

Reconstituting Geography for the 21st century

EPF: Philosophy, Theory, Models,
Methods and Practice
1–4

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We write as the inaugural editors of a new addition to the *Environment and Planning* family of peer review journals. It is called *EPF: Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice* (phonetically, our subtitle sounds as *pee-tee-em-pee*). Geography today should be more than the sum of its many lively parts, but as a discipline cannot dance to one tune – be it ontologically, epistemologically, methodologically or otherwise. We believe that the action lies in forging connections, in mutual learning and in productive disagreement. In this editorial, we detail the context, aims and scope of the journal. At the end, we call for guest editors of special sections and issues, and for articles that fit the remit of this exciting new venture.

As a discipline, Geography today is both distinctive and exceedingly vibrant. Many other disciplines are increasingly interested in people–environment relationships, in local–global connections, in the nature and significance of various boundaries and borders, in movements (e.g. of people, goods, knowledge and information) between places and regions, in landscape and land use change, in the difference that proximity and distance make, and in the functioning of biogeochemical systems at various scales – but Geography has historic pedigree in all these areas. It remains the discipline dedicated to understanding why, how and with what effects people utilise – and are affected by – both natural and created environments (in both a material and semiotic-representational sense). In the Anglosphere, if not necessarily elsewhere, the discipline is also extraordinarily heterodox: variety of focus, methods and aims in both research and degree-level teaching is the rule, not the exception. This heterodoxy is both the product and lubricant of Geography’s breadth of focus, of the virtues of specialisation and – in some parts of the discipline – of a belief that we can learn valuable things by eschewing orthodoxy. Today, albeit not equally across the globe and in different modalities, Geography is burgeoning. Its practitioners have formed lively communities with shared interests in some of the most important issues of our time, such as destruction of the nonhuman world, voluntary and forced migration, rapid urbanisation, new patterns of economic development, the identification and amelioration of concentrated poverty, reduction of the impacts of various natural hazards, emerging geopolitical rivalries and the new cartographies of war, trans-border political struggles for justice, environmental conservation and restoration, infrastructure development and planning for the future, multicultural localities and cities, and much more besides.

Even so, many geographers might believe all is not well in the house of Geography. Some lament the lack of unity of purpose and focus in the discipline; others feel that Geography does not offer enough exemplars of ‘integrated analysis’ that make a virtue of the many specialists we have working side-by-side in the same departments. Yet others believe Geography’s public image remains too weak in several countries, allowing other disciplines to encroach on its fundamental research and teaching areas; some assert that geographers borrow too much from other disciplines and do not make formative contributions of wider significance; and still others maintain that what passes for ‘geography’ in many departments is really ‘geography lite’ practised by geologists, sociologists or ecologists with little to no sense of the history and achievements of Geography over the last century or so.

This is the immediate academic context in which *EPF* is being launched. The wider context is febrile: the first pandemic in a century, with grave economic and social knock-on effects; the forced

transition of the Earth out of its Holocene state; what looks like the end of United States hegemony on the world stage; a surge of populism in many countries, coupled with deep political and ethno-religious divisions within and between multiple nations; widespread and often acute economic inequality; numerous national crises of political legitimacy, in both democratic and autocratic states; the growing challenges of transborder, multilevel governance; and seemingly endless death or harm caused by extreme weather events, malnutrition, diseases, civil war and more besides.

How geographers respond to this context is shaped by the broader landscape in which the public university, as the discipline's primary institutional home, is situated. The role of modern institutions of higher education has been debated quite intensively for about 30 years or more now. While the debate continues, it is clear that academic disciplines can no longer afford to be as removed from the 'real world' as many once were. Research needs, increasingly, to count outside the lecture theatre and seminar room (or, these days, the virtual learning platform). But academic freedom also needs to be protected. There are now varied, fascinating and instructive ways in which geographers are having an impact outside academia through their fieldwork, their writing, their advocacy and other research activities. The relationships between geographers, the evolving goals and governance frameworks of universities and the dynamics of world beset with problems need to be understood clearly if our research, teaching and engagement are to be steered intelligently.

What is the intended mission of *EPF* and how does it relate to Geography's intellectual, institutional and wider context? Geography is already served by numerous general and specialist journals. At first glance, the journal landscape is crowded and the needs of the discipline's practitioners satisfied. However, closer inspection belies this. *EPF: Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice* will seek to fill a hole in the current publishing in Geography by attracting agenda-setting papers that break new ground by forging connections between cutting-edge research in all areas of the subject. It will be a whole-of-discipline journal that makes a virtue of Geography's considerable diversity and vitality. Its papers, however, specialised, will speak to the widest possible readership of researchers in Geography and also cognate fields like Planning, Sociology, Environmental Management and Environmental Science. Contributions will use comparative analysis, critique, creative thinking, counter-factual reasoning and other mechanisms to achieve 'value added' in the key cross-cutting areas, notably the philosophical underpinnings of research, the definition and uses of theory, the employment of various models, research methods and methodologies, and the link of research to practical impacts of various kinds (for instance, via public policy).

The aim is not to hark back to earlier aspirations towards the 'unity of Geography'. Instead, the journal will create new pathways that allow novel and productive patterns of thinking to emerge across and between Geography in many sub-disciplinary communities. This will generate new ideas and modes of working across divisions in the discipline and leverage Geography's potential in response to the complex challenges and opportunities of our time in original and innovative ways. *EPF* will, we hope, be a place where authors can publish interventions of significance, and a place where readers of all kinds can expect to have their thinking challenged and enriched. While we certainly do not believe that there is a singular Geography to be pursued, we do believe geographers might better realise the intellectual potential contained within the discipline's many and varied parts. Heterodoxy counts for little if it is largely comprised of Balkanised areas of inquiry. As such, *EPF* aspires to be a 'weaving' journal rather than simply a place where human, environmental and physical geographers can publish with limited cognisance of each others' work.

We hope that *EPF* will quickly come to add value to Geography in the ways just described. It will succeed if the appetite for dialogue is as large as we believe it is. We very much want *EPF* to be a place where mutual learning can occur about the goals of, impediments to, outcomes of and lessons arising from planned or serendipitous engagements. Through such learning, Geography might come to matter more, without any presumption that some ways of mattering should somehow supercede all others. The connective threads, as our subtitle indicates, are large ones. Issues of philosophical

perspective, theoretical approach, model type and use, methodological tools and strategies, and various modes and outcomes of 'real world' engagement will serve to tie otherwise different or parallel authors and readers together in the pages of *EPF*. These five areas will serve as 'meeting places', or so we hope.

So much for context, aims and scope. What of the articles we will publish? Aside from occasional editorials, there will be three kinds of content:

- *Research articles of up to 10,000 words exclusive of bibliography*: Articles can be conceptual or empirical, methodological in focus or philosophical, practical in their aims or else geared more towards review and synthesis of current research. Whatever their exact form, papers in *EPF* should aspire to be significant, original and suitably rigorous. Specialist papers should be written so as to speak to the widest possible readership in Geography, without unduly simplifying issues, controversies or matters of practice. Papers of wider scope should seek to make reference to as many topics, fields or cases as is feasible so as to connect to readers across Geography. Overall, *EPF* papers should serve to 'convene' readers, enabling learning and conversations across human, environmental and physical geography. Readers should note that data sets, methodological statements and other appendix-like material can be hosted online for papers as a service to authors and readers.
- *Perspectives of up to 5000 words exclusive of bibliography*: These are considered thought-pieces designed to advance a novel or significant argument but where there may not yet be an evidential, methodological or elaborated conceptual basis for the argument. Perspectives are intended to provoke, to inspire debate and to advance thinking. They can be purely based on the argumentation or use of evidence or empirical vignettes to make their case. They will be peer reviewed.
- *Commentaries of up to 2500 words on published articles*: These are (usually commissioned) critical analyses of one or more published articles, and will normally appear at the end of special issues or sections of *EPF*. Commentaries will play a part in the 'convening' and 'weaving' functions of the journal by reading across related papers to identify new insights and possibilities for research, understanding and practice. Commentaries will be reviewed by the editors.

We anticipate that a key feature of *EPF* will be *special issues and sections* about topics of wide relevance across human, environmental and physical geography. Possibilities for special themes and sections include the following: Geography and uncertainty; wicked problems, local to global; Geography and public policy; Geography in the 21st century university; values and physical geography; Geography and 'open' research; mixed methods research; intra-disciplinarity; the future of modelling in Geography; Geography and its future; Geographical education today; theory and theorising in Geography; research translation and impact; Indigenous, Black and Latinx methods and methodologies; progress in decolonising geographical research; the future of physical geography.

We welcome submissions from *prospective guest editors* who wish to submit a call for papers and a supporting case for consideration by the editors of *EPF*. Materials can be sent to the most appropriate editor depending on the topic. A typical special issue will contain six to eight full length papers plus two to three commissioned commentaries. Reviewers of papers might be among those invited to write a commentary. A typical special section will contain four to five full length papers and two commentaries. Guest editors will normally be responsible for sending papers out for review, reaching initial editorial decisions (the journal editors will have final say on all decisions) and ensuring timely submission of the whole set of special issues for section papers.

To summarise, *EPF* aspires to be a 'go to' journal for readers across the discipline of Geography. It will provide a venue for innovative scholarship that straddles or navigates through Geography's

sub-disciplinary fields, theoretical foundations, philosophical frameworks, methodological approaches and modes of research engagement. If Geography is constituted by the actions of geographers, then *EPF* intends to contribute meaningfully to the action while recognising the futility (even counter-productiveness) of aiming for a grand constitution that most geographers would somehow sign-up to. We have a collective duty to our discipline to challenge it, to question our own modes of reproduction in the academy, but also to point out Geography's connectivities and the ways in which it can succeed given its propensity to cleave and furrow.

We want to offer warmest thanks to Robert Rojek, our publisher at SAGE, for being receptive to the idea of this journal. Initially, *EPF* will have as few barriers to global access as possible. We welcome immediate submissions, as well as proposals for special issues and sections. Please do not delay. Together, let's make Geography's parts articulate in new and productive ways for the benefit of geographers and all those who stand to be affected by what we do.

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