



Socio-Spatial Theory in Nordic Geography. Intellectual Histories and Critical Interventions, Jakobsen Peter, Jönsson Erik, Larsen Henrik Gutzon

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Human geography is a complex science, just like its subject of study, the world. Thus, despite its apparent unity, human geography is distinguished by multiple approaches, including regional, national, or ethnic criteria. The Anglo-Saxon or the Francophone approaches are more well-known, neither being organized as a monolith; for example, there are important differences between the French-speaking geography of France and that of Québec (Tremblay, 2023). In this context, it is not surprising that there is also a 'Nordic geography', established in the Nordic European countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), known for the fundamental contributions of geographers such as Torsten Hägerstrand and others in the past, and of contemporary geographers such as the authors of the volume *Socio-Spatial Theory in Nordic Geography*.

In this respect, the publication of this book, which has its origins in a panel session of the 2019 Nordic Geographers Meeting in Trondheim, confirms this contribution to geographical knowledge. However, the book's main concern "is not to delineate a 'Nordic' field of geography", but, first, "the book seeks to foreground theorisations of geography from human-geographical perspectives (...), which is to say social-theoretical perspectives that approach the social and the spatial as mutually constitutive" (p. 2). Second, "and here the 'Nordic' becomes more evident, the book pursues the 'double geography' (...) in the sense that geographical knowledge is also situated knowledge" (p. 2).

The editors discuss in the introductory chapter the contribution to the knowledge of this book and the ideas around the "Nordic identity" and the "Nordic legacy", which conducted to some particularities in the Nordic European countries, and also draw the context, scope, and the overview of the book: "this is not solely a book about geographical knowledge, it is also a book about the production of knowledge within human geography" (p. 4). Then, the 28 authors, with present and past academic affiliations to institutions from the Nordic European countries, address different geographical topics in the 16 chapters of the book. The chapters reflect the

historical (including recent and contemporary) developments and intellectual histories of the subject in Nordic human geography, with an emphasis on the socio-spatial theory, i.e., on “how Nordic geographers have understood and theorized the relations between the social and the spatial, between the material-geographical and the cognitive/social-geographical” (p. 9).

The particularity of the contributions in the book is that “they are fashioned as intellectual autobiographies wholly or partially (...) in the sense that the authors themselves have been or are active participants in what is discussed” (p. 9), except for the chapters 2-4. Although the content of the book could seem heterogeneous, due to the different topics of the chapters, this is the way to cover the rich geographical debate in Nordic geography; and, as the editors confess, it was not possible to make an exhaustive work, some topics and authors are not included in the book.

A particular idea from political geography is discussed in Chapter 2, that of ‘small-state geopolitics’, also named ‘Geopolitik of the weak’ and ‘subaltern geopolitics’. The analysis starts from two political statements: ‘Denmark should again be a green great power’, and Sweden as a ‘humanitarian great power’; it leans on two Nordic proponents of classical geopolitical reasoning, Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) and Gudmund Hatt (1884–1960).

Spatial science and planning are the subjects of Chapter 3, which presents the influence of Walter Christaller’s central place theory on Swedish human geography and the development of a Swedish ‘planning-geography’. The theory was used to expand the welfare state in Sweden (equal access to quality public services for all citizens), which involved a need for new knowledge and tools.

Chapter 4 is a study on radical geography at Copenhagen University, more precisely on structural Marxism of the 1970s. It examines the territorial-structure approach, a “general Marxist theory about how and why different localities of production and consumption are connected, and how they are historically and geographically conditioned by the modes of production that determine the social and economic development of society” (p. 56). It is considered “the most systematic attempt at theorizing geography in Danish radical geography” (p. 64).

The authors of Chapter 5 highlight the need for cooperation between physical and human branches of geography, although opinions about this synthesis are opposite: some geographers consider that it gives “the discipline its meaning and identity”, and others consider the concept as “superficial, unobtainable or a barrier to scholarship” (p. 81). Among other examples, the authors use the one of the

vulnerability of the population to climate: “change depends not only on climate but also directly on social and political measures. (...) In many cases, adaptation is more directly needed than mitigation. The challenge is physical, social and cultural” (p. 81).

The next two chapters focus on the links between natural elements and society within the Nordic geography: the politicisation of nature (Chapter 6) and the landscape (Chapter 7). Nature and landscape are two terms frequently associated with the North, which fed the collective imagination regarding this little-known region for a long time, and the topics of these two chapters prove their importance.

Chapters 8-16 focus on topics of human geography. Chapter 8 draws an overview of the Nordic gender geography, emphasizing that economic transformation alters traditional gender relations, and, among other challenges, the increasing precariousness of academic jobs. Chapter 9 addresses the theme of innovation and regional development: it focuses on economic geography in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, presenting “the developments from Marxist economic geography to studies of industrial districts, regional clusters, and new industrial spaces” (p. 152). Chapter 10 highlights the geographical contributions to tourism studies in Nordic scholarship; it realizes this from a bibliometric analysis of works published since 2010 and provides an overview of how tourism dynamics and developments have been understood and researched by Nordic geographers. Chapter 11 examines the compact city model, which has become the dominant idea for urban sustainability governance; it scrutinizes the spatialities of the compact city model in the Nordic context, focusing in particular on Oslo. Chapter 12 addresses another urgent urban issue, that of the housing market in Sweden; new challenges like marketization and financialization of the Nordic housing market involved processes such as gentrification and shortage of affordable housing. The chapter offers an overview of Swedish displacement pressure to highlight the importance of theoretical tools to the understanding of socio-spatial relations. Chapter 13 discusses theoretical considerations of an important issue, “the uneven geographical developments and the production of ‘peripherality’ in a Nordic context” (p. 218), which could be surprising for the Nordic context, “given the perception of the region as affluent, stable and with high levels of social equality” (p. 217); examples are from the north of Sweden.

The last three chapters of the book address theories within Nordic geography through partially or fully autobiographical chapters of academics with worldwide recognition for their research: Jouni Häkli and Mette Strømsø on the development of Nordic geographical theories of nationhood and nationalism (Chapter 14), Kirsten

Simonsen on the everyday life and the city (Chapter 15), and Anssi Paasi on the institutionalization of regions (Chapter 16).

The book's contribution to knowledge is undeniable, because, although they are marked by natural, social, and cultural peculiarities, the examples studied from the Nordic countries can be relevant to other parts of the world, such as, for example, housing problems: "The Nordic housing markets, like in other parts of the world, have been increasingly challenged by neoliberal planning paradigms, globalisation and the dismantling of the welfare state" (p. 208).

Given its theoretical nature, the book does not contain many figures – only a few conceptual ones. Also, the language is quite technical; therefore, the book can be of interest primarily to geographers, but also to those interested in the specific problems presented in the book. The extensive presentation of the evolution of knowledge in different research topics is also very useful to have an overview of that topic, which makes this book one of maximum interest.

References

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