

CRITICAL INTRODUCTIONS TO GEOGRAPHY

Tim Cresswell

# Geographic Thought

Second  
Edition

A Critical Introduction



WILEY Blackwell



# Geographic Thought

# Critical Introductions to Geography

*Critical Introductions to Geography* is a series of textbooks for undergraduate courses covering the key geographical sub-disciplines and providing broad and introductory treatment with a critical edge. They are designed for the North American and international market and take a lively and engaging approach with a distinct geographical voice that distinguishes them from more traditional and outdated texts.

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# Geographic Thought

*A Critical Introduction*

Second Edition

Tim Cresswell

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# Preface to Second Edition

As I write this, it has been 10 years since the first edition of *Geographic Thought*. A lot of thought happens in a decade. At the same time, the basic story of the development of theory in geography has not fundamentally changed. After all, the history of theory in geography up to 2013, when the first edition was published, is still the same history it was then. Strabo, Alexander von Humboldt, and Ellen Semple still did their thing. They have not been erased from history. So, writing a second edition is, in some ways, harder than writing a first edition. It is more difficult to insert myself into my own narrative of theory in geography. I said what I had to say, so why even do a second edition? As it turns out, there are a number of good reasons. First of all, clearly, a lot *has* happened in a decade. The biggest changes in this edition, nor surprisingly, happen at the end of the book, where two chapters have now become four chapters covering “more-than-physical” as well as “more-than-human” geographies, as well as chapters on postcolonial, decolonial, and anticolonial geographies and Black geographies – no longer crammed into one chapter on geography’s exclusions. These latter chapters are also implicated in the second reason for a revision – a determined attempt to diversify the geographers represented in most of the other chapters. I hesitate to call this “decolonizing” my own book (and myself) for reasons that should be clear from Chapter 14 – but it is a concerted attempt to seek out and find different voices representing different positionalities – to make the account of geographic thought less white and less male. In doing this, I paid particular attention to those authors I have substantially engaged with in order to tell the story of geographic thought. I am convinced that this exercise in diversification has made the account richer and even more inspiring than the one I gave 10 years ago.

In addition to the four new chapters (replacing two of the old ones), all except two of the chapters in the book have been updated and refreshed. Inevitably, and in line with other multiple-edition books, my account has lengthened. It is relatively easy to recognize things to include that were previously absent; it is much harder to get rid of things that I previously thought worthy of inclusion. This has happened, but sparingly. As with the first edition, writing a textbook on geographic thought comes with some interesting challenges. It is clearly supposed to be accessible enough for the students who read this as part of their education in the discipline of geography, and, at the same time, I cannot help but be aware that the book becomes part of the very thing it is about – the story of geographic thought. Textbooks are important components of the assemblage that produces the history of geography. They are among the most widely read books written in an academic context, and they are implicated in the creation of master (and other) narratives of the discipline. Sometimes this seems like quite a heavy responsibility – both telling the story of the main theoretical approaches within the discipline and recognizing that this very story is one that excludes all that is not included in the pages that follow. I remain convinced that it is important for all of us, however critically inclined, to understand the main bodies of thought that have led to where we are. I also understand that there are other stories that have not been told. I urge readers of this book to seek out those stories.



I owe thanks to the continuing insistence of Justin Vaughan at Wiley for continuing to chase me up at conferences and between times to convince me to work on this edition. I am grateful to various critics and commentators who gently (or not so gently) pointed out deficiencies in the first edition. These include the late Ron Johnston, Janice Monk, Eden Kincaid, and Lauren Fritzsche. John Paul Jones III, as editor of the “Critical Introductions,” was amazingly helpful both in the detailed care he took with the manuscript and with the thoughtful side notes, which gave me plenty to think about. Many thanks. I remain eternally grateful for my family of adventurers: my wife Carol and my no-longer kids, Owen, Alice, and Maddy. Particular thanks to Carol Jennings for the much-improved index!



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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Good evening. Welcome to Difficult Listening Hour. The spot on your dial for that relentless and impenetrable sound of Difficult Music. So sit bolt upright in that straight-backed chair, button that top button, and get set for some difficult music. (Laurie Anderson – “Difficult Listening Hour,” from “Home of the Brave,” 1986)

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people’s theories and an oblivion of one’s own. (Eagleton 2008: xii)

If the scientific investigation of any subject be the proper avocation of the philosopher, Geography, the science of which we propose to treat, is certainly entitled to a high place ... (Strabo 1912 [AD 7–18]: 1)

Geography is a profound discipline. To some this statement might seem oxymoronic. Profound geography seems as likely as “military intelligence.” Geography is often the butt of jokes in the United Kingdom. A school friend of mine who was about to start a degree in pure mathematics described my chosen degree as the “science of common sense.” I once appeared on a public radio quiz show in the United States. When the host asked me what I did and I explained I was a geography student, he asked what geographers had left to do – surely we know where Milwaukee is already? I mumbled an apologetic answer. Taxi drivers ask me to name the second highest mountain in the world, trying to catch me out by avoiding the obvious first highest. My parents thought I was going to be a weather forecaster. So why is geography profound? Why indeed would the classical Greek/Roman scholar Strabo (more on him in Chapter 2) suggest that geography deserves a “high place” and that it constitutes “philosophy”?

Strabo presented a number of answers ranging from the fact that many “philosophers” and “poets” of repute had taken geography as central to their endeavors to the fact that geography was indispensable to proper government and statecraft. But perhaps most profoundly:

In addition to its vast importance in regard to social life, and the art of government, Geography unfolds to us the celestial phenomena, acquaints us with the occupants of the land and ocean, and the vegetation,

fruits, and peculiarities of the various quarters of the earth, a knowledge of which marks him who cultivates it as a man earnest in the great problem of life and happiness. (Strabo 1912 [AD 7–18]: 1–2)

“The great problem of life and happiness.” This was and is a central philosophical and theoretical problem. How do we lead a happy life? What constitutes a good life? How should people relate to the nonhuman world? How do we make our life meaningful? These are profound questions and they are also geographical questions.

In addition to being profound, geography is also everywhere. The questions we ask are profound because of, not in spite of, the everydayness of geographical concerns. This point is well made in this extended extract from an essay by the cultural geographer, Denis Cosgrove:

On Saturday mornings I am not, consciously, a geographer. I am, like so many other people of my age and lifestyle, to be found shopping with my family in my local town-sector precinct. It is not a very special place, artificially illuminated under the multi-storey car park, containing an entirely predictable collection of chain stores – W.H. Smith, Top Shop, Baxters, Boots, Safeway and others – fairly crowded with well-dressed, comfortable family consumers. The same scene could be found almost anywhere in England. Change the names of the stores and then the scene could be typical of much of western Europe and North America. Geographers might take an interest in the place because it occupies the peak rent location of the town, they might study the frontage widths or goods on offer as part of a retail study, or they might assess its impact on the pre-existing urban morphology. But I am shopping.

Then I realise other things are also happening: I’m asked to contribute to a cause I don’t approve of; I turn a corner and there is an ageing, evangelical Christian distributing tracts. The main open space is occupied by a display of window panels to improve house insulation – or rather, in my opinion, to destroy the visual harmony of my street. Around the concrete base of the precinct’s decorative tree a group of teenagers with vividly coloured Mohican haircuts and studded armbands cast the occasional scornful glance at middle-aged consumers. ...

The precinct, then, is a highly textured place, with multiple layers of meaning. Designed for the consumer to be sure, and thus easily amenable to my retail geography study, nevertheless its geography stretches way beyond that narrow and restrictive perspective. The precinct is a symbolic place where a number of cultures meet and perhaps clash. Even on a Saturday morning I am still a geographer. Geography is everywhere. (Cosgrove 1989: 118–119)

Here, Cosgrove reflects on the way our discipline sticks close to the banal everydayness of life. It is not possible to get through an hour, let alone a day, without confronting potentially geographical questions. Shopping centers in medium-sized British towns do not seem particularly profound (when compared to the question of the origins of the universe, say), but they are. They are full of geography. But this geography is not always readily apparent. It is not just *there* like park benches or shop windows. To see it we have to have the tools to see it. We need to know about the importance of a “peak rent location” or even what a “symbolic place” is, and to know this we have to think about geography theoretically. So, geography is at the same time “profound” and everyday. Unlike theoretical physics or literary theory, it is hard to escape geography. Once you are a geographer, particularly one interested in theory, you always are a geographer. It is this confluence of the profound and the banal that gives geographical theory its special power.

This book is focused on key geographical questions. It is based on my belief that geography is profound: that the ideas geographers deal in are some of the most important ideas there are. Each of the chapters that follow may occasionally seem slightly arcane as I recount the arguments that geographers and others have with each other in the pages of journals and monographs. But at the heart are important questions. They are important both for the existential dimension of how we lead a good life and for more worldly issues of equality, justice, and our connections to the natural world. Seemingly abstract questions like how we make a home in the world and what constitutes a good life

are important precursors to pressing and grounded issues of living in the third decade of the twenty-first century, including species extinction, climate change, structural racism, global pandemics, and ongoing colonialism. I am convinced that thinking through the theoretical issues of geography at least makes us more aware of ourselves, of the world, and of our relationship with the world. It also allows us insight into so-called wicked problems facing humanity in the current moment.

While geographical questions remain central to this book, I make no claims to completeness. Geographers, like practitioners of many other disciplines, are constantly arguing about ideas. Often it is the people who are supposed to be in agreement that are doing the arguing. We are used to the idea of advocates of competing ideas clashing with each other. In these arguments, large numbers of people are lumped together as “positivists” or “Marxists” for instance. But if we look closely, we find that these groups are constantly arguing with each other too, over what it means to be a positivist or a Marxist. A book like this cannot hope to recount each and every one of these arguments. Such a book would be an encyclopedia of many volumes. Here I hope to convey what, to me, are the essential questions that geographic theory helps us to answer – questions that all of us can apply to our everyday lives in order to help us make sense of the world. This will necessarily involve ignoring the vast majority of work in geography including, undoubtedly, some work that my colleagues and others may feel is central. This book reflects my own fascinations and predilections. Theory in human geography is more complicated by orders of magnitude than what I present here. To engage with these complications, I provide suggested readings along the way (indicated with an asterisk (\*) in the References section at the end of each chapter). This is a road map and there are many small towns and hamlets and even some major cities that these roads do not connect. You will have to go off road occasionally to find them.

This book is likely to play an important role in a ritual. At some point, either as an undergraduate or as a postgraduate, geography students (particularly human geography students) have to do a course on theory, or geographic thought, or philosophy and geography. It is a rite of passage. For many, this is much like Laurie Anderson’s “difficult listening hour” – relentless and impenetrable. For two or three hours a week, students are confronted with a dizzying array of theories and philosophies each with its own particular jargon and logic. And just when one “ism” appears to make sense the next one comes over the horizon and declares it invalid, wrong, confused, or, amazingly, too simplistic. To many of us this ritual seemed a long way from doing geography. It was a diversion that took us away from getting on with our work. To some, however, and I include myself here, it made geography come alive. It was certainly difficult, but it seemed to make other parts of the discipline make sense and make our own work more profoundly connected to currents of thought that coursed not only through geography but its sister disciplines as well.

## Why Theory Matters

This ritual is important. It is important because all geographical inquiry, even that which pretends otherwise, is always shaped by theory and philosophy. To paraphrase the literary scholar, Terry Eagleton: those who say they don’t like theory mean that they don’t like someone else’s theory and are unaware of their own. So how does theory shape geographical inquiry?

First, it is there when we make choices about *what to study*. If we choose to look at the micro spaces of the home, there is a history of feminist theory urging geographers to take private space seriously. If we choose to study the structuring of public space, there are any number of theorists who have argued about the meaning of “public” (let alone the meaning of “space”). It is true that we may be unaware of these writers, and not directly influenced by them, but theory still has played a role at a number of levels. First, these previous theorists have been instrumental in making such projects acceptable as geographical research whether we have heard of them or not. A geography of the spaces of home would probably have been dismissed out of hand as a viable research project in the vast

majority of geography departments in (say) 1960. Funding bodies would probably have returned a polite rejection; many of them still would! Second, we are practicing theory ourselves when we make these decisions. We are deciding what, out of all the possible projects in an infinitely complicated world, is important to us. We are prioritizing some questions over others – promoting some parts of the world as important, as interesting. Such choices are (in part) theoretical.

The second major way in which theory shapes geographical study is in the choices we make about what to include and what to ignore in our study. Once we have decided we want to explore domestic space, we still have work to do. We have to decide what might be included in such a study. What kind of domestic space? Where? How many? Do we focus on the “things” in a space or the things people do? Is it important to explore these themes at different times of the day, week, or year? Should we look at the world of children or just the adults? Shall we link the research to the kinds of spaces the family members inhabit when they are not at home? Questions such as these are endless. They are (in part) theoretical questions.

The third major way in which theory shapes geographical study is in the choices we make about how to gather information. Theory is linked to method through methodology and **epistemology** (how we know what we know). Can we answer the questions we have set ourselves through a survey of thousands of households? Will a quantitative approach be more “scientific” and generalizable? Or do we need to live life with the inhabitants of a small number of households over a long period of time in order to get some of the depth and richness of life as it is lived? Is there archival material we could access to study these issues in the past or elsewhere? These are, of course, practical questions concerning how much money, time, expertise, and energy we have. But they are also theoretical/philosophical questions about what it is we consider important to find out, whether we are more interested in generalizability or depth. Methods are theoretical too.

The fourth major way in which theory shapes geographical study is in the choices we make about how to represent our research to others. The answer to this might seem straightforward; a standard journal paper, a monograph, in text or graphs. But we have to ask how we are going to write a text: impressionistically or with hard certainty? What kind of maps or charts will we use? Why? What journal will we choose to publish in? How will we engage with those beyond the academy? Do we even need to? All of these are theoretical questions too.

So, theory is involved in all stages of geographical research. We may not be clear about exactly how, but it is there nonetheless. And it is my assertion that it is better to be somewhat aware of this than blissfully unaware.

Claims to have no theory (claims which are frequently made) are simply delusional. Theory is everywhere, in everything we do. Without theory, life (not just geography) would be chaos. One purpose of this book is to raise awareness about which theory or theories are implicit in geographical research – to make theory less implicit and more explicit in the practice of geography. It should be an aid in making decisions about theories you like and do not like, believe in or disbelieve. Beyond that, it will provide some ways of thinking that might stimulate self-analysis about how you and those around you lead your lives. With any luck it will make you less scared of thinking difficult thoughts.

## What Is Theory?

Perhaps we have jumped the gun slightly here. Perhaps we need to define theory in order that it might make sense. The term theory can seem unduly threatening and worryingly vague. At the most general level, theory seems to refer to pretty much anything that is going on in our minds. Despite its slightly imposing implications, theory is actually a word that is used frequently in everyday speech. We say things like “Tim has a theory about that” or “In theory, that might work – but not in practice.” Here, theory refers to the realm of ideas. It is opposed to “practice” which itself often appears to mean

“reality.” Theory is thinking and practice is doing. This opposition leads many to think of theory as impractical and unreal. Theory can often be used as a term of abuse. But most things that exist in our heads are not really “theories.” Thoughts and ideas may be hopes, dreams, guesses, fears, or a host of other mental phenomena that are not strictly or wholly theoretical. Theory, in the academic sense, usually refers to organized and patterned sets of ideas rather than spur-of-the-moment thoughts. Theories are more-or-less organized ways of ordering the world which exist in our minds and which we share with others. They have a collective and enduring intellectual quality.

Clearly we perceive the world in many ways using the senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. As we move through the world, we are barraged with sensations that our body has to make some sense of. Think for a minute about the everyday activity of crossing a busy road. We can see the traffic speeding past, smell the exhaust, and see recent rain on the pavement. We can hear the surrounding people and vehicles. How do we cross the road? Is it not miraculous that we get to the other side? Why don't we stand in the middle of the road and marvel at the steady stream of perception – the roar of engines, the stream of colors? Clearly, we have to order our senses to make them make sense. The middle of the road is not a good place to stop and wonder. We did not know this as a very small child. We had to become aware of it. We make sense of the world by taking what our senses present to us and ordering it, prioritizing and assembling sensations so that we might make it to the other side. In fact we are so good at this we can do it seemingly without thinking.

This is the beginning of theory – making the complexity of the world clearer – *ordering* it and prioritizing. Avoiding death. Few would actually say that the mental processes involved in crossing the road constitute theory, but it is certainly the first step to understanding what theory can do for us.

One metaphor that is frequently used to describe theory is the “lens.” Think of theory as a *lens* that helps us see some things clearly – it imposes conceptual order on messy reality – it brings an indistinct blur into focus. Theory turns the perceived and experienced world into an “*interpreted world*.” How this happens is extremely varied and the subject of considerable debate among geographers. People use different lenses to see the same things differently – and then argue about it. Some might say, for the sake of argument, that we need only present “the facts.” This, broadly speaking, constitutes a kind of theoretical approach (whether its advocates see it this way or not) which we might call **empiricism**. An approach that tries to stay close to the things being discussed. An approach that denies abstraction. But how could we present only “the facts”? What facts? When do we stop? Which facts are relevant to our argument and which are marginal or unnecessary? To answer this, some form of lens, or ordering, is needed. In other words, we need theory.

Theory, at its most basic, is a form of ordering the multiplicity of raw experience and “facts.” It allows us to get to the other side. But there are clearly different kinds of theory, different understandings of theory, even different theories of theory.

What we mean by theory differs according to which kinds of theory we subscribe to. Human and physical geographers certainly differ in the ways they talk about theory. A theory in the natural sciences, and thus physical geography, is a much more specific thing than a theory in the social sciences or humanities. In intellectual life, at least, theory usually refers to a more systematic way of ordering the world – a set of interlinked propositions about how things in the world are connected. “Theory” (with a big T) is a word that is often used to describe a general attempt to make abstract conceptual statements about broad arenas of social life. This use of the word is more common in the humanities and the social sciences and is associated with “philosophies” – ways of thinking about questions like the meaning of existence, what it is to be human, and such like.

What theory means depends on the context in which theory is raised. The everyday use of the word theory (as in “Tim has a theory about that”) suggests that I have noted a few facts and come to some conclusion about why a set of facts present themselves as they do. Say, for instance, that I have a theory about why the University of Morningside (not the real name) hired Professor Long

(not a real name either). As Jonathan Culler has suggested, such a theory suggests “speculation” (Culler 1997). This is different from a mere guess, as a guess suggests that there is a correct answer that I do not know. That I have a theory suggests that I have come up with a plausible explanation which includes a certain level of complexity. Not an explanation that can be easily proved or disproved – simply a plausible one. Culler also notes that a theory often provides a counterintuitive explanation: an explanation that goes beyond the obvious. There is a difference between saying that the University of Morningside hired Professor Long because he was the best person for the job and saying that they hired him because he was about to be awarded a big grant or because he was having an affair with the registrar. The first explanation is hardly a theory at all. The latter two are both speculative and not obvious. They are kinds of theories.

When we enter the more specialized world of academic discourse, we see that theory is polysyllabic (has many meanings). Theory comes on many levels. **Marxism** is a theoretical approach in geography and across the social sciences and humanities. So is Marxism a theory? Well, only in a general sense. As we will see in Chapter 7, Marxism includes an array of theories that add up to a coherent philosophy. It includes a theory about how history happens (historical materialism), an economic theory about how things get value (the labor theory of value), a theory about people’s relationship to commodities (commodity fetishism), and any number of other theories each with a particular arena of human life that it purports to explain. Together they add up to a potent political philosophy. These theories are quite particular and logically coherent (even when wrong). They cannot be tested in quite the same way as a theory in physical science. They cannot easily be falsified. In the history of geographical theory, there are also specific theories that are meant to explain particular aspects of the human interaction with the earth. **Spatial science** is premised on a philosophy of **positivism** (see Chapter 5) but includes a number of theories such as **central place theory**, **spatial interaction theory**, etc. Again, these are specific theories that purport to explain particular things, patterns, and processes.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of a set of ideas referred to as “social theory.” **Social theory** naturally formed part of sociology. As the name indicates, it provides theory about society. But social theory quickly became interdisciplinary. Social theory has been practiced by sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, literary theorists, and human geographers, among others. Social theory addresses the way society is structured and occasionally transformed. As we will see over the course of this book, the transformation and reproduction of social distinctions such as **class** and **gender** often, perhaps always, involve elements we could call geographical – **space**, **place**, **territory**, etc. It is not surprising, therefore, that, since the 1970s at least, geographers have been keen to embrace and practice social theory. Indeed, some geographers are at the heart of what can only retrospectively be called social theory from the nineteenth century – the theories of **anarchism** inherent in the work of Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin (see Chapter 3).

Since the 1970s, at least, human geographers have begun to use the word “theory” in a new kind of way. This new approach to theory does not refer to theories of something (like the labor theory of value or spatial interaction theory), but simply “theory.” This new way of using theory is not unique to human geography but imported from (and shared with) literary studies, cultural studies, continental philosophy, and all places in between. Indeed “theory” is used to refer to work that seems to have utility to thinkers across a range of fields. “Theory” challenges many of the commonsense assumptions behind thinking in a range of disciplines. Most of the time we associate this realm of theory with continental European thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, or Luce Irigaray. It is hard to say which discipline someone like Foucault belongs to. His work speaks across disciplines and is thus different from, for instance, spatial interaction theory, which speaks to a small and quite specialized group of people. “Theory” is unlikely to be about something as specific as the reasons for people’s movements in space. It is, as Culler has put it, “about everything under the sun” (Culler 1997: 3).



Theory is often overtly political. Certainly, the traditions of critical social theory sought not simply to understand the world but, as Marx suggested, to change it. Clearly the various theories associated with Marx are designed first to understand why the world is like it is and then to come up with a better (by which we mean, more just) alternative. Likewise, the central message of feminist theory concerns the unequal position of women vis-à-vis men in society and argues for a transformation of that situation. The term **critical theory** is often used to refer to sets of ideas that are designed to provide a critique of the way things are and promote something better – the way things could be. The Black, feminist scholar of race, gender, and many other things, bell hooks, wrote in a powerful paper about being a Black woman using theory. She has frequently been confronted with the idea that theory is irrelevant. Or even that theory is inherently “White” or “masculine.” “You can’t tear down the master’s house using the master’s tools,” she was told. Theory here is yet again contrasted with practice. In this case, political practice. In response, hooks makes a spirited argument for theory as liberatory practice, as something that enlivens and enrages, as something that challenges common sense and reveals the forms of power that stand behind it. Theory is practice, she argues, and when done well, in a way that does not deliberately exclude and obfuscate, it can change lives and become a positive force toward social transformation (hooks 1994). Theory for some, then, is about the practice of politics, about seeking a fairer and more just world than the one we currently inhabit.

All this talk of “theory” will seem strange to a physical geographer. Theory in physical geography, with a few exceptions, is quite different (see Chapter 13). A textbook on theory in physical geography (a relatively rare phenomenon when compared to the array of such books available to human geographers) defined theory as “a framework of ideas that guide what we think reality is and how to go about studying it” (Inkpen 2005: 36). More specifically, some define theories as a systematically ordered set of hypotheses interlocked by a network of deductive relationships (Von Englehardt and Zimmerman 1988). A theory here is a kind of higher-level hypothesis. A theory is a grand hypothesis that sits on top of a larger set of small-scale hypotheses that themselves predict and explain certain kinds of facts in the world. As most physical geography happens in a more-or-less positivist framework, they tend to be testable. Physical geographers, on the whole, believe that knowledge can be linked to some pre-existing reality (the physical world) that it seeks to explain. Until quite recently, they have rarely been interested in how that knowledge might play a role in constituting the reality they are describing.

## Theory, Writing, and Difficulty

One of the major difficulties faced by students of theory in geography and elsewhere is the kind of writing that they encounter. Some of it is simply bad. Some of it is deliberately obfuscating. “Long words strung together in no particular order,” as one physical geography colleague once put it to me. There are a number of reasons for this. Writing in this way can make the writer seem clever when in fact what they have to say is simple. The historian Patricia Limerick expressed this in the following way:

In ordinary life, when a listener cannot understand what someone has said, this is the usual exchange:

LISTENER: I cannot understand what you are saying.

SPEAKER: Let me try to say it more clearly.

But in scholarly writing in the late 20th century, other rules apply. This is the implicit exchange:

READER: I cannot understand what you are saying.

ACADEMIC WRITER: Too bad. The problem is that you are an unsophisticated and untrained reader. If you were smarter, you would understand me.

The exchange remains implicit, because no one wants to say, “This doesn’t make any sense,” for fear that the response, “It would, if you were smarter,” might actually be true. (Limerick 1993: 3)

In her article, Limerick provides two examples from academics to illustrate her point that academics often write as poorly as their students. One of these examples is the geographer Allan Pred. This is what Limerick has to say about the words of Allan Pred quoted in the first paragraph:

If what is at stake is an understanding of geographical and historical variations in the sexual division of productive and reproductive labor, of contemporary local and regional variations in female wage labor and women's work outside the formal economy, of on-the-ground variations in the everyday content of women's lives, inside and outside of their families, then it must be recognized that, at some nontrivial level, none of the corporal practices associated with these variations can be severed from spatially and temporally specific linguistic practices, from languages that not only enable the conveyance of instructions, commands, role depictions and operating rules, but that also regulate and control, that normalize and spell out the limits of the permissible through the conveyance of disapproval, ridicule and reproach.

In this example, 124 words, along with many ideas, find themselves crammed into one sentence. In their company, one starts to get panicky. "Throw open the windows; bring in the oxygen tanks!" one wants to shout. "These words and ideas are nearly suffocated. Get them air!" And yet the condition of this desperately packed and crowded sentence is a perfectly familiar one to readers of academic writing, readers who have simply learned to suppress the panic. (Limerick 1993: 3)

Ideally this would not be the case. Writing, at its best, is an exercise in democracy. It is about sharing ideas. If the idea is not clearly expressed, it cannot be shared.

There is, however, another side to this argument. Some ideas are simply difficult. No matter how clear the writing, the idea will remain difficult. Consider a scenario in which a mathematician or a physicist presents a new theorem. The equations are likely to be difficult (but ultimately explainable and even aesthetically pleasing). A trained scientist might have trouble grasping it and a novice student would find it totally incomprehensible. I would not know where to start. Yet I cannot imagine anyone asking the inventor of the theorem to make it simpler or easier to understand. Scientists have to live with the fact that their science is difficult. You need to be trained to understand it. You have to struggle with it before it becomes clear. So why should geography be any different? Perhaps because many people believe that human geography exists within a realm of common sense. But just as the novice physicist needs to be trained to comprehend complicated science, so the novice geographer needs a theory course to get to grips with theory. This involves reading difficult stuff. Some of this difficult stuff is, indeed, badly written. Some, however, is just difficult.

There is also some unfairness in Limerick's discussion of the passage from Pred. Allan Pred was a geographer who worked with writing his whole life – and his life was full of ideas (we will come across some of them in the pages that follow). He continually tried to invent new kinds of writing to better represent what he was trying to say (most often a style known as "montage" borrowed from the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin). Such experimentation undoubtedly provokes failure on occasions. I have often been frustrated by his writing and have given up on it. Recently, however, I read his book *The Past Is Not Dead* (Pred 2004) from beginning to end. While it would be easy to pick out a sentence or paragraph for ridicule, the effect of the whole book (which includes a strategy of seemingly endless repetition of key ideas) was extremely powerful and left me convinced of the value of experimentation.

As well as style there is the issue of jargon. It is an easy put-down of another writer to refer to the writing as full of jargon. Jargon is most often a pejorative term. To refer to writing as jargon often simply means that the reader does not understand it. But jargon merely refers to specialized language. In this sense the word "drumlin" is jargon because it is a specialized term for a smooth rounded lump in the landscape formed in a glacial environment. Most people who have not taken elementary physical geography will not know this. Why not just say "small hill"? The answer, of course, is that

there are all kinds of small hill, and not all of them are produced by glaciers in a particular way. The same applies in human geography.

Writing in the realm of theory often involves unfamiliar words. Sometimes these are neologisms – or new words. Consider, for instance, the following geographical text:

I suggest the term *spant*, an acronym for *SPace ANd Time* unit. The size of a spant could be noted as appropriately needed by subscripts referring precisely to longitudes, latitudes, dates and times of the day ... History is the study of spants. When a parent tells a youngster “this is not the time or place to behave like that” the child rearing effort has been focused on a spant. (M. Melbin quoted in Billinge 1983: 409)

Why use new words when it would be much simpler, and gentler on the reader, to simply use “plain English”? Often neologisms are unnecessary and obfuscating. Certainly, Mark Billinge was upset by this particular neologism along with a whole array of writing in geography emerging in the 1980s. His response to the spant is as follows:

This kind of manufactured jargon is really quite unnecessary. The assertion of the last sentence of the second passage is highly questionable despite the certainty implied, whilst taken at face value the whole exercise is quite absurd. Historians might be interested to know that they are really spantologists, but the amusement would soon wear off. Equally, the human race has handled its understanding of time and space thus far without recourse to spants, and it is unlikely that whatever mysteries remain will be uncovered by the incorporation of spant into the vocabulary. In practice this kind of jargon is worthless since it adds nothing to our ability to express ideas and consequently it will not endure. It will have limited “spant.” (Billinge 1983: 409)

Writing 40 years later, I can confirm that the spant did not endure. On the other hand, there are good reasons to be inventive in this way. The problem with words we use every day is that, for the most part, we tend to think we already know what they mean. Words like “culture” and “nature” for instance are fairly commonplace. We have a vague idea of what they mean and, in everyday life, we don’t spend too much time questioning them. In fact these two words have been described by the literary theorist Raymond Williams as two of the most complicated words in the English language and yet we think they are obvious. Williams wrote several books which attempted to understand and explain the meaning of culture and in doing so he invented terms such as “structure of feeling” and used terms such as “hegemony” (Williams 1977). Another cultural theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, invented or adopted a whole slew of new terms with which to think about culture – “doxa,” “habitus,” “disposition” (Bourdieu 1990). What happens when we encounter these terms? Most obviously we do not immediately think we know what the writer is talking about. We have to move out of our everyday attitude and think about what these writers mean by these terms. We are forced to reflect. Neologisms, used well, will make us think and have the power to produce new insights. Consider another example of supposedly “bad writing” given by Billinge:

In a supportive physical environment time-space routines and *body-ballets* of the individual may fuse into a larger whole, creating a space-environment dynamic called *place-ballet*. (David Seamon quoted in Billinge 1983: 408)

Billinge described this as “the coining of new and generally superfluous terms” (Billinge 1983: 408). Unlike the ill-fated “spants,” however, the notions of time–space routines, bodyballets, and place-ballets have all endured. Indeed, they feature in Chapter 6. Anyone reading the whole paper from which this quote is taken should be able to understand them easily enough and the terms help to develop new and different understandings of place which have been developed by a number of geographers in productive ways.

And human geographers are not the only ones who use jargon and resort to neologisms. I have already described how “drumlin” can be considered jargon. Consider the remarkable career of William Morris Davis, one of the two or three most important people in the development of physical geography:

Davis’s geographical language was enriched by his constant invention of new terms. He coined more than a hundred and fifty technical terms. ... Many are anatomical, such as elbow of capture, eyebrow scarp, or beheading; some are typical locations such as morvan or monadnock. They heightened the universal appeal of Davisian methodology, although occasionally a certain term gave a foothold for disapproval. ... A few of the terms were stillborn; but most survived and some diffused into the general language, even into modern poetry. Davis would have been flattered to read in W.H. Auden’s “Age of Anxiety”: “O stiffly stand, a staid monadnock/On her penneplain.” (Beckinsale 1976: 455)

## Theory and the History of Geography

One way of writing or reading a book about geographical theory is as a history of the discipline. Indeed the “difficult listening” course that forms a core part of most geography degrees often doubles as an introduction to theory and as a survey of the discipline’s history. This is, at least in part, because accounts of theory often proceed chronologically. The passage of time imposes a kind of narrative on ideas that makes it easier to follow. When this happens, it may appear as an account of progress, with one set of ideas being challenged and replaced by another set of ideas, and so on. Eventually we get to the present where our ideas, now, are better, more correct, more subtle, cleverer than the dusty old, simplistic, inferior ideas of the past. It is certainly true that to understand theory in geography, we have to understand important elements of the history of the discipline – or geography as a body of knowledge. But they are not the same thing. Geography is a lot more than its theories. A history of geography includes the development of its national institutions, the biographies of key players, the development of techniques, the relationships between geography and the state, and a host of other, equally interesting factors.

It would also be a mistake to think that the story of geographical theory is a story of simple progress. There are plenty of instances of geographers forgetting their past and coming up with “new” ideas that are simply new versions of old ones. Similarly, most of the key theoretical contributions to the discipline did not simply disappear when challenged by new ones. Even a set of theories as widely challenged as **environmental determinism** (the idea that the natural environment determines human life and culture) still has its advocates.

It is important to recognize that the development of theory in geography exists within wider histories. When re-reading the first edition of this book, over a decade after I wrote it, I was struck by how my knowledge of theory in geography has been limited by my standpoint as a White, British, cisgendered man educated in the UK and USA. While I attempted to acknowledge these limitations in the final chapter of the book, it was insufficient. In the last several decades, Geography (and sister disciplines) has seen a concerted effort to engage with the viewpoint and theories of scholars from beyond the usual suspects – people who share elements of my upbringing and education including the privileges that come with my Whiteness, masculinity and generally Western/Global North education. My point is not to apologize for this but to work on doing something about it. In part, this means “decolonizing” my own textbook. In addition to recognizing the ways geographic thought has been complicit with all manner of injustices – something I think the first edition did reasonably well – an account of geographic thought has to engage with (not just cite) the voices and ideas of a more diverse caste of theorists. Some might argue that it is not even necessary to learn about the ideas of the figures who have become canonical in geographic thought and that a text such as this

could be written that said nothing about Carl Sauer, Ellen Semple, Alexander von Humboldt, or David Harvey. They might argue that it is even dangerous to study their writings as doing so would lead us straight into conventional modes of thinking that would simply reproduce forms of privilege. I still believe it is necessary to understand the work of these people (and many more like them) in order to understand the discipline of geography in the present moment. What I have tried to do in the chapters that follow is make a concerted attempt to engage with a wider range of voices than those that were heard in the first edition. Decolonial theorists, drawing on the thoughts of the Zapatista movement, write of a conceptual **pluriverse** – recognizing the co-existence of many worlds that call into the question the claims to universality made by academia in the Global North (EZLN 1996). It is important to recognize that much of the history of geographic thought in this book involves the constitution of that universe as part of a colonial project. I hope it makes clear that this lineage of geographic thought is in fact, like other lineages elsewhere, one that is specific to particular places that have been at the heart of colonial projects.

The development of human consciousness is reflected in the history of geographical theory. How to relate this history presents me with some problems. There are many ways to write a book on geographical theory and there are many excellent books already in existence. This book could be written biographically as an account of the ideas of key figures in the development of geographical thought. Ritter met Reclus, Harvey supervised Smith, Santos collaborated with Chomsky. A family tree of geographers would not be without interest. We will see in the early chapters of this book just how influential particular geographers were in the development of ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is some of this kind of account in the pages that follow. It could be written through places where theories were developed: German geography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, radical theories in Clark University, Massachusetts, spatial science at the University of Washington, or even new cultural geography in Lampeter, Wales. Places will be referred to. It could be approached through the concept of paradigms. Here, one set of ideas holds dominance for a period of time before being challenged and essentially replaced by another set of ideas: regional geography by spatial science, spatial science by humanism and Marxism, and so on. This is not a paradigmatic account but introduces bodies of thought in more or less the order they emerged. I have no intention, however, of suggesting that sets of theories replaced each other. They are all ongoing, living traditions of thought with fierce advocates and detractors. I could also tell this story contextually, describing the development of ideas in relation to other things going on in the world beyond the discipline: historical events, social contexts – forces exerted from outside the discipline (imperialism, religion, war, etc.). I will keep an eye on these. But at the heart of this book are key questions for geographers: key ideas that geographers have puzzled over and argued about. Everything else is secondary to them. We have a lot to offer the world. We are a profound discipline.

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# Chapter 2

## Early Geographies

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Long ago no divisions existed between humans, animals and spirits. All things of the earth, sky, and, water were connected and all beings could pass freely between them. The Raven was a trickster full of supernatural power. He stole the sun from his grandfather Nasshahkeeyahl and made the moon and stars from it. The Raven created lakes, rivers and filled the lands with trees. He divided night and day, then pulled the tides into a rhythm. He filled the streams with fresh water, scattered the eggs of salmon and trout, and placed animals in the forests. The first human was hiding in a giant clamshell and Raven released them onto the beaches and gave humans fire. Raven disappeared and took with him the power of the spirit world to communicate and connect with humans. (Traditional Haida Creation Story [https://web.archive.org/web/20120611074256/http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied\\_history/tutor/firstnations/haida.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20120611074256/http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/firstnations/haida.html) accessed June 12, 2022)

The account above is a version of the creation story of the Haida people of Haida Gwaii off the west coast of British Columbia in the land that is now called Canada. It is an account of how the world came into being. It is also an example of geographic thought that has been handed down in an oral tradition for hundreds of years. Accounts like this, creation stories of Indigenous cultures, exist around the world in a myriad of different forms. Humans exist in places and in ways that relate to other living and non-living things. As long as humans have been thinking, they have been thinking geographically. Despite this, accounts of geographic thought (including this one) tend to focus on thought from within the discipline of geography. I wanted to start with this account in order to make it clear that this book is not about all geographic thought. It is about geographic thought from within the discipline of geography – a creation of the last several hundred years in Europe and North America that, thanks to various forms of imperialism and colonialism, has become the dominant way of thinking geographically. This is not just a recognition of the fact of different kinds or traditions of geographic thought – it is an acknowledgement that the ideas contained in this book have been active agents in the marginalization and, sometimes, attempted eradication, of other ways of thinking geographically. Recent work from within the discipline of geography has begun to take the existence of other modes of geographic thought seriously and we will see how this has been done in the final chapters of the book. Despite the role of disciplinary geography in the erasure of other ways

of knowing, however, I continue to tell its story. I do so both to show how its ideas are complicit with largely White, western, Global North forms of oppression and domination and to show how, despite this, it still contains a host of ideas that are illuminating and profound and can be and have been used for good as well as insidious ends. Martin Heidegger, a philosopher we will meet in Chapter 6, was a member of the Nazi party – but critical theorists still find value in some of his ideas. Alexander von Humboldt (who we meet in the next chapter) was clearly involved in a colonial enterprise as he traveled the world to form his theories but, as we will see, he also produced anti-colonial ideas along the way. This is not an account of good and bad in black and white. It is more nuanced and contextual. At the outset, however, I want to recognize that the discipline of geography is both the home of useful and profound ideas *and* an enterprise thoroughly implicated in the attempted erasure of other ideas from beyond its euro-American homelands. My purpose in writing this book is to trace how both have been true. It is worth remembering, however, that many forms of geographic thought existed before the formal discipline of geography emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe. As this is an account of geographic thought within the discipline of geography, the starting point, as with most academic disciplines, is the ancient Mediterranean world.

In a paper called “What time human geography?” Rhys Jones charts how human geography has, over time, become increasingly fixed in the present (Jones 2004). Geographers in the early twenty-first century have tended to focus on the world since about 1800. This has not always been the case. In the 1950s, for instance, geographers would often explore the period before 1800. In the period 1956–1960, 31% of human geography papers in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* concerned time periods before 1800. In the period 1996–2000, the figure was 11%. While it is always harder to get information about the distant past, it is unlikely that it is harder now than it was 60 years ago. One of the reasons Jones gives for human geography’s temporal myopia is that historical geographers (those geographers who should be most interested in the past) have increasingly turned to the history of the discipline of geography itself. As a discipline, geography has only existed since the nineteenth century. Whatever the reason, Jones argues that this foreshortening of the time periods of human geography has impoverished the discipline. The past is important geographically because present geography will one day be past and because past geography was once present. To properly understand the geography of the present, we need to know what came before. We need to know how we got here. While Jones’s arguments are primarily about what geographers study (states, empires, landscape, etc.), they are also true of geographical theory. They are true in two main ways. Books about geographical theory have increasingly taken the period since 1945 (and more often 1960) as their starting point (Peet 1998; Hubbard 2002; Aitken and Valentine 2006). Like human geography itself, the study of geographical theory is being foreshortened. And this leads to the second similarity. Just as we cannot properly understand a contemporary place without some understanding of its history, so we cannot understand modern geographical theory without some understanding of where it came from. So while this chapter deals with the very distant past, the questions at the heart of it are broadly translatable into questions geographers are still asking today. These include: How is human life related to the natural world? What are the significant differences between places? How is the particular related to the general and universal? While not being quite at the level of “what is the meaning of life?” these are nonetheless profound questions that demand answers that are equally geographical and philosophical. They are questions that link all of the chapters that follow.

Knowing something about the deep past of our discipline stops us from reinventing the wheel. There is very little engagement between geographers today and geography over 20 years ago. Some of these geographers might be surprised at what they might find. Consider a paper I read while writing the first edition of this book. I will not say when it was written or who wrote it – I will simply summarize parts of its argument. At the end, of course, I will give the author due credit.

The author is arguing for a reformulation of the central interests of human geographers. He (I will give that much away) argues that human knowledge is hampered by the way disciplines have been



constructed over the past century or so. The division of faculties of arts and sciences, he argues, has left geography feeling a little uncomfortable, a little unsure of itself, with no obvious place to locate. Modern geography, he argues, is too focused on the material world, on the world of things. In so doing, he continues, geography has emphasized the shape of things, the morphology of objects “that nobody had previously thought worthy of study.” He focuses on those relatively fixed geographical ideas that are familiar to all of us – particularly the idea of the **region**, but also **territory** and **landscape**. He complains that these ideas are far too object-like – too brittle and immobile. “Regions are not fossilised,” he writes, “they are active and growing entities, since the men who organise them are moving, working and thinking beings.” He argues, then, for a dynamic view of geography that puts its emphasis not on boundaries and fixities, not even on patterns or networks, but on “men and things moving.” In many ways these observations could have been written very recently (if you exclude the frequent references to “men”). Doreen Massey has asked us to consider places as constantly dynamic things produced through constant flows within place and between places. The recent mobility turn in human geography has urged us to focus on “men and things moving” (although women are also included now, of course) (Cresswell and Merriman 2010). But this was written in 1938 by the Scottish geographer P. R. Crowe (Crowe 1938). He is not a figure familiar to many of us and yet his arguments would have to be repeated several times over before we arrived where we are now. Old geographies can, indeed, be very useful to those of us practicing in the present day.

It is impossible to say where and when geography, and more precisely geographical theory, began. In a sense, we are all geographical theorists in so far as we make decisions about things like where to live, what to eat, where to avoid late at night, and where to go on holiday. In 1947, the geographer John Kirkland Wright coined the term “geosophy” to describe what we might call the geographical imagination or geographical knowledge (Wright 1947). At the time, he was making the argument that geographers could benefit from exploring the geographical knowledges of non-academic, everyday, folk – fisherman, lorry drivers, farmers, nurses – in order to understand how their ways of knowing the world influenced their everyday lives. What he was saying was that we are all geographers, all theorists – we all make sense of the randomness of the world in geographical ways. To limit an account of geographical theory to geographers, or even academics, is therefore slightly wrong-headed. If we all have geographical theories, then it seems just as certain that the earliest humans were engaging in geographical theory – perhaps concerning where food was most abundant or where they were safest from predators.

Veronica della Dora makes the continuity of geographical theory clear in her consideration of the conceptual metaphor of the earth’s “mantle” over time, showing how this geographic concept of the surface of the earth appears across many geographical imaginations.

The Babylonians envisaged the sky as a mantle. Egyptians devised a “living mantle” in the shape of the goddess Nut, whose elongated body formed an arch, literally wrapping and sheltering the earth. Indian mythology similarly refers to a hill goddess who lifted herself from the ground, acting as a protective mantle for the people and animals of her region when it was attacked by the rage of Indra, the divinity of the thunderbolt. Myths from Central Africa describe the earth being “rolled out like a mat,” while the Quran likens it to a carpet spread out by Allah and held in place by “firm mountains” that serve as weights or pegs. In the Māori tradition, the Nga Uri cloak is symbolic of care and protection of the earth, while Native American mythology ascribed the birth of summer to a “new cloak of green” unfolded by the Shining One upon Mother Earth, “beautiful with all her flowers and birds,” and to a soft cloak of dark blue subsequently spread over the sky, in which many a star sparkled and twinkled. (della Dora 2021: 18–19)

Here, della Dora traces the generative metaphor of the idea of the mantle across space and time reminding us that geographic thought happens continuously and in many sites that exist outside of what we normally think of as the discipline of geography.

## Classical Geographical Theory

### Herodotus and Eratosthenes

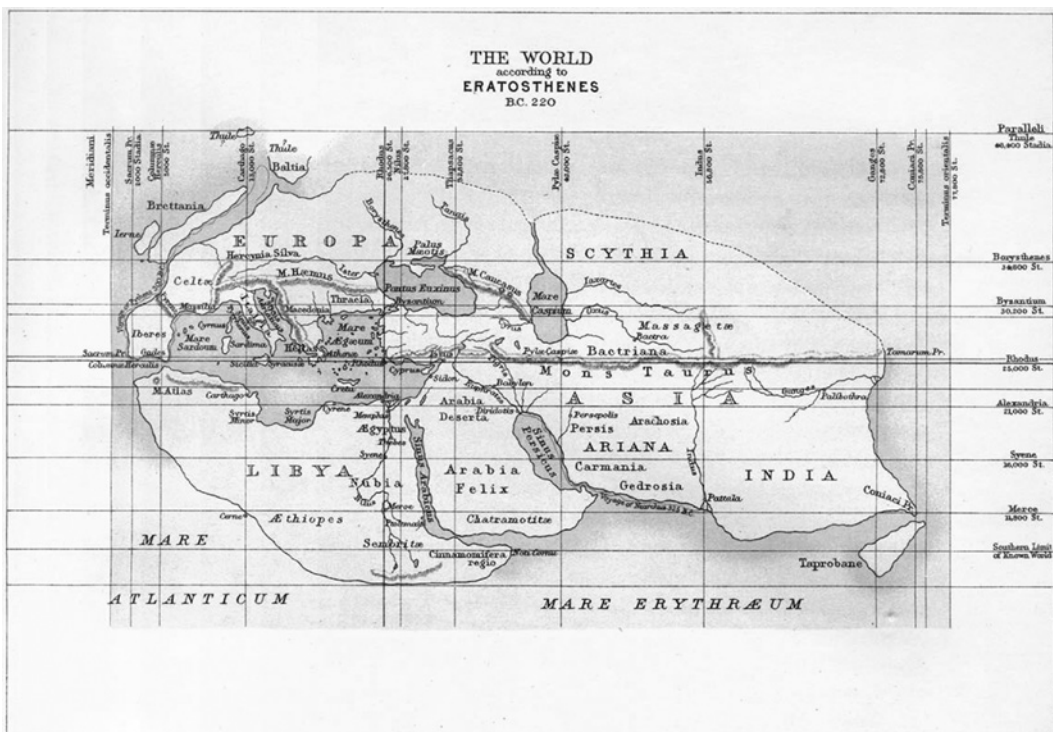
The earliest written accounts we know of, which are clearly geographies, were written by Greek philosophers and historians who laid down some of the foundations for geography as an intellectual enterprise. The Greeks were responsible for the production of elaborate topographical descriptions of places in the known world. These descriptions covered both the natural conditions (climate, soil fertility, etc.) and culture and way of life. The “father of history” Herodotus of Halicarnassus (485–425 BC), for instance, described the flow of the Nile and suggested that its source might be melting ice on Mount Kilimanjaro (this proved to be a mistake but a good theory nonetheless). Indeed, his account of Egypt, based on extensive travels and what we might now recognize as “interviews” of local priests and librarians, is full of observations ranging from the natural world to the customs and beliefs of the people. The following extract, for instance, starts with the climate and goes on to observe gender differences in everyday appearance and behavior: It is hardly surprising that Herodotus is claimed as the father of both “history” and “anthropology,” but he surely has some claims on geography too.

The Egyptians in agreement with their climate, which is unlike any other, and with the river, which shows a nature different from all other rivers, established for themselves manners and customs in a way opposite to other men in almost all matters: for among them the women frequent the market and carry on trade, while the men remain at home and weave; and whereas others weave pushing the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards: the men carry their burdens upon their heads and the women upon their shoulders: the women make water standing up and the men crouching down: they ease themselves in their houses and they eat without in the streets, alleging as reason for this that it is right to do secretly the things that are unseemly though necessary, but those which are not unseemly, in public: no woman is a minister either of male or female divinity, but men of all, both male and female: to support their parents the sons are in no way compelled, if they do not desire to do so, but the daughters are forced to do so, be they never so unwilling. The priests of the gods in other lands wear long hair, but in Egypt they shave their heads: among other men the custom is that in mourning those whom the matter concerns most nearly have their hair cut short, but the Egyptians, when deaths occur, let their hair grow long, both that on the head and that on the chin, having before been close shaven. (Herodotus 2007 [450 BC]: npn)

Herodotus is known for a nine-volume account of the Persian wars of 490–479 BC (recently recalled to us in the film *300*). To discover the cause of these wars, Herodotus recounts a vast context of the known world at the time, including a foray through Egypt (Book 2) from which the above quotation is taken. In his account of Egypt, Herodotus seemingly attempted to tell us everything it is possible to know about the region, from the plant life and animals and the flow of rivers to the toilet habits of the inhabitants. Indeed, it is not until well into the fifth volume that the reader encounters the events at the center of this first “history” – the wars between the Persians and Greeks in which the massively outnumbered Greeks finally defeat the Persian Empire. West defeats east. For four and a half volumes, Herodotus seems to be avoiding the subject. Or was he? What we get in these pages is a geographical and, more explicitly, geopolitical, context for the rise of the all-conquering Persian Empire. At the center of this story is how the Persian Empire outgrew its “natural” setting. The Persian Empire, he is telling us, belonged in the east, in what we now know as Asia, and by attempting to incorporate Greece it was overstretching, becoming “unnatural.” His account of Egypt is just one of many digressions that tell us how human life is mapped on to natural circumstances. Nature, or environment, determines culture. The account of Persian expansion includes many stories of, not the domination of people by other people, but the domination of nature. The Persian army was said to drink rivers dry. In other places it tried to make rivers where no rivers had previously existed.

The army became so large it could not feed itself. One of its most famous defeats occurred when a huge navy, advancing on Athens, was destroyed by a massive storm. The empire had reached its natural limits and it had no right to enter “Europe.” In doing so, it doomed itself. What we have in Herodotus, then, is a combination of **environmental determinism** and Greek tragedy (in which a mistake inevitably, because of fate, leads to downfall). This is a geographical theory. History depends on geography.

While Herodotus wrote detailed narrative accounts of his travels accompanied by theories concerning both the natural and human worlds, others attempted more systematic geographies. Eratosthenes (276–194 BC), the Librarian of the Library at Alexandria – calculated the circumference of the earth and developed systems of coordinates (latitude and longitude) that are the forerunners for the locational system we program into global positioning systems (GPS) today. His estimate of the earth’s circumference reveals an innovative mixture of observation and theory. There are some things he knew from experience, observation, and prior knowledge. He knew, for example, that the sun would appear at its zenith (directly overhead) during the summer solstice at noon in the town of Syene (more or less on the Tropic of Cancer). In Alexandria, at the same time, he measured the angle of the elevation of the sun at 1/50 of a full circle south of the zenith. He believed that Alexandria was due north of Syene (it wasn’t) and concluded that the distance between Syene and Alexandria must be 1/50 of the earth’s circumference. He estimated the distance between the two cities as about 500 nautical miles and thus came up with a circumference of 46,620 km (about 16% larger than we now know it to be). This estimation was still used several hundred years later and is remarkably close (see Figure 2.1).



**Figure 2.1** The world according to Eratosthenes. Source: From *Cram’s Universal Atlas: Geographical, Astronomical and Historical* (1895).

The geographies of Herodotus and Eratosthenes are remarkable in their own right but perhaps even more remarkable in that they prefigure and illustrate two of the central ways in which geographical theory operates today. While Herodotus was busy cataloguing the areas he traveled through and heard about, Eratosthenes was busy wondering how to measure the world and provide a reliable grid of reference points for navigation. Herodotus, then, was fascinated by the particularity of different places and what made them unique (even if framed by a general theory of environment and fate). Eratosthenes, on the other hand, was interested in producing a common measure that bound the whole earth into a unified system of reference points. He was developing a universal and quite mathematical geography that was not primarily interested in the particular – in what one place was like and how it differed from the next one. What the combined work of these two scholars reveals is an emerging sense of order in the world – an interest in a whole inhabited world beyond the immediate confines of the local. The Greeks referred to this world as the *oikoumene* (later, *ecumene*) or the “inhabited earth.” Just as the interest in places (Herodotus) and objective space (Eratosthenes) prefigure debate 2000 years later, so does this concept of the global *ecumene*. For it is largely the inhabited earth that interests geographers today. Humans, after all, exist in a thin layer from just below the earth’s surface to just above it. This is geography’s layer. Go too far beyond it and you enter the world of astronomy, go too far below and you are in the realm of geology. Geography as the study of the *ecumene* is not a bad definition of our discipline.

### *Kenon, chora, and topos*

The very different geographies of Herodotus and Eratosthenes are frequently held up as examples of early geography. This is because the kinds of knowledge they produced match modern expectations about what geography is – a knowledge of places on the one hand and a science of space on the other. But in many ways it was other Greeks – particularly philosophers – who were busy asking questions that would form the basis for large parts of contemporary geographical theory. Consider for instance the concepts of *kenon*, *chora*, and *topos* developed by Plato and Aristotle.

The concept of *kenon* referred to the void in which all other things exist – a realm which is homogeneous and undifferentiated. *Kenon* is arrived at when one abstracts a thing from its surroundings. It is pure extension. This notion of eternal emptiness became the basis of scientific, abstract, notions of space. It was further developed by Descartes and Newton, among others, and forms the basis for all kinds of science that depend on abstract notions of space.

*Chora* comes from Plato’s (428–348 BC) discussion of the process of becoming – the way in which existence takes shape out of the void of *kenon*. Becoming, in Plato’s terms, is a process that involves three elements – that which becomes, that which is the model for becoming, and the place or setting for becoming (Casey 1997). This final element is *chora*, a term which implies both extent in space and the thing in that space that is in the process of becoming. It is often translated as a receptacle and differs from the void of *kenon* in that it always refers to a thing within it – it is not empty. *Topos* is often used interchangeably with *chora* in Plato but is usually more specific. While *chora* most often referred to a place in the process of becoming, *topos* would refer to an achieved place. Later, Aristotle would use *chora* to describe a country while *topos* would describe a particular region or place within it. Both *chora* and *topos* would eventually become part of geographical language through the notion of chorology (the study of regions) and topography (the shape of the land surface). Both *chora* and *topos* are different from the notion of *kenon* (the void) in that they refer to something more particular – more like place than space. While *kenon* is limitless space, *chora* and *topos* are finite and contain things (Casey 1997; Malpas 1999).

If anything, Plato’s student, Aristotle (384–322 BC), had even more fundamental things to say about one of geography’s most basic concepts – place. To Aristotle, place is a necessary starting point

from which it is possible to understand both space (the infinite, the void) and movement and change. Place, he wrote, “takes precedence over all other things” (Aristotle in Casey 1997: 51). To understand change and motion, for instance, it was first necessary to acknowledge that the “most general and basic kind [of] change is change in respect of place, which we call locomotion” (Aristotle in Casey 1997: 51). The geographical question of “where” is absolutely fundamental to Aristotle, for everything that exists must be somewhere “because what is not is nowhere – where for instance is a goat-stag or a sphinx?” (Aristotle in Casey 1997: 51). Place comes first, to Aristotle, because everything that exists has to have a place – has to be located. Thus “that without which nothing else can exist, while it can exist without the others, must needs be first” (Aristotle in Casey 1997: 52). So, in Aristotle we have a very powerful philosophy of place. What could be more of a celebration of geography than the assertion that place is the most fundamental thing in existence – the starting point for all other forms of existence?

It is strange, then, that we are more likely to recognize the endless travels of Herodotus or the scientific measurements of Eratosthenes as “geography” despite the fact that human geography now is less likely to be an inventory of observations of life in Egypt and more likely to be a set of reflections on what **place** means. Plato and Aristotle were just as much geographers as Herodotus and Eratosthenes. Describing Egypt, measuring the earth, and ruminating on the primacy of place are all geographies and all have elements of what we might call “theory” in them. None of them, however, referred to what they were doing as “geography.”

### *The first geographers?*

However, the man who busies himself with the description of the earth must needs speak, not only of the facts of the present, but also sometimes of the facts of the past, especially when they are notable.  
(Strabo, *The Geography*, Book 6.1.2)

Despite the fact that there must have been geographical theorists since time immemorial, it is generally acknowledged that the first written account of geography in the western world, referred to as such, that still remains, was written by Strabo of Amasia (64 BC–AD 23). Strabo was a Greek citizen who came from what is now an area of northern Turkey. He was a wealthy and educated man who traveled to both Rome and Alexandria in order to pursue his education. By the time he wrote his “geography,” he was probably a Roman citizen living in Rome (Dueck 2000; Koelsch 2004). Strabo wrote a massive 17-volume “geography” accounting for what was known about the inhabited world (*oikoumene*) at the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. One reason we know that Strabo’s was not the first to attempt something called geography is because he refers to earlier works that have since disappeared and to which we no longer have access.

At the time Strabo was writing, the Roman Empire was experiencing an extraordinary period of relative peace and prosperity under Emperor Augustus. It was in this context that Strabo sought to explain this world to the Romans. As someone from Greece, he was displaced and used this position to translate Greek ideas to the Romans. At the heart of his geography was a plea for a kind of world understanding that would accompany the peace Roman citizens were enjoying. Here, geography and an understanding of it were seen as the basis for tolerance of difference and otherness. There are many facets to Strabo’s *Geography*, including some quite mathematical sections that have led some to consider Strabo as a measurer of things – a geographer of space (Livingstone 1993). Like Eratosthenes he was keen to provide measurements of the globe and distances between places. Indeed, much of the 17 volumes features endless lists of places and their relative locations. Scholarship on Strabo has often concentrated on whether his locations and measurements were accurate.

But Strabo was also, and perhaps more importantly, a geographer of place – of the lived world. Strabo argues that “the peculiar task of the geographer” is to explain “our inhabited world” (Koelsch 2004). In this sense, Strabo was a cultural geographer. Consider the following:

The seaboard that comes next after Leucania, as far as the Sicilian Strait and for a distance of thirteen hundred and fifty stadia, is occupied by the Brettii. According to Antiochus, in his treatise *On Italy*, this territory (and this is the territory which he says he is describing) was once called Italy, although in earlier times it was called Oenotria. And he designates as its boundaries, first, on the Tyrrhenian Sea, the same boundary that I have assigned to the country of the Brettii – the River Laüs; and secondly, on the Sicilian Sea, Metapontium. But as for the country of the Tarantini, which borders on Metapontium, he names it as outside of Italy, and calls its inhabitants Iapyges. And at a time more remote, according to him, the names “Italians” and “Oenotrians” were applied only to the people who lived this side the isthmus in the country that slopes toward the Sicilian Strait. (Strabo, *The Geography*, Book 6.1.4)<sup>1</sup>

Here, we see Strabo providing encyclopedic details about regions and places in what is now Italy. But his cultural geography did not simply describe places and regions but attempted to synthesize these into an understanding of the interactions between these places. This was a study of empire and how the periphery related to the center (i.e. Rome). As Koelsch has put it: “we should not become bogged down in the details, book by book. Although Strabo drew on many sources (...), his genius lay in the organization of the various parts of his book and in his editorial synthesis. He incorporates each regional or chorographic segment into a systematic pattern for comparative purposes, advancing the general plan of a universal geography of the oikoumene” (Koelsch 2004: 508). Strabo was attempting to understand the relationships between specific places and a wider spatial realm at the time of the first Roman emperor. He was trying to figure out how the global interacted with the local – a task still central to geography in the twenty-first century.

Strabo’s *Geography* was also about the relationships between the present and the past in place. His argument that “the man who busies himself with the description of the earth must needs speak, not only of the facts of the present, but also sometimes of the facts of the past” reflects his interest in processes over time. Later Bunbury, a nineteenth-century historian of geography, would describe these reflections on the past ages as “digressions” (Bunbury 1879), while another scholar of Strabo, Clarke, is more sympathetic, noting how the identities of present places are so often constructed on the basis of memories of the past (Clarke 1999). For some reason, Bunbury and others did not see these accounts of place histories as being as important as all the details, locations, and distances so valued by military tacticians and politicians, but it was accounts of place that were most important to Strabo. Clarke quotes a line from Book 14 of Strabo’s *Geography* in which he writes: “in the case of famous places it is necessary to endure the tiresome part of such geography as this” (Clarke 1999: 202). “This” referred to the measurements and mathematics of space. This “mathematical geography” was, for Strabo, a matter of accuracy as “Every one who undertakes to give an accurate description of a place, should be particular to add its astronomical and geometrical relations, explaining carefully its extent, distance, degrees of latitude, and ‘climate’” (Strabo 1912 [AD 7–18]: 13).

Many have interpreted Strabo’s geography as evidence of the complicity of geography and the state (Smith 2003). Certainly, Strabo acknowledged the importance of geographical knowledge to statecraft in the Roman Empire of Augustus:

For the sea and the earth in which we dwell furnish theatres for action; limited, for limited actions; vast, for grander deeds; but that which contains them all, and is the scene of the greatest undertakings, constitutes what we call the habitable earth; and they are the greatest generals who, subduing nations and

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Strab.+6.1.4>.