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► To cite this version:

Federico Ferretti, Geronimo Barrera de la Torre. Cosmohistories and pluriversal dialogues: The future of the history of geography.. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2023, Reimagining the Futures of Geographical Thought and Praxis, pp.204382062311712. 10.1177/20438206231171203 . hal-04077692

HAL Id: hal-04077692

<https://hal.science/hal-04077692v1>

Submitted on 21 Apr 2023

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Cosmohistories and pluriversal dialogues: the future of the history of geography

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Abstract

When it comes to ‘the History of Geography’, many people still wonder of something descriptive and conservative, which has virtually no links with the ‘future’, a metaphorical place where ‘progress’ and ‘advancements’ are usually located. The existence of such feelings exposes how some lingering positivistic views still remain also in parts of the discipline that claimed to have got rid of positivism. We instead contend that the history of geography can bring innovative and challenging contents that should play important roles for the future of the discipline. First, drawing upon our own research experience and extending recent literature on ‘geographical futures’, we expose why the history of geography is making increasingly important contributions to key discussions in a plural and evolving discipline. We especially focus on the ongoing pluralistic and multilingual rediscovery of ‘other geographical traditions’ that is enriching critical, radical and feminist approaches to geography. Then, we propose to enrich an intellectual field of prevailing ‘Western’ origins like geography by engaging in pluriversal dialogues with indigenous knowledges and practices, focusing on Latin America and on decolonial notions such as cosmohistory, which show that there are many histories of geography, and they all matter for the futures of the discipline.

New geographical histories for the future

This paper discusses the theme of geography’s futures by addressing a part of the discipline that is generally considered to deal with the past – that is, the history of geography. We argue that this still neglected area of study can provide significant contributions for thinking the future of the

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broader field of geography thanks to its potentiality in bringing diversity and providing intellectual stimulations beyond the paradigms and key ideas that periodically (and temporarily) dominate the field. Amidst growing awareness of the contextual nature of knowledge and its contingent and contested character (Lozano 2013), recent scholarship on ‘other geographical traditions’ (Ferretti 2019) discusses dissident tendencies including anarchism (Springer 2016) and various forms of radicalism that emerged at different times in different countries (Berg et al. 2021), showing a plurality that was not always seized by disciplinary historiography. This variety emerges from a number of recent studies that cannot be fully referenced here. It is worth mentioning, among other cases, scholarship on the South American and transnational critical geographers who challenged an epistemic setup limited to ‘the bubble of the Global North’ (Melgaço 2017), works suggesting to start studying the history of geography from Africa (Craggs and Neate 2020), and claims to rediscover histories of women and other marginalised categories (Jöns, Keighren and Monk 2017). Actually, histories of geography are more plural than what it is commonly believed.

We argue that these ongoing rediscoveries are increasingly providing insights for an idea of the discipline that is epistemologically and politically ambitious and challenges mere utilitarian uses of academic knowledge. This matches some of the main themes of a recently published special issue on ‘the future of geography’ (Castree et al., 2022), in which authors such as Noel Castree discuss the future of a discipline that can ‘speak various truths to power’ (Castree 2022, 8). They significantly stress how scholarship is never neutral, hence the need to defend ‘the principle of academic freedom and academic vocation’ by fostering intradisciplinary dialogue ‘for heterodoxy to be meaningful and positive’ (Castree 2022, 9). This implies the creation of syncretism that does not pretend to deny the (sometimes deep) distance existing between different specialisms within the discipline, but aims at creating collaborations to ‘improve the world’ (Castree 2022, 10). This also means committing the discipline to the most relevant political and social agendas of critical theory and radical practices. In Castree’s metaphor describing the different fields of geography as a sort of ‘confederacy’, or ‘multi-cultural republic’ (2022, 12), the history of geography can convey innovations that enhance the opening to the world that is needed in the discipline, beyond mere academic needs for financial ‘viability’ or other needs of the neoliberal market.

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It is to this inclusivity (in epistemological, social, cultural and linguistic terms), significantly defined by Castree (2022, 12) as ‘epistemic justice’, that rediscovering different histories of geography can productively serve to inform geography’s future agendas. This includes fostering what Lesley Head calls ‘the new Indigenous Geographies’ (2022, 94), which try to bring new epistemologies in a field that was traditionally dominated by imperialism and epistemic violence. Such epistemologies can offer precious insights to deal with anthropocenic matters on human-environment relationships as well as in new conceptions of ontology and epistemology (Head 2002). This scholarship is demonstrating that, by rediscovering alternative disciplinary traditions, one can include new ideas and practices starting by reconsidering figures, concepts and praxes that, in the past, were excluded by the dominating canons of the discipline for ethnic, national, gender, linguistic or epistemological reasons.

Yet, these openings are still limited. While there is a certain consensus that ‘an understanding of the past is crucial’ (Rose-Redwood 2021, 1) to make sense of engaged and politically relevant geographies, re-interpreting disciplinary histories entails recognition of the processes through which Western geographical knowledge became hegemonic. The assumption of one evolutionary temporality made of accumulative advancements was eventually framed by the coloniality of power (Lander *et al.* 2009). Thus, it is urgent to question what ‘counts’ as geographical knowledges, making space to ‘alternative epistemologies within the discipline’ (Oswin 2020, 10), a task that has been often performed more gesturally than substantially. Indeed, universalized and objective knowledge is still privileged in the broader field of geography (Howitt 2022).

In the next section, we introduce the possibility of fostering dialogues with indigenous knowledges and practices, particularly from Latin America, to further question ontological assumptions, and foster inclusiveness in the discipline’s futures. That is, we must listen carefully at and reflexively engage with other expressions of geographical knowledges and their histories.

For cosmohistories, or decolonial histories of geography

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Our proposal to open pluriversal dialogues draws on the notion of ‘cosmohistory’. According to Federico Navarrete Linares (2022), cosmohistory questions and complicates ideas of homogeneous temporalities and spatialities, to shift from a unique and universalistic ‘regime of historicity’ (Hartog 2003) to the acknowledgement of diverse historicities. Cosmohistories are attempts to draw connections by journeying across different intellectual worlds (e.g. Indigenous knowledges and European rationality) without pretensions of objectivity or epistemic superiority. They give full consideration to plural and subaltern agencies, including nonhuman ones.

As for the notion of ‘pluriverse’, we refer to the Zapatistas’ idea of a world in which many worlds can fit. This is put in political terms by Arturo Escobar (2020, viii) arguing that: ‘If worlds are multiple, then the possible must also be multiple’. To re-imagine histories appraising the variety of geographical knowledges and practices beyond disciplinary boundaries and hegemonic discourses, we should value diversity and co-create theories and plural ways of producing knowledge (Ferretti 2019; Martinez and Neurath 2022). Beyond acknowledging exclusions, historians of geography should commit to pluriversal dialogues with Indigenous knowledges and practices, questioning traditional understandings of the past, present, and future of the discipline (Scott 2020) by creating spaces for new spatio-temporalities.

As for temporalities, we should scrutinize hegemonic ideas of time that define geography’s trajectories under modern and Western frameworks, also considering the diversity and complexity of subaltern standpoints (Sidaway 2022). While linear, evolutionary, and positivist approaches to geography have been widely criticized (Livingstone 1993) and replaced by critical and non-essentialist views of geography’s histories (Lozano 2013), there is still work to do for questioning the epistemic and ontological hierarchies established by colonialism, including its ‘historical superiority’ (Blaut 1993, 2).

The normalization of particular ideas of space-time serves to exclude other expressions of geographical knowledge, incorporating and validating them through hegemonic narratives. In the same way, Indigenous peoples’ dispossession and marginalization has been justified by liquidating them as ‘people without geography’ (Howitt 1993). Against that, cosmohistory should be considered as a way to engage with other historical traditions, acknowledging the always complex,

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contested and fragile interactions between worlds (Navarrete 2022, 24). Drawing on Stenger's (2014) ideas of cosmopolitics, cosmohistories seek to proliferate temporalities by avoiding discriminatory and selective historicity. They produce partial and contested historical truths between different worlds (Martinez and Neurath 2022), overtaking what Bruno Latour defined 'mono-naturalism', and considering 'more ways to be other' (Latour 2005, 453).

By recognizing other pasts as history and other forms of biocultural memory (Barrera-Bassols 2019), this perspective opens possibilities for dialogue across different understandings of space-time. Nevertheless, what cosmohistory defines is not radical alterity but the complex interaction of worlds that characterise the histories of Indigenous peoples in Latin America. This helps situating expressions of geographical knowledge and practices within contradictory and conflictive temporal enactments, challenging integrating and reducing worldviews (Martinez and Neurath 2022, 10). This awareness is a necessary step to set the new theoretical frameworks that we need to further proliferate diverse and dynamic spatio-temporal experiences.

On the one hand, Indigenous knowledges and their spatio-temporalities expose the contingency of geography's historical accounts (Clastres 1987) to create spaces for alternative geographical knowledges. On the other, they should be understood in their variability as 'multiple knowledge systems, epistemologies, worldviews, and traditional practices,' where tradition is 'far from a solidified, bounded, or value neutral category ... being reinterpreted, invented, and contested' (Nelson 2014, 188, 191). Social mapping and calendars designed with and by communities represent variegated expressions of geographical knowledges that negotiate, resist and provide alternatives to the hegemonic geographical imaginations (Sletto et al. 2020).

Historicizing these alternative geographies and spaces of enunciation by relying on people's (cosmo)histories provides the grounds to re-interpret landscapes, introducing new understandings of geographical thought's trajectories in Indigenous territories (Barrera de la Torre 2017). This way, the very notion of geographical tradition can be enlarged by recognizing the rejection of those who resisted the exclusionary historicity of modern/capitalist/patriarchal/statist universal history.

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Conclusion: Other histories for other futures

This short paper has exposed the potentialities of the history of geography in charting a course for the future of the discipline by first rediscovering silenced voices that provide new intellectual tools fostering inclusion in the discipline, epistemic pluralism and political relevance. Second, rescuing what was considered not enough ‘scientific’ by dominating canons and paradigms can open the way to further enhance inclusive practices, by making room for new epistemes in the future of geography, eventually inspired by pluriversal dialogues and cosmohistory.

Cosmohistory can provide precious methodological insight for the future of geography, understood as a practice crossing and putting in relation different spatialities and different temporalities. Cosmohistories can help to avoid reductionist views of a disciplinary unity in which ‘the type of difference recognized and affirmed is severely constrained’ (Grove and Rickards 2022) following the epistemic frames imposed by colonialist cultures (García 2018). We should instead invent and experiment plural modes of knowing and being as alternative approaches that aim to generate and proliferate novel difference (Grove and Rickards 2022), laying grounds for horizontally sharing and connecting diverse traditions and mindsets. Histories of geography are plural, and matter.

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