



# Have the human geographical can(n)ons fallen silent; or were they never primed?<sup>1</sup>



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## Abstract

A disciplinary canon comprises a body of work – almost invariably textual – that is represented as highly influential in its development, laying the foundations on which contemporary practices have been built. Such works, most often books, are sources that all students should address to appreciate the disciplinary fundamentals – where it has come from and whose shoulders it rests on. This implies progress, of the discipline advancing on those foundations. This is not the case with Anglophone human geography, however; whereas until c.1960 the discipline's practices could be traced back to the writings of a small number of key scholars, many German or French, those works are now very rarely the subject of close study. The discipline has fissured into many constituent strands each of which has had core figures and classic works that have guided practices but without the stability expected of a canonical tract. Arguably, Anglophone geography has been defined less by its canonical works but rather by its canonical concepts – space, place (region, milieu, and locale), and environment. These build on earlier advances in geographical vocabulary and visualisation. Contestation over their meanings and the diverse sources of influence and inspiration in human geography connects with questions about comparative canonization amongst disciplines and past and present challenges to geography's status and future.

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**Keywords:** Canon; Classic; Progress; Human geography

No geographer works today looking over his or her shoulder, wondering anxiously if it is mainstream (Thomas Kuhn's "normal science"?) or a "deviant" from established lines of research. We are simply too busy 'doing geography' in a postmodern world marked less and less by fundamentalisms, a world of pluralistic perspectives judged and respected for what they can illuminate.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of a canon has distant origins in theology, but came to be applied to the selection and classification of significant literature, art and music in the twentieth century, a process that had nineteenth-century antecedents. Although it documents the ecclesiastical use

of *canones* over a millennium ago, The *Oxford English Dictionary's* first record of canon as 'A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most significant, and worthy of study... of the highest quality and most enduring value' dates from 1929.<sup>3</sup> The concept of the canon has since been applied and debated in many social science and humanities disciplines, but human geographers ask why they lack such enduring foundational texts, to which students are introduced as key to their discipline's culture and practices – as first novitiates, then apprentices and certified, *en route* to becoming practitioners – and to which scholars return as foundational documents on which they move those cultures and practices forwards.<sup>4</sup> Sociologists are introduced to Durkheim, Marx and Weber; political theorists have a range

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Christian Brannstrom, Jamie Gillen, Kelvyn Jones, Innes Keighren, Virginie Mamadouh, Robert Mayhew, Richard Powell and three anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> P.R. Gould, On reflections on Richard Hartshorne's, *The Nature of Geography*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81 (1991) 328–334. The Kuhn reference is, T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary online edition ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)) [last consulted 15 December 2014].

<sup>4</sup> For example, in a review Audrey Kobayashi – Review of J.A. Agnew and J.S. Duncan (Eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Human Geography*, Malden MA, 2011, *The AAG Review of Books* 1 (2013) 7–9 – notes that although the nine chapters on the history of geography contain numerous citations to canonical figures such as Hartshorne, Sauer, Hettner, Mackinder, Ratzel and Ritter, none of them are cited in the 32 other chapters concerned with the contemporary discipline.

of canonical texts stretching back to the Greeks; there are key anthropological studies that arguably form a disciplinary canon; and economics draws heavily on the work of a few pre-twentieth century writers (in part because disciplinary politics – enhanced by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK<sup>5</sup> – have marginalised heterodoxies).<sup>6</sup> Many sciences, too, are characterised by progress building on canonical works – as exemplified by Jones' updating of *On the Origin of Species*.<sup>7</sup> A closer look at these (and at other disciplines such as English literature), however, indicates both wide divergences about how canons are defined and frequent disputes about their consequences and contents as well as doubts about their futures.<sup>8</sup> As Wendell V. Harris noted regarding literary debates about 'canonicity': 'The "canon question" then proves to be much more complex than contemporary ideological criticism admits.'<sup>9</sup> Drawing on prior material about different types of literary canons and what is accomplished by discussions concerning their content, he argues that:

We need more than ever, then, to be honest with ourselves and with our students about the limited purposes both of individual courses and of the requirements for our degrees – to be honest about what *our* selection of texts and *our* approach to them does *not* accomplish.<sup>10</sup>

How have such debates evolved in human geography and how and why has the subject come to recognize itself as relatively weakly canonized in terms of a set of enduring core texts? How else might canonicity be conceptualized in human geography? This essay addresses these questions, focusing entirely on the current situation in the Anglophone academy, whilst recognising that this may differ from other realms and that there is variation across borders and departments.

Indeed, there may be considerably more canonical endurance elsewhere. Consider an argument about the distinctive structures of Anglophone geography by a Romanian geographer who was newly exposed to these on arrival at the University of Bristol's School of Geographical Sciences in the early 2000s. In his undergraduate studies at Cluj-Napoca<sup>11</sup>:

... most exams were oral exams, and the consensus among staff was that if a student was asked a question from one of... three 'fundamental' textbooks and did not know the answer, (s)he should not be allowed to pass that exam... On coming to Bristol, I realized that it is more acceptable not to know things that former Romanian colleagues would find outrageous not to know by heart. Instead, at Bristol there is a premium on wide reading, on developing the ability of being critical, of having analytical presence and originality, and constructing (and considering) an argument or a model.

Likewise, an Italian geographer reading an English language collection on *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (see note 46) queries why:

... two of the geographers who perhaps most strongly influenced the discipline throughout the 20th century – Friedrich Ratzel and Paul Vidal de la Blache – are missing from the list of 'key' thinkers to the development of geographical reflection... [are] excluded from a volume that purports to trace theoretical debates on space and place? It can be excluded only by beginning the disciplinary reconstruction from the quantitative revolution onwards, pretending that nothing of any import for contemporary geographical thought came before it; erasing, de facto, the legacy of the European geographical tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Even when contemporary Anglophone geography acknowledges the work of such founders<sup>13</sup> – notably Humboldt and Ritter, Ratzel and Vidal de la Blache – nevertheless their texts are rarely interrogated (and only in part because of their inaccessibility, not having been written in English and scarcely translated); as a result, much of the detail of their arguments is largely unknown. Recent scholarly reappraisals of Humboldt<sup>14</sup> and of Kant<sup>15</sup> as geographical writers are unlikely to figure on many undergraduate curricula. Instead, the histories which students are introduced to concentrate very largely on the last 60–70 years, perhaps only the last 30–40 in many cases.<sup>16</sup> Geographers have chosen to remember some older texts, but although these may be cited they are rarely sighted; they

<sup>5</sup> F.S. Lee, X. Pham and G. Gu, The UK Research Assessment Exercise and the narrowing of UK economics, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37 (2013) 693–717.

<sup>6</sup> On the canon in economics, see E.L. Forget and S. Peart (Eds), *Reflections on the Classical Canon in Economics: Essays in Honour of Samuel Hollander*, London, 2000; for sociology, see G.F. Davis and M.N. Zaid, Sociological classics and the canon in the study of organizations, in: P. Adler (Ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Sociology and Organization Studies: Classical Foundations*, Oxford, 2009, 635–648; for anthropology see G.E. Marcus, A broad(er) sider to the canon: being a partial account of a year of travel among the textual communities in the realms of humanities centers and including a collection of artificial curiosities, *Cultural Anthropology* 6 1991 385–405; and for political science J.G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought through History*, New York, 1971. More generally, see J. Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*, London, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> S. Jones, *Almost Like a Whale: The Origin of Species Updated*, London, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Although we will briefly return to some of the literary debate on the relationship between classic and canon as a means of interpreting these terms in human geography, further coverage of debates in other disciplines must remain largely beyond our scope here.

<sup>9</sup> W.V. Harris, *Canonicity*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (PMLA) 106 (1991) 110–121.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, *Canonicity* (note 9), 119.

<sup>11</sup> D. Simandan, On what it takes to be a good geographer, *Area* 34 (2002) 284–293.

<sup>12</sup> C. Minca, Comments on *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37 (2005) 168–170 [168].

<sup>13</sup> I.M. Keighren, C. Abrahamsson and V. della Dora, On canonical geographies, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 296–312 [300].

<sup>14</sup> A. Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Exceptionalism*, New York, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> S. Elden and E. Mendieta (Eds), *Reading Kant's Geography*, New York, 2011, and R.B. Loudon, The last frontier: the importance of Kant's Geography, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014) 450–465. See also D. Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*, New York, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> A collection of ten volumes of reprinted items aimed at student libraries contains 'some of the most significant articles from the major fields of human geography published over the last 40 years' – J. Agnew (Series Ed), *Contemporary Foundations of Space and Place*, London, 2008 [xi]; in that Preface to each of the volumes, Agnew suggests either that the 'older foundations are either irrelevant (we have created a brand-new discipline in the last few decades) or, as he puts it, "older ideas are adapting to new circumstances" so that we do not need to return to the originals' (R.J. Johnston, Book review essay: what every human geography student needs to read to know the discipline?, *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (2010) 528–535). Elsewhere, Agnew implies that this lack of links between any foundational works and contemporary writings may be because geography is 'a relatively minor and "marginalized" field... an outsider... [which] has always left it open to the charge as a haven for dilettantes and misfits, producing pedestrian travelogues', which are best forgotten: J. Agnew, Why criticizing grand regional narratives matters, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3 (2013) 160–162 [162]. Harvey, of course – D. Harvey, The sociological and geographical imaginations, *International Journal of Political and Cultural Sociology* 18 (2005) 211–255 – reminds us that the work of academic geographers is only one of a number of separate geographical imaginations. In this regard, public perceptions of geography are shaped by media in the genre of travelogue produced by (in the USA) *National Geographic* and similar magazines in many other countries. See R. Johnston, On Geographic and geography, *New Zealand Geographer* 65 (2009) 167–170 and R. Johnston, Popular geographies and geographical imaginations: contemporary English-language geographical magazines, *Geojournal* 74 (2009) 347–362. On *National Geographic* in particular, see C. Lutz and J. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, Chicago, 1993 and S. Hawkins, *American Iconographic: National Geographic, Global Culture and Visual Imagination*, Charlottesville, VA, 2010.

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