

## THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Writing/righting the world

Citation for published version:

Harrison, RT 2024, 'Writing/righting the world: Reflections on an engaged history and philosophy of geographical thought', *Journal of Historical Geography*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2024.03.006

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):** 

10.1016/j.jhg.2024.03.006

Link: Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

**Document Version:** Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:** Journal of Historical Geography

#### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



### ARTICLE IN PRESS

Journal of Historical Geography xxx (xxxx) xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

#### Historical Geography at Large

# Writing/Righting the world: Reflections on an engaged history and philosophy of geographical thought

#### Richard T. Harrison

University of Edinburgh Business School, 29 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh Eh8 9JS, Scotland, UK

#### A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history: Received 22 April 2022 Received in revised form 14 March 2024 Accepted 15 March 2024

Keywords: Academic discipline History and philosophy Biography Politics of hope Grand challenges and hyperobjects Posthumanism

#### ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the relevance of the history and philosophy of geography and provides a personal perspective on the origins of the Working Party/Study Group/Research Group by one of its founders. Intellectually, the paper identifies the role of its history and philosophy as the construction and sanctioning of meta-narratives by which meaning is conferred on 'geography'. Practically, the paper summarises the descriptive, normative and personal justifications for the establishment of the Working Party in 1981 in the context of Queen's University Belfast as a zone of civility exemplifying the politics of hope in a militarised, segregated and sectarian society.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

To explore possible worlds is to be a geographer with a mind that matters and a matter that minds.<sup>1</sup>

Academic disciplines define the norms and practices accepted by a disciplinary community and set the boundaries of academic small worlds.  $^{\rm 2}$ 

The definition of an academic discipline, necessary for discussion of its history and philosophy, is no simple matter, nor is it uncontested:

An academic discipline is a complex endeavor, comprising multiple people in multiple institutions with a variety of research interests and foci, in a variety of places. ... "In practice" the questions geographers have been asking have diversified, the objects of study have diversified, and the methods used to study them have diversified. ... it is that diversity that is the real source of richness ... 21<sup>st</sup> Century geography has access to a multiplicity of ways of knowing the world.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Pauline R. Couper 'Epistemology', in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Second Edition, volume 4), ed. by Audrey Kobayashi (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2020), pp. 275–284 (pp. 276, 283–84).

Given this diversity, writing the history and philosophy of geography as a professionalised social construction addresses the issues of identity, internal coherence and external legitimacy of the discipline. As such, it faces three challenges: first, to find how geographers construe (make and judge) whole accounts and meta-narratives; second, to establish how that construal is always already structured by form and judgement; and third, to come to terms with the struggle to change the professionally sanctioned strategies by which meaning is conferred on geography. This will not be done by studying a few texts about how geography was done or should be done; neither will it be done by scholars dabbling at it as an adjunct to their main professional interests. This short Intervention recounts the founding of a forum to research and debate the history and philosophy of geography, which is now part of that history and can inform debates on the present and future of geography.

#### Origins

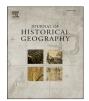
The History and Philosophy of Geography Working Party (HPGTWP) was originally conceived on the basis of three arguments.<sup>4</sup> First, the descriptive justification was that there was already an emerging, if highly diffuse, interest in the history and philosophy of the discipline. This was reflected, for example, in the

#### https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2024.03.006

0305-7488/© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Please cite this article as: R.T. Harrison, Writing/Righting the world: Reflections on an engaged history and philosophy of geographical thought, Journal of Historical Geography, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2024.03.006





E-mail address: r.harrison@ed.ac.uk.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Gunnar Olsson, Lines of Power/Limits of Language (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Suzana Sukovic, *Transliteracy in Complex Information Environments* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2017), p. 138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> These are my personal reflections, observations and interpretations, which are not necessarily shared by all involved in the origins of the HPGWP.

#### R.T. Harrison

establishment of a Commission on the History of Geographical Thought by the IGU in 1968, the inclusion in *Progress in Human Geography* of a 'Progress Report' on Methodology and Philosophy from volume 1 (1977) of the journal, and a section renamed 'History and Philosophy of Geography' from volume 8 (1984). There was, however, no formal channel in geography in the UK for the discussion of and reflection on these interests.

Second, the *normative* justification was that there ought to be a more formalised focus on the history and philosophy of the discipline, based on the view that knowledge and knowledge production was highly contextual. This was so both in terms of the ontological and epistemological role of the 'hand of time' in shaping what we know and how we come to know it, and in terms of the impact, actual and potential, of developments in the theoretical and philosophical adventurings in cognate disciplines. In this respect, it was always the case, in my mind, that the history and philosophy of the discipline could not be separated but were interdependent in shaping the present form and future directions of the field.

Third, the personal justification arose from my own interest in the topic, an interest, it became clear, shared with my fellow PhD student, David Livingstone. This was shaped by my wider interest in philosophy (I audited a number of philosophy courses throughout my undergraduate geography degree at Queen's University Belfast) and, crucially, by a first year undergraduate course on the history and philosophy of geographical thought taught by Professor William (Bill) Kirk which took an eclectic and inclusive view of 'geography' as genre rather than discipline and a broad historical sweep of geographical and related thinking as it developed across space and time. This initial interest was honed and refined by a number of other encounters, both personal and through the written word. Of the latter, in addition to the holy trinity of Herodotus, Humboldt and Hartshorne that Bill Kirk introduced us to, Clarence Glacken's masterful Traces on the Rhodian Shore (1976) was seminal in extending my growing interest in the history and philosophy of the subject.<sup>5</sup> David Harvey's Explanation in Geography (1969) pointed to more contemporary debates in the logic and philosophy of science (even if, as Robert Sack (1973) pointed out in his review, the book actually had little or nothing to say about geography specifically), and his Social Justice in the City (1973) introduced social theory and (Marxist) critical theory in particular to the discipline.<sup>6</sup> The seemingly interminable debate over the relationship between physical and human geography and the 'quantitative revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s drew my attention to the wider literature on the history of the evolution of academic disciplines, notably Goran Therborn's Science, Class and Society (1976), whose description of sociology resonated strongly with geography as I saw it then: 'a naturalistic enterprise of precocious grand theories and dilettante intrusions upon the old and developed disciplines of economics, history and jurisprudence'. Personal encounters of influence were many and varied, but conversations with Estyn Evans (the by then retired founding figure of geography and of Irish studies at Queen's), Anne Buttimer, Jim Bird, Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston and Gunnar Olsson, among many others, were particularly developmental in pointing, in their very different ways, to the transdisciplinary nature of the geographical enterprise.

How an intellectual historian (David Livingstone) and a quasieconomist/economic geographer (Richard Harrison) came to establish the HPGTWP in 1981 is an interesting demonstration of the role of serendipity, politics and context in the evolution of ideas and academic institutions.

#### Serendipity

In terms of serendipity, both David and I were PhD students in geography at Queen's in the period 1976-1979, funded by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland, under a scheme equivalent to an ESRC studentship. David's PhD topic was the examination of the work of Nathaniel Shaler and the development and spread of evolutionary thinking; mine was the historical evolution and regional economic impact of the UK shipbuilding industry.<sup>8</sup> Not, you might think, an obvious coincidence of interests that would lead to a series of joint publications and the genesis of the HPGWP. Indeed, were it not for a very rarely used administrative provision none of this might have happened. As a consequence of the institutional 'stickiness' of postgraduate research funding in the devolved nations, when my intended supervisor left Queen's for a position at Bristol in the summer of 1976, just before I was due to commence my doctoral studies, the only reason that I did not transfer to Bristol was that my PhD funding was not transferable to an English institution and as a Northern Ireland domiciled student I was not eligible (at that time) to apply for ESRC funding

Over the time of our PhD studies David and I quickly discovered a shared interest in the history and philosophy of the discipline (and, as it happens, in playing snooker and table tennis – indeed, the origin of the HPGTWP probably owes more to conversations over the green baize in the dingy basement of the Students' Union than to discussion in the hallowed halls of the ivory tower itself). This went beyond the subject matter of our PhD theses and was reflected in a series of publications which explored that common ground, several of which prompted subsequent debate and response.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Herodotus, The History of Herodotus, translated by George Rawlinson (London: John Murray, 1910); Alexander von Humboldt, Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe, translated by Elise C. Otté (London: H. G. Bohn,1851); Richard Hartshorne, The Nature of Geography: A Critical Survey of Current Thought in the Light of the Past'. Annals of the Association of American Geographers 29 (1939) 173–412; Clarence J. Glacken, Traces on the Rhodian Shore. Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> David Harvey, *Explanation in Geography* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973); Robert Sack, 'Book Review: David Harvey, *Explanation in Geography'*, *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 6 (1973) 68–72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Goran Therborn, Science, Class and Society: On the Formation of Sociology and Historical Materialism (London: Verso Books, 1976), p. 273.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> David N. Livingstone, Nathanial Southgate Shaler and the Culture of American Science (Tuscaloosa AL: University of Alabama Press, 1987); Richard T. Harrison, Industrial Organisation and Changing Technology in UK Shipbuilding: Historical Development and Future Implications (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Our joint *oeuvre* represents a systematic attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for the development of a subjectivist human geography. See Richard T. Harrison and David N. Livingstone, 'There and Back Again: Towards a Critique of Idealist Human Geography', Area 11 (1979) 75-79; 'Reply', Area 11 (1979) 81-82; 'Reply', Area 11 (1979) 215-16; Richard T. Harrison and David N. Livingstone, 'Philosophy and Problems in Human Geography', Area 12 (1980) 25-31; 'Comment', Area 12 (1980) 323–25: Richard T. Harrison and David N. Livingstone, 'Hunting the Snark: Perspectives on Geographical Investigation, Geografiska Annaler B 63 (1981) 69-72; Richard T. Harrison and David N. Livingstone, 'Meaning Through Metaphor: Analogy as Epistemology', Annals, Association of American Geographers, 71 (1981) 95–107: 'Comment', Annals, Association of American Geographers 72 (1982) 275–77: Richard T. Harrison and David N. Livingstone, 'Understanding in Geography: Structuring the Subjective', in Geography and the Urban Environment: Progress in Research and Applications ed. by David T Herbert and Ron J. Johnson (Chichester: Wiley, 1982) pp. 1–39; David N. Livingstone and Richard T. Harrison, 'The Frontier: Metaphor, Myth and Model', Professional Geographer 31 (1980) 127-132; David N. Livingstone and Richard T. Harrison, 'Immanuel Kant, Subjectivism and Human Geography: a Preliminary Investigation', Transactions, Institute of British Geographers 6 (1981) 359-74; David N. Livingstone and Richard T. Harrison, 'Reflections on a Phenomenological Approach', Journal of Environmental Psychology 3 (1983), 295 - 96

#### R.T. Harrison

#### Politics

In terms of politics, the end of the 1970s was marked by the second wave of Thatcherite cuts to university budgets across the UK and the effective cauterisation of the academic labour market. In the absence of any openings for academic appointments in geography. I moved across to a research position in applied economics at Oueen's (1979–1981). While not part of my day job. this position exposed me to discussions with colleagues in the economics department about the history of political economy in the UK and Ireland and beyond and the relations between economic theory and economic policy, which kept alive my interest in the matters that became the focus of the HPGWP. This was followed by an economic analysis and public policy development position outside the higher education system with the Northern Ireland Economic Council (1981–1985) before taking up a lectureship in business economics, in the then Department of Business Studies, back at Queen's in 1985.<sup>10</sup> As with many other economic geographers, the remainder of my career has been spent in a business school environment, in my case at the universities of Ulster, Aberdeen, Queen's and Edinburgh (twice) - not guite the early career pattern that one would associate with the establishment of a HPGTWP!

#### **Political context**

In terms of political context, the conversations leading up to the formation of the HPGTWP took place against the background of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', a 30-year period of civil unrest and violence that had peaked in the mid-1970s and led to the deaths of almost four thousand people in Northern Ireland, most of them civilians; a further forty-five thousand were injured in bombings and shootings. Relative to population size this was at the time the most intense conflict experienced in Western Europe since the end of the Second World War, and it was one of the longest lasting low intensity conflicts in the world (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> In a militarised, segregated and sectarian society Queen's University Belfast stood as a 'zone of civility'.<sup>12</sup> a space which was relatively protected from the surrounding violence in which staff and students could experiment with identities free from their segregated neighbourhoods; a space, in other words, that facilitated the replacement of the politics of fear with the politics of hope.<sup>13</sup> This certainly encouraged a detachment from the quotidian realities of everyday life in Belfast and the exploration of ideas - such as the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the discipline - on a much broader canvas, as part of the deep human capacity for curbing and circumventing violence and 'accessing resilience and regenerative creativity'.<sup>14</sup> This detachment, however, is not to imply the absence of engagement: over the period of which we speak (the early 1980s) Queen's geographers were researching, inter alia, the

operation of the local housing market (inequalities in which were an immediate trigger for the emergence of the conflict in 1969), patterns of intra-urban and intra-community household migration, the geography of violence and its implications for the evolution of the urban fabric, and the impact of violence on inward investment and regional economic development.

#### **Micro-context**

If the macro-context of the university in the region provided space for wider reflection, the micro-context of the geography department at Queen's also played a role. In the mid-1970s, the geography department had moved from a rabbit warren of staff offices and teaching facilities in the main university building to a free-standing refurbished building a few minutes' walk away. This housed not just academic staff offices and space for the department's administrative and technical support staff but also teaching laboratory space and office accommodation for PhD students (with two or three doctoral students sharing an office). Crucially, this building also included a coffee lounge on the top floor and it was an unwritten custom and practice that mid-morning and mid-afternoon anyone working in the building (academic staff, support staff, technicians and PhD students) would drop in for coffee (in their own named mug) and conversation. In an echo of the 'coffee shop culture' associated with innovation past and present this provided a melting pot environment for the exchange and discussion of ideas in a uniquely interdisciplinary environment which, when combined with the toleration of significant work beyond the narrow confines of our PhD topics, allowed for the development and exploitation of the synergies that eventually were manifest in our joint papers and in the HPGTWP proposal.

Given my career move out of geography (and indeed for some years out of academia) in the early 1980s, I did not envisage being involved in a '40 years on' celebration of the product of the enthusiasm of youth – there is an irony in the fact that someone who has never held an academic position in geography has their career bookended by their interest in matters of the history and philosophy of the discipline!

#### Futures - righting the world?

Looking back is also an opportunity to look forward. Many of the issues of concern in the discipline in the late 1970s and 1980s – definition and scope, internal coherence, external validity, methodological orientation, philosophical grounding, the 'parade of the –isms' (feminism, colonialism, etc) and relevance, for example – remain so. Equally, there is no doubt that the brave new world of crisis, hyperobjects, uncertain futures and wicked problems poses new challenges for how we think about the roles and relations of academic disciplines and provides both a challenge and an opportunity for scholars of the history and philosophy of geographical thought to bring a wider, inclusive and integrative perspective to bear on these contemporary issues.<sup>15</sup> First, grand challenges, super wicked problems and hyperobjects transcend the conventional boundaries of what is known and unknown, thought and unthought, and require recognition of the importance of polyvocality

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Somewhat ironically, at this time the Department of Business Studies occupied the space on the main campus previously occupied by the Geography Department during much of my undergraduate studies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Liam Kennedy, Who Was Responsible for the Troubles? The Northern Ireland Conflict (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); M. Sutton, Bear in Mind These Dead. An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland 1969–1993. Updated Database of Troubles-related Deaths (CAIN: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2001) http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/updates.html, last accessed 7 November 2021.

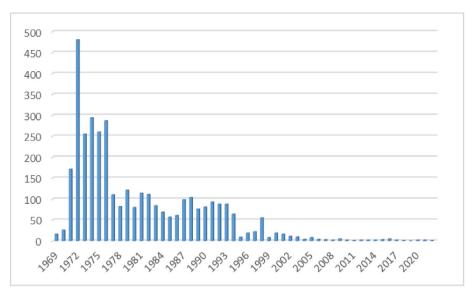
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> John Brewer, 'Queen's University Belfast in Times of Violence and Peace', in Universities and Conflict: The Role of Higher Education in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, ed by Juliet Millican (London: Routledge, 2018) pp. 65–77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones, 'Rethinking Borders, Violence, and Conflict: From Sovereign Power to Borderscapes as Sites of Struggles'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 38* (2020) 287–305.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Bandy X. Lee (2019). Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> A hyperobject is an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats traditional ideas of what a thing is in the first place; it is simply 'too big', characterised by complex and systematic change that crosses traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries. See T. Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

### ARTICLE IN PRESS



#### Fig. 1. Deaths in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' 1969-2022.

Source: based on data from https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/tables/Year.html (accessed January 17, 2024).

Notes: The 'Good Friday Agreement', generally taken as marking the end of the conflict, was signed on April 10, 1998; The decommissioning of IRA weapons was completed in 2005. Data for 2002–2022 are provisional and exclude a total of 25 deaths which may be Troubles related

and the heterodox: there is no simple or single 'right answer' as the issues transcend our capacity to think of them.  $^{16}\,$ 

Second, this challenges us to rethink what we consider to be appropriate processes of institutionalization and socialization, then and now, in the discipline, and to rethink the increasing lack of fit between these internally directed processes, designed to maintain and reinforce our sense of membership in and belonging to the 'discipline' (or one or more of its constituent sub-tribes) and the transdisciplinary manifestation of the key issues facing us.

Third, the scale and scope of the issues facing us challenges the contextualization of knowledge at the individual and the discipline level. For GWF Hegel, the owl of Minerva (the archtypical representation of wisdom in the West) spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is only as an era ends that one can look back and fully comprehend its nature. This encourages us to re-examine the history, development and status of geography as the basis for moving forward. Fourth, this in turn points to the erosion of essentialist and internalist accounts of the history of the discipline (the 'manifest destiny' of the subject) and the replacement of vanguard theorising and its fitting of the world to its previsions and propositions by 'theories of the rearguard' which recognise that the time of linearity, simplicity, unity, totality and determination is over.<sup>18</sup> This rearguard theorising is grounded in craftsmanship not architecture, committed testimony not clairvoyant leadership, and intercultural approximation. It follows and shares the practices of social movements, asks questions,

<sup>17</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963/1820) p. 13.

establishes synchronic and diachronic comparisons, symbolically enlarges such practices by means of articulations, translations and alliances with other movements, and provides contexts, facilitates interactions and facilitates complexity and simplification as appropriate to the situation and context.

Fifth, in so doing, this offers a resolution of the tension between rigour and relevance and (re)establishes the role of phenomenon (or problem) driven research in a way that does not privilege those of us who dwell in the inaccessible neighbourhoods and fortified institutions we call 'universities'. Writing in 1940, the English novelist and essayist George Orwell berated his literary contemporaries for their passivity, detachment and lack of purpose and commitment. Using the Bible story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale, Orwell argued that the myth persists because 'being inside the whale is a very comfortable, cosy, homelike thought'; the whale's belly is a dark cushioned space that exactly fits you, with 'yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter what happens'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, his contemporaries have performed the essential Jonah act of allowing themselves to be swallowed, remaining passive, accepting. So it is with much contemporary scholarship, marked by an increasingly sterile scholasticism, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake by scholars who know more and more about less and less, driven by the search for legitimacy as reflected in progressively more arcane methodological and theoretical casuistry.

Sixth, an adequate response to the challenges of the twenty-first century requires the integration of and response to the voice of the Global South in a decolonising geography which recognises that 'the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice ... [and] ... the emancipatory transformations of the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory'.<sup>20</sup> From

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Super-wicked problems are more than just wicked problems that can be understood but for which no rational solution can be found; they are problems 'for which time is running out, for which there is no central authority, where those seeking the solution to it are also creating it, and where policies discount the future irrationally'. Morton, 'Hyperobjects', p. 15; R. J. Lazarus, 'Super Wicked Problems and Climate Change: Restraining the Present to Liberate the Future', *Cornell Law Review* 94, (2009) 1155–1234; K. Levin, B. Cashore, S. Bernstein and G. Auld, 'Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems: Constraining our Future Selves to Ameliorate Global Climate Change', *Policy Sciences* 45 (2012), 123–152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Santos, 'Epistemologies', p. viii.

#### R.T. Harrison

this perspective, inquiries into ways of knowing cannot be separated from those into ways of intervening in the world to attenuate or eliminate the oppression, domination, and discrimination caused by global capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy and address the apparent hegemony of the neoliberal consensus.<sup>21</sup> This implies a new temporality, revaluing the present as the locus for the irruption of the past and the future and paving the way for a geography of absences and a geography of emergences: as Gunnar Olsson expressed it, both ideology and planning 'are nourished by the legitimating interplay of mystification and domination ... planning is an ingredient of that ethical glue whereby the is of the past and the ought of the future are bound together'.<sup>22</sup>

Seventh, there is an opportunity to engage further with and move beyond the dialectics of self and other and the binary logic of identity and otherness as posthumanism dislodges belief in the 'natural' foundations of socially-coded and enforced 'differences' and of the systems of scientific validity, ethical values and representations they support.<sup>23</sup> The political economy of difference has marked off the sexualized other (woman), the racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, environment, earth) with significant consequences for passing off entire categories of human beings as devalued and disposable, reinforcing structural ignorance and the active production of half-truths about these others and legitimising the bellicose dismissiveness of other cultures and civilizations. By contrast, the performative approach of posthumanism draws attention to intersectionality, embodiment, inclusivity and positionality as alternatives, and to practices, doings and interactions in terms of epistemology, ontology, materiality and agency.<sup>24</sup> In so doing, this raises more questions than it provides answers: What are the lived experiences of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the pursuit of recognition? How do the politics of assembly and embodied ethics build interdependence and relationality?<sup>25</sup> And how do we reconfigure the relationship between structure and agency in addressing the social hierarchies that produce and perpetuate disadvantage?

Journal of Historical Geography xxx (xxxx) xxx

#### Conclusion

How then do we construe the nature of the discipline going forward and the role of the History and Philosophy Research Group (HPGRG) within that? Our guide here can be the philosopher Max Fisch who, in taking issue with Whitehead's definition of philosophy as the critic of abstractions, saw it rather as the critic of institutions. defined as 'any provision or arrangement of means or conditions for subsequent activity, additional to or in modification of the means or conditions that are already present prior to the institution, whether present in nature prior to all institutions or present in nature only as modified by previous institutions'.<sup>26</sup> For Fisch, institutions are comprehended with the help of maps, charts, models, complex theoretical descriptions and historical narratives, and these techniques of comprehension become so specialised to particular institutions or aspects of institutions as to form the basis of a social science. These sciences become so focused on description, the comprehension of their institutional domain, that they neglect the function of criticising those institutions. Presciently (as he was originally speaking in 1956) Fisch believed that in fifty or seventy five years it may turn out that the 'social sciences ... [and] ... their effort to approximate the mind-free value-free concepts and methods of the natural sciences ... have been a mistake'.<sup>27</sup> If so, he believed, they could return to the condition of philosophy, each functioning as a critic of institutions from the base of a particular institution or set of institutions. Scoping out what geography as a critic of institutions might look like and identifying the implications for our scholarship seems a worthy objective for the next forty years of the HPGRG as it both brings forth the new and continually reviews the old by re-sifting, re-selecting and re-ordering past creations and re-editing, re-translating, re-reading, re-interpreting and criticising afresh.

#### **Declaration of competing interest**

None.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Tom Mels 'Between the Castle and the Trial: The Spaceless Spaces of Planning', in *GO: On the Geographies of Gunnar Olsson*, ed by Christian Abrahamsson and Martin Gren (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) 111–29 (p.111).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Simon Springer, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy (eds) *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC And London: Duke University Press, 2007). Heike Jöns, 'Dynamic Hybrids and The Geographies of Technoscience: Discussing Conceptual Resources Beyond the Human/Non-Human Binary', *Social and Cultural Geography* 7 (2006) 559–580.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Max H. Fisch, 'The critic of Institutions'. In *The Owl of Minerva: Philosophers on Philosophy*. Ed. by Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 135-52.
<sup>27</sup> Fisch 'Cottic' on 140-50.