Chapter 1
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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,

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> 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 polysymous (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 *SP*ace *ANd T*ime 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 typal 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 peneplain." (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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