The future of Geography: when the whole is less than the sum of its parts

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Abstract

In a recent article, Thrift has presented an optimistic account of the future of Geography. While this reply is broadly supportive of his claims that Geography is more diverse, and has more to offer than ever before, it is less optimistic with respect to the prospects for the survival of Geography as a unitary academic discipline. Experiences over the last 20 years in the UK higher education, in particular, the 2001 RAE exercise, point to an unfavourable institutional climate for the discipline. Within Geography, the ever-increasing diversity of its subject matter and research philosophy poses problems for disciplinary identity. This is reflected in the more restricted perspective of the subject outside the universities, and is compounded by a weakening of the link between Geography in the universities and the schools. In these circumstances, serious attention must be given to the changing nature of the discipline, to its positioning with respect to other subjects, and to its relations with the wider world. At a time of academic, cultural, technological and social dynamism, there are, nevertheless, opportunities as well as dangers for the subject. Although this reply is an explicitly bleak one regarding the future, the implicit message is that Geography can (and should) still prosper. The more positive outcome, however, rests on an appreciation and nurturing of a more traditional geographical heritage than Thrift identifies, as well as a more creative view of the relationship between fundamental and applied research.

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1. Introduction

For those colleagues in UK Geography Departments contemplating redundancy notices, it will come as something of a surprise to learn that Geography as a discipline is, as Thrift (2002) concludes, ‘...going from strength to strength’ and that ‘...the times are on our side’. Neither will there be much empathy for those who survive the post-RAE ‘restructuring’ with the idea that the RAE 2001 might be characterised by ‘heartening outcomes’ (no matter how carefully these examples are chosen), nor with the lament at the passing of the monograph. There are simply more relevant issues of survival to face.

In keeping with the spirit of Thrift’s original article, this response is, by invitation, of similar polemical, rather than scholarly style. It is written with a mind to the discipline as a whole, but from a physical geographer’s perspective. Recent experiences in the UK form the basis of most of the discussion. Although broadly supportive of Thrift’s central theme, that Geography has much (possibly more than ever) to offer, this response is less optimistic with respect to the prospect of the discipline’s survival, for two sets of reasons. First, at the most pragmatic level, there is the institutional, economic and political setting within which contemporary academics and academic disciplines must work. At the moment, this seems to present almost insurmountable challenges, over which geographers (and academics more generally) have little control, which, in the pre-RAE period were noted by Thrift in a separate article (Thrift and Walling, 2000). Follow-up comment, however, is curiously absent in his more recent, post-RAE article, despite the emergence of some well-argued and hard-hitting commentaries (Martin, 2002; Gregory et al., 2002). These really demand an answer, particularly from those who have occupied sufficiently privileged vantage points to provide an informed response. Second, even were the future of Geography to rest with the quality of its intellectual argument, it might be unwise to rest the case (or even begin it) in the way that Thrift expounds. For all its optimism, Thrift’s is not a ringing
endorsement of a unitary discipline. Neither is it a persuasive vision of the discipline’s future trajectory in any form (contrast this, for example, with the prospective for Geography in the 21st century mapped-out by Walford and Haggett, 1995). As Thrift points out, what has been lacking in the subject, and the greatest barrier to disciplinary progress, is respect for diversity, and with this, mutual understanding between the multiple and contested viewpoints within Geography as a whole. What Thrift is less inclined to consider are the origins and significance of these disjunctions (perhaps this explains the worrying reluctance to engage with the history of the discipline, or to see value in the ‘consolidation of its own territory’?). Instead, we are treated to a kind of showcasing of geographical talent, adeptly chosen from an assortment of safer and more controversial research, but which, upon reflection, fails to convince, because the whole is somehow less than the sum of its parts.

2. The success of Geography

There is no doubt that research pursued within geography departments has been successful, and in many of the ways which Thrift identifies. For the size of the discipline, ‘physical geography’ is now well-represented in the research councils (although not equally—ask a coastal, rather than a fluvial geomorphologist!) and as Thrift maintains, there is a growing engagement with the big science model, where research programmes are identified and sustained over years, and where centres of excellence are developed and projected on an international basis. Intellectually, as well as pragmatically, this big science model has its adherents, not least because it allows similar questions or lines of research to be pursued incrementally, resulting in the emergence of more enduring work, and because it is the most rapid form of developing a research culture in students (see Clifford, 2001 for discussion). Yet, the big science model does not come without costs, and it has (implicitly, if not explicitly) been ridiculed in human geography for almost a generation. It is, therefore, somewhat paradoxical to use this as an indicator of ‘success’, especially when (as Thrift suggests later), it is also a major driver in the divergence of the discipline. Judging by RAE outcomes, too, there are grounds to question its cogency. At least three of the most successful departments (measured over at least a decade) operating the big science model in physical geography have nothing to show for their efforts. Neither the international prestige of their research groups nor research council income were sufficiently compelling to warrant even a grade 5 in two of these, or to maintain a 5* in another. Why big science should now become the litmus test for acceptability and success in physical geography is, therefore, doubly perplexing, and deserves some greater examination.

As Thrift recognises, Geography is particularly vulnerable to the big science paradox: the very success in coming closer to the practices and structures of other subjects inevitably increases the outward valence, rather than internal cohesion. All too easily, physical geographers become sedimentologists, palaeoclimatologists or environmental modellers, not by formal affiliation, but by a form of professional association which is intrinsic to their research, publication and career advance. If this is bad for Geography, then in some respects, it is the ‘physical geographers’ who have the bigger case to answer, but let us remember that geography departments have commonly been administered by human geographers, and this internal culture seems not only to have been tolerated, but actively supported.

There are other grounds, too, to be wary of a rush to embrace this form of ‘success’. Research over two decades into the sociology of scientific knowledge demonstrates that the big science model is one which relies on the culturing-in of its adherents, and the culturing-out of its opponents. Almost as a necessary consequence of the refinement of the ‘big idea’, or the practical requirement to focus on research funding to sustain the research programme and its personnel, more creative forms of enquiry are restrained. A further worry arises when, as seen in Thrift’s account, the more individualised, subtle and less resource-intensive approaches are passed off as symptomatic of the ‘one of everything mentality’ which, presumably, is now to be eschewed. Yet, it is in these forms of research that more chances are to be found to de-privilege the rigid perspectives engendered in the big science model and to reveal the interwoven nature of environment, science and society. Transcending the technical, seeing big issues in fundamentally new ways, and making connections other subjects (and subject cultures) cannot, has always been something of a (physical) geographical David and Goliath success story. Why spurn it now, especially when the reification of its alternative (as a general model of progress) offers something of a straight jacket for the next generation? Could it be that, as departments have to fight for survival in an aggressive, economically-driven world, ‘physical geography’, cast into the big science mould, is rediscovered, and that deconstruction might be set aside for the more practical concerns of ensuring a financial cross subsidy?

3. The increasing relevance of Geography

The most palpable excitement in Thrift’s account occurs when he makes the case for the relevance of Geography in a contemporary world marked (at least for the rich) by an extraordinarily dynamic socio-technological culture. This is an exciting development at the frontier of geographical research. However, events in the
real world have done much to expose the giddy volatility of the new economics, the ever-more bland political agenda, and the \textquoteleft spin' and \textquoteleft hype\textquoteright which seems to accompany these. Exciting though the frontier may be, there may be a danger in the subject being tarred with a kind of \textquoteleft brush of association', especially if, in the vanguard of the discipline, so little is evident concerning more traditional, but enduring, aspects of the global economic order and environment (see Stoddart, 1987, for some early warning signs on this). There have been those within human geography who have been voicing scepticism at the wider significance of much of this work beyond anything other than the more ephemeral cultural margins. It is particularly unfortunate that, in championing this new frontier, Thrift is also so critical of what, at first, seem more prosaic activities, particularly those \textquoteleft emanating out of consultancy'. This kind of comment is an unnecessary, and intellectually restricted caricature, which misses the opportunity to resituate Geography at a time of economic, environmental and academic change in a way which harnesses the attributes of diverse research, both substantive and methodological. Other human geographers clearly sense as much. Contrast Thrift's account, for example, with the recent editorials in the Transactions over \textquoteleft relevance' in Geography: Peck's (1999) discussion of grey geography; Massey's (2000) practising political relevance; and Anderson and Smith's (2001) emotional geographies. All of these are explorations into how (and why) geographical research can be both relevant to policy, engaged with \textquoteleft real issues' and yet remain consistent with ideals of both constructivist and non-constructivist approaches. In the early 1990s—well before geographies became grey—physical geographers were frequently confronted by the term \textquoteleft translational research' with essentially the same intellectual message. What a pity this appears to have been lost. More recently within physical geography (Agnew and Spencer, 1999), the value of revisiting traditional areas of expertise, not simply with new technologies, but with new intellectual purpose and goals drawn from a better appreciation of a dynamic, reconfiguring academic world, has been recognised (although even here, the project could do with a little more ambition). The \textquoteleft real' world respects and needs consultancy (real problems, issues and solutions) more than it respects images of the cultural margins. There can be intellectual bite, then, in all forms of research if we are imaginative enough to explore them creatively. The challenge is to retreat into this reinvention of the traditional ivory tower (virtual or real) when, for the rest of society, it has long since lost its shine. There is a need, at the risk of stretching Anderson and Smith's words, to develop geographical sensibility as well as geographical imagination!

4. Some problems in Geography

Geography, perhaps more than any other traditional university discipline, has been exercised by its own identity and a search for \textquoteleft common ground'. This has been a recurrent, but elusive quest. As time has marched on, the mental gymnastics required to make sense of a bewildering and burgeoning array of \textquoteleft geographies' (in substance) and methodologies (in practice) have become all but impossible to perform. Who but the geographers would seriously attempt to sustain a dialogue, let alone a working relationship, between researchers into cosmogenic nuclides and the commodity chain of cut flowers? Yet try we do, and, if this not to look increasingly foolish, it must, then, be turned into some kind of a virtue.

One of the major advances in the last decade is that physical geographers have become aware of, and engaged with, wider explorations of the contingency of explanation, the nature of experimentation and the role of social practice and culture in disciplinary advance. Take, for example, the ongoing discussions of the various forms of \textquoteleft realism'. A thoroughgoing collection of post-positivist scientific philosophical discussions was assembled in the 26th Binghampton Symposium Collection, The Scientific Nature of Geomorphology (Roads and Thorn, 1996). Why has this not received wider recognition? There is no doubt that we have become curiously ignorant about the major subbranches of our own discipline. Thrift notes the forced arrangement between contributions from human and physical geography in the Annals, but it is far more than this—just look at the titles, let alone the content, of essays such as Bauer et al. (1999) to see how physical geographers are both walking the walk and talking the talk of those with a more cultural turn! Maybe this is a product of the US, where, because Geography as a discipline is smaller and less entrenched institutionally, more open, less bounded, and more informed discussion can take place? In the UK, there are signs that physical geography is beginning to \textquoteleft open-up' in a similar fashion. In the overviews of physical geography presented by Gregory (2000, 2001), for example, the substantive and philosophical momentum of the past decade is not only reflected, but harnessed, in an overt attempt to capture the changing nature of the discipline and also, to chart its future restructuring. How disappointing, then, in the recent UK discussions of Geography and science to which Thrift alludes, to see an almost total disregard of the
epistemological and philosophical variety of physical geography and physical geographers—a welcome starting point for debate, here, but from an extremely parochial base, and one of the very examples of the lack of understanding, if not of respect, between the subdisciplines of which Thrift warns. But why should this have happened?

Some of the explanation is that, 20 years on, the ridiculing of positivism and the deconstructionist excesses have taken their toll. The philosophical forefront of discussions in physical geography are still substantively directed towards the philosophy of science: much contemporary human geography is no longer in the same ball game, and shows no inclination to go back. For a physical geographer, abandoning the ‘rule book’ of positivism was a big enough step, but to go further, and to abandon the ‘game’ of general explanation is at least two steps too far. What has, in effect, happened is to leave even those physical geographers who have explored the nature of explanation stranded—the grounds for mutual respect are now all but gone, because the nature of the enterprise is fundamentally different. This is the most depressing prospect of all for any kind of intellectual coexistence, let alone rapprochement, although there are still those, thankfully, who are trying.

A somewhat pragmatic approach, for example, is evident in Common heritage, shared future: perspectives on the unity of geography, which is in preparation under the editorship of John Matthews and David Herbert, professors of Physical and Human Geography at Swansea. Pragmatic, first, because it recognises that, for the discipline to survive in anything like its present form, there is a need for direction and identity, and that these are rightly products of a rich heritage—a shared past. A meaningful framework for students—to help them make sense of a varied and otherwise impenetrable array of topics and expertise housed in university departments—also demands this. Pragmatic too, because the invited chapters ranging from debates over environmentalism, remote sensing, Geography and public policy and philosophy are each co-authored by a human and physical geographer. The creation of common fora may, as Thrift indicates, be something of an enforced juxtaposition, but, at least it does allow researchers from disparate perspectives to be exposed to one another (see also the rationale of Agnew and Spencer, 1999).

5. Some prospects for the future

So where might Geography go, then, if it does survive? For Thrift, the future rests with an invigorating application of new methods, which disclose new aspects of the world; with experimentation in representation and communication; and the deepening of political thinking in which ‘geography can be a good citizen’. Granted, these are stimulating, but they are not uniquely, or even primarily geographical. To quote Thrift’s own words:

There are just too many other disciplines interested in its domain and they cannot be kept out...we have to look for a model based on respect for the quality of the work that a discipline produces.

It is not, of course disciplines, but those within them that produce this work, and unless there is a common banner, there is no reason for us, or the wider world to perceive it as ‘Geography’. The failure to collectively seek a united front is possibility of more importance in the failure of the discipline to prosper its image or defend its territory than any lack of internal philosophical or epistemological common ground. Thrift’s more caustic comments about studying the history of the discipline are a double whammy in this respect. There is nothing unadventurous about considering histories of the discipline (why shouldn’t we if there is something to be proud of?) and histories, like geographies, surely hold some lessons (see above)? What of academic stewardship—the recognition and nurturing of at least a hundred years of scholarship, discovery and experience? What legacy is there to hand on (and, as importantly, whoever will effect this?). What of the Geographical tradition? If we do not understand where we have come from, and how we have arrived where we are, then how can we choose (and choose with the sensitivities of other subjects in mind) for the future? Are we to be condemned to a kind of perpetual ‘onward and outward’ exhortation, at best, to periodically rediscover the wheel, or at worst, to march ever-onwards in delight at the new and imagined geographies of whatever flight of fancy, only to out-flank our intellectual supply line, to be outflanked by competition or resented for a kind of intellectual imperialism? What, then, of those, consigned as Thrift puts it to

Circulating through the same old conferences and thereby generally confirming geography’s presence as themselves.

Wither, then the academy! We need committed disciplinary champions well-placed to make markets. We also ‘need to want to be’ identified as Geographers, first and foremost, whatever our more obvious specialism.

A glance at admissions for the subject over the last five years will bring us back to reality: Geography still recruits well, but with increasing effort, and only a handful of departments are not now subject to clearing to fill their places. Either, when the cards are down, students will not pay in enough numbers for the smorgasboard diet of delectable treats they have been offered in the subject since the late 1980s, or other subjects appear to serve it up with more panache, or both. Again,
Geography must have an identity to project and defend in an increasingly predatory institutional environment. Given that the physical sciences find recruitment even harder, it is not the physical geographers who are subject to erosive competition. For a subject so often the butt of jokes about its ‘softness’, it on this softer ground that the territory is being ceded. The implications of some very practical decisions have been staring us in the face for a long time. How many departments have wrestled with whether to continue compulsory human and physical courses throughout the degree programme, or whether to include a balanced content to the supposedly core course in ‘philosophy and methods’ or geographical ideas? One of the messages from the study of the sciences is the power of culturing: if we do not expect (or even want) students to integrate in circumstances where we have complete control, then how much less can we expect a unitary discipline to survive, let alone thrive, when these students progress as the next generation? Which is worse: near feinting at the sight of an equation in a lecture, or derision of ‘imagined’ or ‘mystic’ geographies? The truth is, neither should ever have been indulged!

Perhaps here again, the challenge is not entirely within the discipline: there is a perception in the wider world that a geographical education is necessary, but at a very basic level—a level where such problematic questions of fusion and fragmentation simply do not arise. Much of this has to do with the divorce between the subject in the university and the schools, where, as Thrift identifies, Geography is fast disappearing into environmental or humanities course programmes. One thing on which we can all agree: this will be the death of large-scale Geography in the universities. Again, however, it has been a long time in the making, and more-or-less air-brushed form the mainstream disciplinary agenda. Institutionally, the autonomy of the examination boards has played a part—universities no longer control, or significantly influence the quality, let alone the quantity, of those they then accept—but at an individual and disciplinary level, how high on the agenda is major involvement in the wider educational process, and where is the career advancement in this? Once upon a time, we were all working to the same score.

Clearly, Geography is not the same in all countries, but it is equally clear there is a kind of academic globalisation which means that the health and status of a discipline in one country impacts, sooner or later on the health in another. Thrift’s intellectual side swipe at weaker US Geography may yet come back to haunt us in the UK. If the US is to be tarred with the hectoring theoretical stance, what are they (and others) to make of us? Over 20 years of underfunding; the mess left by an arbitrary merging of the various streams within UK higher education; and the politics of the numbers game as played in the various universities is not a record of which we should be proud. In the 1980s, there were worries about the future of the subject in the UK in a phase of underfunding (Dawson and Hebden, 1984), and despite the economics, the subject grew. Now, however, the situation is worse, because other areas of higher education are expanding, and worse still, we as a subject have done ourselves no favours. Thus, when the RAE has become as much linked with internal university management as it is with intellectual rigour or quality control nationally, can a discipline where the subject in the two leading universities (as measured by the RAE outcome overall) is judged no better than a 5, and where progress more generally over the past five years apparently falls short of other disciplines, really be that healthy? Never, since its inception as a university discipline in the UK, has Geography been so threatened, and never have the prospects looked so bleak. If UK Geography is the disciplinary standard-bearer, let us hope we can do more than make a dignified end at our intellectual Waterloo! The prospect of universities without geography departments, where the geographer is an isolated and token member of the larger faculty, is now a very real one. By some bizarre twist, better that Geography in the UK and Australasia had always been small and ‘weaker’ on the institutional stage, since it could then have developed, rather than as now seems to be happening, where the hitherto larger enterprise is lost in a kind of downsizing attending the corporate rush to restructure: the bigger they are, the harder they fall…

To conclude, then Thrift’s is an upbeat, and overtly persuasive portrait of the contemporary discipline. It has all the skill, craft and sparkle worthy of a Hollywood opening night for the academic cognoscenti, but events over the last few months in the UK are more consist with the screening of some very grim British realist film noir. Maybe at second or third order, the world is becoming more, not less geographical, but more traditional areas of geographical concern are themselves intensifying, too, and should not be passed-over. No-one owes us, as a discipline, a living. We have to go out and either make the case for the maintenance of things as they are, or be willing to reconfigure around a set of issues which wider society considers somewhat higher on the agenda than the standard diet of research councils or of the narrow preferences of the RAE panel. What has so rapidly become clear is little short of an institutionalised cull, and one which we, Geographers and academics, have ably abetted, either unwittingly or not. We do indeed, as Thrift concludes, live in a world of worlds, but for the inhabitants of our own discipline, how quickly these worlds have apparently come apart. Quickly, but perhaps not so shockingly, when, for a generation, the whole has added up to less than the sum of its parts. We should have seen this coming. Now that it has, can we, as Geographers, unite to do something about it?
References