Like Cook, Denis Cosgrove and Mona Domosh (1993: 37) impel us to ‘explicitly recognise our personal and cultural agendas’ at the start of our narratives. Stating a bias, however, as Wishart reminds us, is ‘a lot more complicated than is often suggested’, given that a ‘full exegesis would require an autobiography, and that’s hardly an unbiased genre’ (1997: 115). Wishart asserts that we should credit the reader with being capable of judging the analysis on its own

merits, without excessive prompting from the author. The reader, he says, ‘will do so in any case’ (1997: 115). This is not, of course, to say that we should not contextualize our situated historical representations (as argued throughout this chapter). Situating our knowledge productions, outlining the methodological concerns and signalling the broader theoretical currents is ultimately key to our narrating critical, engaging and relevant historical geographies.

Summary

- Recent years have witnessed new perspectives and themes within historical geography that have been consonant with a broader concern in human geography for theorizing the production of knowledge about nature and culture.
- The notion of *situated knowledges* of the geographical field has resulted in work in historical geography becoming more differentiated, contextualized and self-reflexive of the theoretical and methodological production of knowledge.
- The development of a wider thematic field has coincided with the emergence of a broader delineation of what constitutes valid sources; whose diversity has in turn prompted the employment of new techniques for their effective examination.
- For all sources, thinking through questions of accuracy, authenticity, political and ideological underpinnings and power relations is an essential part of doing historical geography; broader theoretical concerns also form an integral part of interpreting sources.
- In writing, our story is always a *partial truth*, reflective of our knowledge community, theoretical position, methodological techniques and idiosyncratic choices made in narration.

- Situating our knowledge productions, outlining the methodological concerns and signalling the broader theoretical currents is ultimately the key to our narrating critical, engaging and relevant historical geographies.

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