

# Introduction

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This collection of essays offers an interpretation of human geography and its significance as a diverse body of intellectual enquiry for imagining, thinking about, living in and changing the world. The book examines the ways in which human geography as a discipline – the intellectual concerns of a specialised yet richly varied field of knowledge – shapes the lived and experienced geographies of the human world and so is vital to its wider analysis, understanding and transformation. The book may, therefore, be described as a dynamic grammar, rather than a strict syntax or vocabulary, of human geography. And this grammar extends well beyond human geography. Our concern is to disclose human geography as a vibrant enterprise of vital significance in informing, framing and shaping social and environmental practices and understandings.

This is, therefore, an inherently open-ended project. The indefinite articles in the foregoing are important in at least three senses. First, all the authors were invited to offer their own particular takes on the topics

that they address. Sure, they were asked to set their own preoccupations within a context of the development of thought and writing in their respective fields, but the wider point is that they have each reflected in a personally distinctive fashion on particular aspects of human geography. The key dynamic here is the significance of the diversity and scope of human geography which reaches across conventional disciplinary divides to engage in productive ways with disciplines beyond geography. Because authors were encouraged to look beyond their usual referents and references and, where possible, to think and write through perspectives ‘other’ than their own disciplinary and geographical worlds, the book is outward-looking. The intention is to emphasise the formative relations between geography and other disciplines, as well as the significance of geography in the active shaping of social and environmental practice; it is not to define or determine the boundaries of human geography and, still less, to be prescriptive as to its framing, content or reach.

Second, the chapters are titled by one word – or at least by as few words as is sensibly possible. This approach is central to the book. Our intention is to avoid prescription and to open up the complexity and diversity of the issues addressed so as to enable a breadth and richness of content, and to provide a framework within which the book could speak to – and in – the vocabulary of the social and environmental sciences and humanities, as well as of human geography. This was essential in our aim to address the significance of human geographies in imagining, thinking and acting in the world. The seeming lack of specification implied by the one-word chapter titles has proved to be challenging, often involving a careful (re)-think of what precisely may be meant by the chapter titles or, at least, how each may be specified and interpreted.

Third – and crucially, given the key significance of the dynamics of space and context which act not merely as surfaces or containers for human and more-than-human relations and practices, but are profoundly formative and constitutive of them – the book explores the resonances between human geography and other disciplines. The objective is to demonstrate how human geography is inseparable from, and integral to, the nature and practices of social life, essential to the framing, representation and analysis of such life – and vital to active engagements in – the past, present and future of human and non-human worlds.

The underlying rationale of the *Handbook* may be expressed in a single question: ‘What does it mean and what difference does it make to imagine, think and act geographically in the world?’ This question may be broken down into (at least) five components: what does it mean to imagine the world geographically?; what is involved in thinking about and investigating the world geographically?; how do these processes of imagining, thinking and investigating take place?; how do lived human geographies shape, drive and contest the world?; what does human geography contribute to an understanding of the world? These

questions provide the rationale and justification for the book and they offer three key themes – imagining, thinking/practising and acting – which capture the ways in which human geographies and geographers shape the world and human geography attempts to interrogate and intervene in it. Thus the structure of the book is formed of three major parts: Part I Imagining human geographies; Part II Practising human geographies; and Part III Living human geographies. Within this framework, the chapters highlight the formatively active nature and role of human geography in framing and shaping the world and, in offering vital and distinctive interpretations of it, they elucidate the concepts, methods and diversity of human geography and show how human geography informs engagements in, and with, human and non-human worlds.

Part I is concerned with the ways in which human geography looks at, frames and so comes to understand the world. Nine interconnected themes guide this Part – place, mobilities, spatialities, difference, more-than-human geographies, nature-society, transformations, critique and geo-historiographies. These chapters point to critically significant ways of seeing and understanding the world. Because it considers spatial relations and nature-environment relations, human geography engages with all spheres of human and more-than-human life, working across a diverse array of spaces and forms of space which are themselves mutually formative of each other. This integrative characteristic makes for an inherently complex field of study and action. Thus questions of complexity and interdependence inform all the chapters in this section (as throughout the book). So, too, does the narrative of transformations through time as well as across places and spaces. Human geography is always historical and the chapter on transformations considers historical geography less as a separate field of study than as an inescapable frame within which human geographies proceed and take place. So, too, for critique. Engaged criticism is inherent to human geography, not least (but far from only) as a

consequence of the disruptions caused by the incorporation of spatialities and materialities into its attempts to apprehend human and non-human worlds. As a process of sustained enquiry – from gentle probing, through considered scepticism, to informed action – critique is, therefore, a *sine qua non* of human geography, but the chapter on critique also identifies (offers a critique of) major critical impulses in human geography.

Part II focuses upon the work that human geographers do – how they conceive of the world, how they attempt to capture and represent it, and the kinds of work that result – as well as upon the audiences for, and wider participants in, human geography. It is comprised of nine themes: capturing, noticing, representing, writing, researching, producing, engaging, educating and advocacy. Of course, these themes apply to all academic work. Our point is not to claim an exclusivity for human geography, but rather to probe the distinctive ways in which human geographers proceed in exploring the concerns that flow from their framing of the world.

Human geographers engage with the world in at least three ways: through research which attempts to comprehend and/or problematise the world; through teaching and proselytising in furthering the potential of human geography; and, through engagement in attempting to (re)construct and even change the world for the better. The discipline of human geography does not – nor should it ever – merely contemplate the world. It is, therefore, difficult – if not impossible – to separate the academic practice of human geography from its lived practice in producing human geographies.

Thus the third part of the book focuses on the diverse geographically shaped practices and relations of human life. Thirteen themes are explored: moral and ethical dimensions of social life; economic, social, cultural and political relations and practices; the work of words; power; (under)development; bodies; identities; demographics; health and resistance. These chapters show how crucial

dimensions of human and more-than-human life *take place* through the geographies constructed to enable such life and, in so enabling, also shaping and conditioning the relations and practices involved. Geographies are, in other words, everywhere; always present, always profoundly formative. This ubiquitous, apparently banal, nature of geography has led it frequently to be ignored and/or taken to be self-evident. In this context, the chapters elucidate the dynamics and contradictions of human life: geography as quotidian but far from hum-drum, as vital not redundant, and as a lived and formative not a passive feature of life.

Turning to individual chapters, one way in which their essentially one-word titles might be interpreted is as a set of keywords. In the context of this book, it is especially noteworthy that Raymond Williams (1983: 11) introduced his magisterial *Keywords* by referring to displacement in space and time – ‘they just don’t speak the same language’ – as the incentive to write his ‘vocabulary of culture and society’. Although Williams stressed that his book is a vocabulary, it goes well beyond that to address the spatial, temporal and social influences on (the ongoing geographies of) the meanings, intentions and dynamics of words and language. In this sense, whilst not wishing somehow to bracket this book in any way with Williams’s, there are similarities of intent. Both go well beyond the granular to embrace the synoptic; both take one word to stand for much more; both look at the range of possibilities for seeing worlds differently in different words. Yet the titles of the chapters in this book are most definitely not ‘keywords’. Rather, the use of one word titles and the deliberate omission of the word ‘geography’ from them, is intended to open out their play of meaning and significance from human geography to the necessarily multi- (or trans-/cross-/post-) disciplinary worlds of human geography, which are inherently embedded in, and formative of, social life.

As such, it is worth staying with the notion of ‘keywords’ a little further. For one thing,

the content of the book would be radically different had a different set of keywords been used. What, for example, might be the consequence of using words such as love, sex, passion, grief, bereavement; or violence, exile and fear; or, (un)consciousness, communication, myth, belief; or art and civilisation ... as chapter titles? Certainly, an alternative framing of human geography would reveal a very different set of chapter titles and hence an alternative, but no less valid, way of thinking about human geographies. One point of departure in the reading, critique of and (electronic) debate around this book may well concern the framing that informed the choice and juxtaposition of the words employed. But the point here is that the words used for chapter titles are seen neither as 'key' nor as canonical.

The book is dialogical. It is intended to be open to debate and to transform debate. In this, the one-word chapter titles offer an insight and point of departure into the complexity and richness of the worlds inhabited by human beings – the worlds through which they sustain themselves via imagination, thought and action – and hence into the responsibilities of human geographers. Key words make key points, but they are not acts of nominative determinism: they enable, not by placing boundaries around things but by bringing them into view.

Although this is a book which has no intention of declaring 'keywords' or key words in human geography, the approach to chapter-titling does use words that are, for

the most part, not straightforwardly disciplinary or specifically bound up with geography's history and identity. And this raises one of the most centrally important and intriguing points of – and possibilities for – the book: to posit other, non-disciplinary (or trans-/cross-/post-disciplinary) words as a way of reframing a range of essays about disciplinary significance and progress. In short, if the *Handbook* sets out to make interventions in what might be deemed key words or 'keywords' for the discipline, it does so only to detonate any lingering sense of there being somehow a list of such 'keywords' logically/necessarily/adequately anchored in and of the discipline. Their purpose is to try to avoid either the cloistering of human geography or, conversely, its crusading and imperial tendencies. Rather, the single word titles reflect a belief in the unavailability and profoundly formative significance of geography for human life and hence the importance of human geography as a discipline or set of practices essential to any attempt to understand and transform such life.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether this intention is realised. And for that, it is the reading of the chapters themselves, rather than any editorial introduction, which matters.

## REFERENCE

Williams, R. 1983. *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*. Fontana Paperbacks revised and expanded edition.