

Book Review: Geography: History and Concepts. 5th Edition. Arild Holt-Jensen.
Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2018.

Reviewed by Michiel van Meeteren (m.van-meeteren@lboro.ac.uk).

School of Social Sciences, Loughborough University

Published as: Van Meeteren, M. (2019). Geography: History and Concepts. 5th Edition. Arild Holt-Jensen. Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2018, pp. xxi + 276. ISBN 978-1-5264-4014-3 hbk, ISBN 978-1-5264-4015-0 pbk. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 40(1), 175–177. <http://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12277>

Please refer to the published version.

As we speak, humanity faces geographical questions of unprecedented scale and scope. From climate change to inequality and urbanization, geography potentially offers crucial insights. The perennial question is, however, whose geography? The positionality of the geographical imagination determines what is important, included, theorized, recorded in the disciplinary annals, and what is neglected as triviality. If discipline building is an academic project, how can we ensure that all are included as part of that project (Christopherson, 1989). Or viewed dynamically, how do we maintain coherent disciplinary dialogues while simultaneously keeping an open mind to include unexpected contributions, as suggested by the practice of engaged pluralism? (Sheppard, 2015). Such a practice needs to unscrew itself from the Anglo-American primacy that has dominated the discipline in the last decades, yet retain communication between past and present (Hassink et al., 2018a; Van Meeteren, 2018). This review resolutely pleads that Holt-Jensen's *Geography: History and Concepts* is the perfect undergraduate textbook to advance that disciplinary agenda.

Geography: History and Concepts unapologetically advocates a holistic geography that includes the physical- and human-geographical families. Thinking geographically (Sheppard, 2015), fosters the 'homo geographicus' (Sack, 1997), and the geographical discipline is habitus for that remarkable viewpoint. Taking climate change as the over-arching example why geographers need to stick together more than ever gives the book a remarkably fresh yet familiar flavour in an age of disciplinary subspecialism fragmentation. The book makes its case filled with a contagious excitement for the geo-graphical profession. Geography's outward-looking interdisciplinarity is imagined as a life-raft in the sea of knowledge (pp. 16–17). Instead of policing the discipline's boundaries we need to widen the circle. The book's 'basic intuition' to approaching geography (page xiv) is to acknowledge that science entails simplification and that a single perspective never bears the whole truth. Therefore, we have to be sceptical of authority claims but do so in a manner of constructive criticism.

Such rules of practice could have been platitudes, but Holt-Jensen illustrates them with biographical stories from an academic career spanning more than fifty years embodying all the major changes in geographical thought. His account of how guest lectures by legends like Pierre Gourou and Torsten Hägerstrand invigorated a lifelong curiosity sets the stage for a narrative where Holt-Jensen is introduced in new paradigms and understandings of geography by transformative experiences. How Peter Haggett turned young Norwegians into spatial science junkies (p. xiv) and how the critical discussions about flower power made them go back to rethink earlier certainties (p. xv). Holt-Jensen being toured through Los Angeles by Ed Soja makes the diversity of modern urban society tangible (p. 187), while we get to hear Gunnar Myrdal (p. 126) make the case that a disinterested social science cannot be anything but pure nonsense. The biographical narrative of Holt-Jensen underlines the dictum that the older you get, the more you realize of how uncertain things are. Holt-Jensen develops it into a philosophical stance where he is never dismissive about geographical praxis, only really curious how new viewpoints might improve our understanding.

Being from Norway, a significant but small geographic tradition, the cast of historical characters diversifies vis-à-vis the familiar anglophone accounts. His description about the inseparability of nature and culture in the French and German landscape traditions (chapter 4) makes one realize how relevant these geographical thinkers still are and how easily they could be made compatible with contemporary thought. Holt-Jensen does not shy away from geography's complicity in the imperial age, but the diversity of

imperialisms makes it different. That red-dyed map of the British empire fades in the background and other geographies become visible. Réclus and Kropotkin are discussed, not as some alternative history, but as central figures in the development of global geographical thought. The book is nevertheless only slightly off-centre and the anglophone tradition remains dominant. However, by including examples and cases from different traditions, and highlighting geography's Arab, Chinese and Greek roots, a more modular history of the discipline renders into view. This results in an account of geographical philosophy and history where your own geographic tradition, even if it is not explicitly mentioned in the book, feels like it is welcome in 'the widening circle' of geography. Not as an exotic Other, but as a full contributor to the engaged pluralist homo geographicus.

Additional to offering this fascinating geographical vista, the book does not let readers down in doing what it says on the tin: offering a thorough introduction to the history and philosophy of geography on the undergraduate level. All major geo- graphical vantage points are treated equally, critically and curiously. Complicated issues are not shoved under the rug, and troubled dichotomies like induction/deduction, chorology/chronology, ideographic/nomothetic are explained and questioned clearly and judiciously. What can we learn from each perspective and how does it make us better geographers? Moreover, this pedagogical aspect has been strengthened in the book's newest edition. The chapters are short, with engaging text boxes of difficult problems and cases and a good set of review questions is provided within each chapter that can enliven any undergraduate seminar. From a pedagogical perspective, the book is perfectly situated to help educate non biased, curious geographers that are knowledgeable about the pluralist geographical tradition. *Geography: History and Concepts* concludes by focusing on pressing contemporary issues where climate change, agriculture, energy, inequality and mobility are all woven together. The book does not just tell but shows how these conundrums can be tackled thinking geographically.

References

Christopherson S (1989) On being outside "the project." *Antipode* 21 (2), 83–9.

Hassink R, Gong H, Marques P (2018) Moving beyond Anglo-American economic geography. *International Journal of Urban Sciences*. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2018>.

Sack RD (1997) *Homo geographicus: a framework for action, awareness, and moral concern*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD.

Sheppard ES (2015) Thinking Geographically: Globalizing Capitalism and Beyond. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (6), 1113–34.

Van Meeteren M (2018) On geography's skewed transnationalization, anglophone hegemony, and qualified optimism toward an engaged pluralist future; A reply to Hassink, Gong and Marques. *International Journal of Urban Sciences*. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2018.1467273>.