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Relating physical and human geography

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- 1 In its initial academic approaches, Geography defined Society-Environment relations as its core field of study and developed theories like physical determinism (Ratzel, Semple, Huntington), possibilism (Vidal de la Blache) as well as cultural geographic approaches of these relations (Sauer ; the monumental "Man's role in changing the face of the Earth"). Even if they are today considered as problematic for several reasons, these approaches were characterised by a strong interweaving of sciences studying nature and society, embodied in the figure of "the geographer" as a researcher mastering both the natural and societal dimensions of the field.
- 2 These relations between human and physical geography has been broken down with the theoretical and quantitative revolution after WWII. Even if this revolution hit both human and physical geography, and thus generated the impression that both remained tied by a common epistemological stance, the analytical empirical approach has systematically deepened the gap between them through increasing specialisms. Moreover, the further developments in human geography took distance from this neopositivist approach. Radical geography, humanistic geography and all sorts of postmodern influences have further moved human and physical geographers away from each other.
- 3 Yet, the present state of the Planet calls for new bridges between natural and social sciences to analyse and understand what has to be done in order to cope with alarming situations. Among others, political ecology, the studies of the commons, environmental justice and more broadly sustainability studies are the new approaches developed until now. While some human geographers have played a key role in their development, physical geographers barely participate in these endeavours. Often deterred by the explicit political dimension of these approaches, they pursue alternative efforts to address these issues, like modelling environmental processes and developing Earth System Science. In turn, these efforts do not really attract the attention of human geographers.

- 4 This topical issue of *Belgeo* – following some similar events, such as the recent Session “Physical Geography and Human Geography: Twins or Stepsisters?” at the 7th Eugeo Congress on the Geography of Europe (2019) – is meant to encourage the reconnection between physical and human geography and the combination of natural and social scientific research by exploring where and how cooperation between physical and human geography is happening or the other way round, what hinders their encounters.
- 5 The papers in this issue are not meant to highlight the results of research in which both (sub)disciplines have collaborated, but to focus on the relations between physical and human geographers in such research and what they imply in terms of epistemology, ontology, institutional arrangements, personal implications and so forth. Moreover, the papers address these questions from a historical or philosophical point of view, but also relate the difficulties and successes of cooperation at the level of countries, universities and research and educational collaborations.
- 6 We introduce the issue with an historical overview of the relations between the two subdisciplines of geography, that also contains a proposal that echoes those of the other papers.
- 7 The first two papers by Emiliano Tulusso and by Arie Stoffelen and Erik Meijles document the divide. Tulusso initiates bibliometric analysis on co-references between both geographies, that calls for further research, certainly because the journals’ editorial policies are a crucial institutional factor deciding about cross-fertilisation. Stoffelen and Meijles show how the peculiar divide in the Netherlands, where human and physical geography are perfectly separated disciplines in higher education, is weakening the societal relevance of the discipline.
- 8 Kevin Cox and Cristian Suteanu concentrate on proposals that must create common grounds for collaboration. Cox is pleading for a common conception of relational space, that curiously is dominant, but not reflected upon in physical geography, and much more debated in human geography. Suteanu explores how non-linear theory, mobilised to study complex phenomena, can be used to create bridges between both subdisciplines.
- 9 The last paper, by Kewan Mertens develops a strong example of how an interdisciplinary research project, aimed at improving landslide risk management in Africa becomes much more complex and political when assemblage theory is mobilised to self-reflect on the research and its outcomes.
- 10 It is worthwhile to read all the papers in this issue as a single contribution to the debate and to discover the common lines, creative dialogues and points of contention they raise. With the present special issue, without wanting to give a final answer to the question, *Belgeo* aims to contribute to a debate as old as the geographical science, but nowadays current and urgent as never before, and to launch further, fruitful and factual research about the topic.
- 11 **Guest Editors:** Chris Kesteloot (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), Lorenzo Bagnoli (Università di Milano-Bicocca; AGeI-Association of Italian Geographers), Anton Van Rompaey (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), Pierluigi Brandolini (Università di Genova; AIGeo-Italian Association of Physical Geography and Geomorphology).

AUTHORS

CHRISTIAN KESTELOOT

Division of Geography and Tourism, KU Leuven, chris.kesteloot@kuleuven.be

LORENZO BAGNOLI

Department of Sociology and Social Research, Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca,
Corresponding author, lorenzo.bagnoli@unimib.it