Where's Europe?

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Abstract This commentary wonders why these canonical textbooks, conceived and written in the UK as the country was integrating itself economically and politically into the European project, make so little reference to Europe as a conceptual, analytical or geopolitical framework. These highly successful textbooks have helped create an idea of modern human geography as an essentially Anglo-American social science, different in form, content and objectives from earlier, largely European versions of the discipline.

Keywords Textbooks · Human geography · Europe

The first editions of Ron Johnston's *Geography and Geographers* (1979) and Peter Taylor's *Political Geography* (1985) had relatively little in common. The former was a clearly articulated history of post-war Anglo-American human geography and a persuasive commentary on the discipline's present and future relevance. The latter was a stirring manifesto for a new, theoretically-informed political geography capable to analysing relationships between localities, nation-states and the world economy. But as these now canonical textbooks evolved through multiple

editions, assisted by co-authors James Sidaway and Colin Flint, they acquired a discipline-defining importance, especially in the English-speaking world. Over time, they incorporated many of the larger debates about the nature and scope of human geography as a social and political science.

Given the wider significance of these textbooks, it is worth considering the causes and consequences of any missing dimensions left unresolved by earlier revisions. Europe is perhaps the most obvious conceptual and geopolitical absence. The European arena is largely absent from Johnston's history of post-war human geography, which is presented as an essentially Anglo-American and Anglophone intellectual project, albeit emerging from an earlier European tradition. The implications of this Anglo-American framing have been re-assessed in recent years by Johnston, Sidaway and others, notably in connection with the role of language in modern geographical inquiry, to consider whether an Anglo-American perspective is an acceptance of an intellectual reality or a statement of prejudice (Berg and Kearns 1998; Hassink et al. 2019; Minca 2000; Johnston and Sidaway 2004; Rodríguez-Pose 2006; Samers and Sidaway 2000). Despite these nuances, Johnston's now hegemonic account of post-war human geography, when juxtaposed with equally influential histories of earlier periods in this discipline's past, has constructed a widely accepted narrative arc in which geography is considered in European terms prior to 1945 and as an Anglo-American story thereafter (see Stoddart

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1982, 1986; Livingstone 1992). Europe is similarly downplayed as an active geopolitical scale in Taylor's political geography. Despite many European historical case-studies, Taylor's theory is defined by local, national and global economic and political interactions, with only passing reference to the processes of regional integration that have re-ordered the geography of post-war Europe.

The absence of a European dimension is surprising when one considers that both textbooks were conceived and written in northern English universities shortly after the 1975 referendum confirmed the UK's membership of the European Economic Community. When the first editions were published, the UK was still re-orientating itself, economically and politically, away from its former colonial empire and towards a rapidly integrating western Europe that would later absorb most of the former communist countries in the central and eastern parts of the continent. The European question, never far from the surface of British political debate in the intervening decades, has recently generated an unprecedented political crisis in the UK and may yet precipitate the geographical break-up of the country into its constituent nationalities. One might reasonably ask why these persuasive and prescient textbooks about the past, present and future of human geography, written by two of the discipline's most distinguished British exponents, failed to acknowledge what has become the dominant political and economic debate of the early 21st century for Britain, Europe and much of the rest of the world, especially as the questions at the heart of this debate can be articulated in the simplest geographical terms: what and where is Europe, and does Europe include the UK?

This silence on the European question is, I think, symptomatic of a broader reluctance to consider the history and potential of human geography in European terms. Insofar as these textbooks illustrate broader trends in human geography, they suggest a discipline still uncomfortable about its pre-war European past and suspicious of claims about a European future. This does not mean that Johnston and Taylor have ignored the importance of European cities, regions and countries, or failed to mobilise ideas and concepts developed by European intellectuals and philosophers. Nothing could be further from the truth as both authors have drawn extensively, and with characteristic acuity, on European examples and ideas to develop their arguments and theories.

However, neither of these textbooks consider Europe as an active scale worthy of separate geographical analysis, whether for the history of geography outlined by Johnston, or for the global economic and political system analysed by Taylor. The words 'Europe' and 'European' feature in these textbooks, and across much of human geography, as neutral descriptive terms, as if the project of European economic, political and cultural integration had no meaningful significance.

As Johnston has acknowledged in other writings, earlier generations of British human geographers, active before and after World War Two, were more willing to engage with the economic, political and intellectual implications of a European project that was no more than a pipe-dream at the time, and to present their contributions as part of a European rather than Anglo-American conversation (Johnston 2000; see, as examples, East 1935; Houston 1953; Smith 1967). But for the generation of British-educated human geographers who re-ordered the discipline after the 1960s, including Johnston and Taylor, geography's pre-war European intellectual history seemed stultifyingly old-fashioned and politically suspect given the mobilisation of geographical expertise and ideas by authoritarian European regimes before and during World War Two.

In contrast to the descriptive, imprecise and environmentally determined regionalism that dominated pre-war human geography in Britain and across continental Europe, the new human geography devised by British geographers in the 1960s and 1970s saw itself as a practical, rigorously analytical and conceptually ambitious social science, able to draw selectively on European geographical theories where necessary but no longer defined by a European intellectual or geopolitical context (Barnes 2012).

This familiar story, the core of Johnston's account of Anglo-American human geography's post-war history, involved a previously unacknowledged paradox, the consequences of which are only now becoming evident. The new human geography that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks largely to the efforts of British geographers, was formulated as the UK's political and intellectual establishment was seeking to re-imagine the country as a modern, post-colonial and European state, shaped by an active involvement in the project of European economic and political integration. But this new human geography, so conducive in

other ways to the modernising instincts of post-war Britain, turned its back on the European context in which the discipline had previously operated and re-defined itself as an Anglo-American social science, initially quantitative but always conceptually ambitious, sustained by the trans-Atlantic traffic in ideas and individuals described so vividly by Johnston.

The reluctance of a British-dominated human geography to ‘problematize’ Europe, to focus the discipline’s energies on exploring the continent’s complex cultural and political meaning, finds no parallel in the history of other subjects in the UK at this time. History, politics, international relations, sociology, law and modern languages engaged far more systematically with the European project and were all substantially reconfigured in European terms during the 1970s, generating libraries of books on the European idea, pioneering single- and joint-honours university degree programmes in European Studies, and establishing dozens of disciplinary associations and journals that continue to operate successfully with reference to a European arena and agenda. Human geography’s institutional structures, by contrast, still self-identify as either national (AAG and the RGS-IBG) or international (IGU), while the *European Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, established in 1994, is often the only explicitly European periodical catalogued under the heading ‘human geography’ in most university libraries.¹

Geography and Geographers and *Political Geography* are classic textbooks whose enduring success through several editions tell us a great deal about the history of human geography in the post-war period. But they also reveal the unintended consequences of intellectual manoeuvres undertaken by the generation of British human geographers who created the modern discipline described and endorsed by Johnston and Taylor. As geography often presents itself as a fleet-footed discipline of context, continually recalibrating

its priorities and methods in response to the urgent challenges of the moment, the absence of any sustained geographical engagement with the idea of Europe from textbooks that define the scope and methods of the subject seems, with the benefit of hindsight, an unusual and unfortunate oversight.

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¹ The European Association of Geographers (EUROGEO), established in 1979 to promote geographical education across the continent, publishes the *European Journal of Geography* but neither the association nor the journal have significant profiles in Anglophone human geography. The more research-orientated Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO), established in 1994, is only marginally better known.

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