Introduction to the Concise Encyclopedia of Human Geography by Loretta Lees and David Demeritt

When approached to edit this Concise Encyclopedia of Human Geography we hesitated to get involved, given the number of similar volumes out there and the work involved in such a venture. But in the end we decided to take this on, partly out of genuine curiosity about ‘the state of human geography’ today, but also in recognition of how valuable such reference volumes can be, particularly for students or those encountering human geography from other disciplines. Having leaned heavily on similar reference volumes as we learned the ropes and established ourselves as geographers, we hope that this Encyclopedia will help light the way for future generations of geographers.

As joint editors of this Encyclopedia, we come from different subdisciplinary traditions, which in turn face outwards from human geography in different directions. Loretta has long identified as an urban geographer, but sees herself, more broadly, as an urbanist and urban studies scholar working at the interface of human geography with sociology, architecture, planning and policy. By contrast, David has long identified as an environmental geographer, working across the internal divides between human and physical geography, and increasingly making forays well outside of geography into applied policymaking and public administration.

We are white geographers trained in the ‘Anglo-American tradition’ (although this is often the term used, we would argue it should be Anglo-American traditions – there is no singular tradition) who have worked in British geography departments for most of our careers to date. We are in the later stages of our academic careers. We have only worked together before on three publications and the last of these was well over a decade ago, so working together again triggered interesting debates between us about the state of human geography. It must be noted that our positionality is consequential for the map of the discipline provided by this Encyclopedia. While we were attentive to the gender and ethnicity balance of our contributors, and succeeded in including authors at a range of career stages (from PhD researchers right through to distinguished professors), we struggled, as white, UK-based and English-speaking geographers of a certain age, to involve as many geographers as we would have liked working outside of the UK and North America and publishing in other languages. For a host of reasons, human geography is dominated by an Anglo-American core of authors, institutions and journal outlets (Imhof and Müller, 2020). Notwithstanding our significant international networks, the contributors to this Encyclopedia are still drawn predominantly from that Anglo-American bubble, and so, despite their demographic diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and career stage, the map of human geography provided by contributors reflects the prevailing biases and intellectual proclivities of that institutional setting.

So what is ‘geography’, and ‘human geography’ in particular? That is a question that geographers have argued about since the very dawn of the discipline. At its most basic, human geography is concerned with the interrelationships between people, place and the environment, and human geographers are especially focused on how this varies spatially and temporally (across space and time). Human geography is more connected (philosophically, theoretically and methodologically) with other disciplinary work in the social sciences and the humanities, in comparison to ‘physical geography’, which is more connected to the natural, mathematical and physical sciences. Human geography is a ‘spatial science’, distinguishing itself from, for example, sociology or anthropology. It is interested in spatial organization and the spatial processes that organize the world around us, and the people (humans) and non-humans in it. Human geographers draw on a set of concepts through which they study the world spatially and temporally; these include space, place, scale, landscape, nature and mobility (all of which have their own entries in this Encyclopedia). Human geography is made up of numerous subdisciplinary fields and specialities, spanning from the longer-standing ones like economic geography, urban geography, rural geography, development geography, political geography, social geography, cultural geography, transport geography, historical geography and...
health geography and so on, to newer specialities like sexualities geographies, young people’s geographies, emotional geographies, Indigenous geographies, geographies of race, decolonial geographies, geographic information science (GIScience), and so on. The premier human geography journal Progress in Human Geography often reviews these fields and suggests future trajectories for research. It is worth our readers looking at these reviews.

Boyle (2021) argues that ‘human geography’ is best understood as both an intellectual endeavour and a historical, political and institutional project – we agree. There is a long and complex history to Anglo-American human geography, as it moved through different paradigm shifts, from regionalism, to environmental determinism to behavioural geography, humanistic geography, radical geography, feminist geography, the ‘new’ cultural geography and so on. There is no need to recount that fascinating history here – we refer interested readers instead to Livingstone (1992), Johnston and Sidaway (2004), Nayak and Jeffrey (2011) and Cresswell (2013). Yet, at the same time, our readers should be looking at, and thinking about, those histories of human geography outside of Anglo-America. Öhman and Simonsen (2003), for example, zoom in on Nordic human geography. Others have been more international in their horizon – for example, Barnes and Sheppard’s (2019) section on radical geography beyond North America or Berg et al.’s (2021) foray into the international histories of the subdiscipline of critical geography.

Most recently, human geography has seen the growth of critical geographies (and this Encyclopedia reflects that), which both reject but also draw on and extend earlier work and approaches. There are no clean breaks – the formation of human geography has been and will likely continue to be cumulative. For example, shoots from the discipline’s quantitative turn of the 1950s and 1960s can be seen sprouting today in the flowering of GIScience. Another noteworthy flowering can be traced back to the continued influence of post-structural ideas (and especially the cultural turn with language, meaning and the interpretation of wilful human action.

Encyclopedia, we are struck by how many still reflect the energies unleashed by those cultural and critical turns, like the emergence of new materialist, more-than-human and non-representational geographies, which in various ways seek to move beyond the focus of the cultural turn with language, meaning and the interpretation of wilful human action.

The ongoing impact of the ‘cultural turn’ in human geography can also be seen in the growth in so-called ‘critical geographies’, initially feminist and/or materialist, and now critical race and post-colonial theories, which are gaining real traction in the discipline as we try desperately and belatedly to decolonize it.

Despite these interventions, human geography is still a predominantly white and masculine discipline (see Oswin, 2020). Yet, as we write, there is some evidence that things are changing. For example, British and North American geography departments are starting to decolonize their curriculums and to be more attentive to gender and ethnicity in their hiring processes. But, as Sheppard (2022, p. 20) argues, we need to be ‘particularly attentive to spatial exclusions: the danger of marginalizing southern and non-Anglophone scholarship and non-academic expertise even as we work to diversify Anglophone geography’s internal makeup. Putting it bluntly, decolonizing geographical thinking means challenging the presumption that Anglophone scholarship is the go-to place for cutting-edge thought’.

In thinking about what to include in this Encyclopedia, we noted that theoretical work in human geography is more highly cited than empirical work, and that intellectual prestige and prowess is often associated with the former not the latter, and it is usually male. We would argue that this is a real issue that needs both discussion in the discipline and to be addressed. In response, we made a real effort to include as many female (and indeed, non-white) contributors as was possible and the result is a reasonably good gender (and ethnicity) balance. The 78 entries we finally agreed on, after reviewing other human geography encyclopedias, text books and review articles, are limited by the overall word count we had to work within – after all, this is a concise encyclopedia. There are, of course, many more entries we could have included, but the entries cover the breadth and depth of human geography and provide a good ‘state of the art of human geography’ at a ready glance. Encyclopedias are supposed to
produce legitimate information from expert and scholarly sources that we as the editors are supposed to check over and verify, which we did. Nevertheless, we must recognize that none of the entries are unbiased; contributors have their own takes on the entries they were asked to write. We did not interfere with their takes, as they represent the field.

The word cloud below (see Figure 0.1), which was developed from all the entries in the Encyclopedia, was an interesting exercise in terms of getting an overall picture of the key or popular words that dominate at different levels in the contributions (see Jackson et al., 2006 for earlier work on this). Putting the focus on (human) geography and geographers to one side, it is notable that social dominates, followed by space and political. Space is used more frequently than place, perhaps reflecting a move away from 1990s’ work on geography, place and representation. It is also notable that political is used more than say economic, cultural or urban. We speculate that this reflects a new politicization in human geography involving a renewed focus on power and struggle around issues of social justice and a new interest in Indigenous knowledge and approaches as we begin to decolonize the discipline. The other notable thing is how pluralized human geography is: contributors prefer plural, more open terms, like geographies, spaces, forms, relations and so on. They look across and beyond. They are interested in the world around them, in the global. Human geography is avowedly research (led), critical and spatial; theory floats further down the hierarchy. Human geography is also very actively focused on doing: approaches, processes, practices; it seeks and investigates understanding, the continuance of an interest in Verstehen perhaps from the cultural turn. Data is important. Time is another key concern but one notably subordinate to space and the spatial. But beyond the word cloud, what trends in human geography did we uncover in the process of editing this Encyclopedia? We have already mentioned the continued impact of the ‘cultural turn’, but we also noted the growing impact of big data, even on historical geography; the renewed and much more committed focus on decolonization of the discipline away from white, Anglo-American, colonial lenses; and increased work on the Anthropocene, which is opening the door to new conversations between human and physical geographers, and with other disciplines.

Big data refers to the voluminous information being generated by people in an increasingly digital world, from mobile phone data to Twitter or Facebook data, to credit card or supermarket club card transactions. Harvested and analysed computationally, big data offers human geography scholars the possibility of finding new patterns and correlations, and even to seeing geographical processes digitally before they are seen on the ground (see Kitchin, 2021). Graham and Shelton (2013) were right to be concerned about ‘whether or how it might be integrated into pre-existing structures of scholarly knowledge production’ (p. 256) in geography, but also right that critical GIS and radical approaches to quantitative geography offered hope that geographers would be well placed to do justice to big data – indeed, big data is even being used to reflect on Anglo-American hegemony in urban geography through publication and citation patterns (see Kong and Qian, 2019).

Another emergent theme from the entries is real sensitivity to the colonial hegemony of Anglo-American human geography, along with a commitment to starting the process of systematically decolonizing geography. As Radcliffe (2022) notes, this decolonizing
approach must be applied to how geographers look at space, place, nature, global–local relations, the Anthropocene and much more. Such a decolonization will of course change how human geographers understand people, place and the environment, as it rethinks through the lenses of Indigenous thinking and decolonizing ideas. This will, no doubt, be one of the most radical paradigm shifts to happen in the ongoing development of human geography, but it is only just beginning to gain traction. One measure of its success down the line will be in what does not appear in a future encyclopedia of human geography, as much as what is included.

Human geographers’ engagement with ideas of the Anthropocene is a final theme that builds on, but in other ways challenges the discipline’s longstanding human–environment tradition and its status as an ‘integrative’ field (Grove and Rickards, 2022). Of course, the discipline of geography more broadly has long sought to integrate, or at the very least hold in productive tension, physical and human geography, and in that the natural and social sciences (Demeritt, 2009). Indeed, geography as a discipline is incredibly well positioned to ‘do’ interdisciplinary research, but what is notable is that those who choose to go down this path struggle, and are sidelined, as they leave their disciplinary identity home base behind or to one side. As Ellis (2017, p. 525) has noted, the engagement of physical geographers with the Anthropocene has been ‘lukewarm at best’, and progress will require both ‘sides’ of geography, physical and human, to engage.

What this all means for the future of work on the Anthropocene or problem-orientated work on global challenges, is hard to say. Sheppard (2022, p. 14) suggests five priorities:

- We must be more historical in our thinking (integrating the temporal with the spatial). We must pay more attention to the macro-scale: to how local events are complexly bound-up in spatially differentiated planetary processes?
- We must be socio-ecological: incentivizing productive collaboration across earth science, social science, and humanities sub-fields. We must deconstruct our disabling quantitative–qualitative methodological divide, incentivizing training in multi-methods. We must work harder to diversify the perspectives and socio-spatial positionalities incorporated into geographical thinking to decentre White male, Anglophone, and settler geographies.
- Excitingly, the potential for all this exists within Geography today.

This can only enrich human geography and we look forwards to the outcomes, in what will no doubt be an engaged, pluralist future.

References and selected further reading


Kong, L. and Qian, J. (2019). Knowledge circulation in urban geography/urban studies, 1990–2010: testing the discourse of Anglo-American hegemony through publica-