

Review

Countryside, landscape and heritage in (new) historical Geography: Some considerations in the current geographical tendencies

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Abstract: The geographical histories are a field of study of notable heterogeneity and influenced by other geographical sub-disciplines such as cultural geography, rural geography or social geography. The countryside, the past landscape and the heritage are key themes in the new historical geography through the micro or small place histories. Research into key cases of studies allows for the elaboration of broader interpretive frameworks. Current methodological trends are highly influenced by the general orientations of cultural and rural geography, with broad relevance to qualitative methodologies on selected cases. This allows for a mundane geographical history from below that breaks with the general interpretive schemes of academics experts. This has notably influenced the research sources used in the new historical geography with the emergence of oral histories as a source of research for the preparation of contrasted biographies of places and the articulated use of new and old or classic sources—mainly archives—of information. The development of an environmental history in the context of the new historical geography is due to the relevance of the hybrid relationships between nature-culture-society that currently characterize modern geographical research.

Keywords: historical geography; countryside; academic traditions; heritage; place; history of geography

1. Introduction

Historical geography is not a well established discipline with close boundaries [1], it is an open field that amalgamates academic traditions and sub-disciplines. At present it is interpreted as a sub discipline characterized by its thematic and academic heterogeneity [2]. Traditionally, many research of historical geography remain in an old stage that comes from the description of a certain agrarian

landscape, where the precise elements for the vision and understanding of a rural area are synthesized, especially from a descriptive and material perspective [3]. In traditional rural studies such as Meynier's [4], the focus is the evolution of agrarian systems and landscapes. Among the main manuals of historical geography, only Mitchell's precursor book [5] incorporates analytical elements of rural historical processes in his study of settlement systems. However, other more localized works such as Harris [6] do insert a section on the dynamics in the historical processes of rural change. In more recent books the historical construction of the rural landscape at the regional or sub-regional level (eg Turnock) [7], is already associated with changes in the construction of rural space.

The historical perspective disappears in rural studies since the 1970s with the deployment of various works that interpret rural spaces from the political economy. From then on, a period opens in rural (geographical) studies based on the analytical interpretation of the present. But, with the development of a more analytical socio-culturally oriented rural geography, rural historical studies have revolved around the historical evolution of the landscape and the nature of change in rural landscapes and societies [3]. In particular, the key role of pastoral traditions has been revealed in the construction of myth and idylls of an ideal countryside [8,9], where the maintenance of an old order prevails. The debate on the cultural representations of rurality has had effects on the bucolic ruralism, the nostalgia of traditional landscape and a notable concern for the (built) heritage. Conservative rural idyll point of view [10] has always prevailed in this debate, based on the preservation of the traditional landscape.

At present, historical geography is still understood as a heterogeneous and diffuse sub-discipline influenced by different academic geographical traditions [11]. Consequently, this short review tries to systematize the approach to scientific knowledge of the new historical geography that combines the rural, historical and cultural dimensions [3].

2. Countryside, heritage and landscape in the new historical geography

Baker in 1976 [12] in a key text suggests that the transition to a new historical geography that implies a historical geography over a geographical history is necessary. In the Baker sense [12] the old geographical history refers to histories of spaces and the spatial dimension in history. Against the new historical geography refers to the time geography and geography of temporality and includes biographies of individuals as infinite interpretative paths in time and space. Also, in this new geographical academic context, research areas such as: memory and identity of landscape, past in the present (survive of relict features), cultural significances (historical survivals), cultural continuity (cultural myths, nostalgia and memories) and related questions about heritage conservation and preservation. Contested cultures are a new formulation for historical geographies since the 1970s coupled with the remarkable processes of socio-economic transformation of the countryside. In this perspective, historical geographies can play a key role in the reconstitution of place identities [12]. A new historical geography, where the term "new" comes from how the "new" studies and interprets spatial or location histories.

2.1. Landscape and new historical geography

Currently landscape is a key interest in historical geography from different study perspectives [13]:
 (a) Landscape geographies and histories would analyze landscapes discourses, memories and

identities in landscape places. (b) The landscape as process suggests a work on historical geography as a part of spatial development. (c) The visual landscape would have meaning in the form of memories of cultural myths. In this academic orientation, the stories about the landscape can provide and appropriate window on human-environment relations [14]. (d) The denominated landscape biography amalgamates the biographical accounts of the numerous individuals who have occupied in the past [15]. (e) The landscape as check-list aims at the deconstruction of landscape's as the core of an adequate scientific knowledge construction in historical geography [1]. In this new academic context the nexus of landscape, memory and identity is fostered. All the arguments must be placed in the place, amalgamating historicity and spatiality. The historical cultural landscape expresses spatiality and a history (based in live memories) in the form of particular narratives of past landscape.

Another objective of the new historical geography is to contribute to the scientific development of a theoretical research framework based on the new cultural orientation in rural geography [16], by combining the latest theoretical and methodological approaches used above all in different geographic sub-disciplines such as rural, social and cultural geography. As Duffy [3] indicates, in the context of rural studies there has been considerable overlap between rural and cultural geography. In this way, two trends converge in the new historical geography: the historical perspective of cultural geography or the cultural perspective of historical geography. Many of the works written for historical geography during the 1970s and 80s have adopted the analytical perspective of cultural geography ever since. As a consequence, an interpretative approach to the past has been generated [17]. From this point of view, the problems of translating and interpreting the past for the present [18] are analyzed. The specific narratives of history suggest particular relations and tensions between past, present and future. The subjective interpretation of the cultural landscape is central to the concept of geographical self [10] and contributes to promoting different cultures of landscapes. The tensions between the different cultures of landscapes in a place suggest competitive interests and multiple versions of particular landscape(s). The character of place and the genealogy of place synthesize and express the unique biography of each place. In this analytical context the countryside as a whole synthesize and expresses old pictures based in traditional visions of landscape and modern versions based in a creative destruction of landscape. In short, there would be multiple dualities of landscape based in the old basic geographical dualism nature-culture.

2.2. *Heritage and new historical geography*

This would also affect the study that associates memory and heritage. Heritage refers to the use of the (material) past in the present [1]. The traditional studies in historical geography focused on the survival of relict features, in contrast the new historical geography need to explain and describe such features as historical phenomena and representations in the present-day landscape [19]. Modern studies of historical geography are interested in analyzing the cultural significance of historical survivals in the context of heritage conservation and preservation politics [20]. Likewise, it suggests an adequate geographical interpretation of the main roles of the different governance positions, in relation to the human transformation of the (cultural) landscape. In traditional historical geography, heritage was an element of the landscape that founded nationalism and patriotic sentiments. In the new historical geography it contributes to analyze the association between cultural landscape and cultural identity [18] and heritage as part of the present is used. Heritage is viewed as a whole subject to interpretative differences according to age, gender or class. The heritage protests would express

different interpretative sociopolitical tensions and can take many forms. Usually new geographical historians tell stories about others stories [14]. Heritage as an interpretative whole of different elements (tools, reliefs, potteries, lakes or knowledge) plays a key role in the construction of narratives of identity and as such overlaps with other usual concepts in historical geography as landscape and memory. The narrative is organized in terms of the versions of cultural landscape and competitive visions of landscape [10,21].

The current interpretation of heritage would depend largely on ideology. Studies on public memory of the past and the debates surrounding the representation of heritage sites reveal the role of ideology and the theoretical framework in the interpretation of visual heritage. Heritage is subject to differences of interpretation between a conservative sense associated with nostalgia and rural idyll and a radical and critical concept based on an open and active dialogue between the past and the present [18,22]. The interpretation of heritage would be the balance between the current and imagined countryside either as individual elements or as parts of a more complex frame of reference. Heritage would not only be the built heritage but the set of personal experiences and meanings [23]. A patrimonial heritage tends to be idealized, as a representation of the traditional material culture that no longer exists [24–26]. In this perspective, there would be an individual construction of the cultural landscape and heritage. The moral geographies of landscape emerge to analyze different modes of everyday behavior in the cultural countryside. In contrast, the immoral geographies of leisure analyze the effects of recreational activities on consumption and the creative destruction of the cultural landscape of the countryside.

On the other hand, from a more social perspective, as Newby [27] suggests, most of the changes in rural society are influenced by changes in agriculture. It would be the antidote to rural idyll. This perspective expresses the anti-pastoral tradition based on the differences of experience the countryside [8]. In this line of argument, it has been indicated that the city-countryside binary dualism is a relationship of domination and that class relations dominate rural communities [28]. The human settlement of the past takes on different meanings in the time. If the landscape is a site of value, it is also a place of anger [10].

In sum, at present, historical geography admits the existence of multiple and different cultures of the landscape that express the cultural effects of ruralism and a concern of ideal cultural landscape as a mythical idealized and pastoral idea contrasting with disfigured contemporary countryside landscape.

3. Methodological tendencies and sources of study in the new geographical history

3.1. New methods for a new historical geography

As Morrisey et al. [1] suggest, the new geographical history should be constructed across multiple and spatial contexts, through a comparative study between the different areas that allows the extraction of broader interpretations [22,29,30]. Due to the academic configuration of the field of study, it is not necessary to adopt a unique scope and scale [1]. An approach to the cultural geographical past from the bottom up of rural places, in a range to micro research to national interpretation dominates the current orientations of the new historical geography. This allows more emphasis to be placed on regional differences and local nuances. In this way, small histories or micro histories have been a key focus of interest in recent historical geographies, based on the detailed study of the historical evidence of the

present. In this field of scientific work, the past of the historical landscape is not a passive space, but is linked to the history of individual people, practices and tensions in the place [31]. In this academic context emerge the past biographies of the place that adopt the forms and molds of life and active histories. But the case study has little value unless the theoretical contexts [29]. The spatial dimension of the past must be included in the study of the present process. This contributes to configuring a new contextual geographical history of an interpretive nature due to the difficulties of identifying the relevant data that feed consistent and complex theoretical frameworks. Historical and traditional landscapes are currently more heterogeneous and multilayered humanized landscapes as a result of their progressive denaturalization.

Historical geography still combines methodologies that come from phenomenology and traditional geography, in order to increase the knowledge of how people used and experienced the land (power, ritual and emotions). The everyday place is considered as a particular site of historical struggles. This facilitates the integration of social facts in place as a source of research.

The cultural landscape has evolved from a tangible material thing, visible as a result of human activity on the surface of the earth to a landscape as discourse materialized [32], which connects the past with the present [33]. This affects the main data sources used: archives and comparative field work.

3.2. Sources and new historical geography

A wide range of sources for a broad vision of geographical (rural) history is the current tendency. Already in 1941 [34] Sauer indicated in a classic work that the first stage in the reconstruction of the past of historical cultural areas is matters of its written document (archives and libraries) and the second the field work that consisted of “reading” and interpret documents in the field. Currently the most widely used methodological approach is the so-called “complementary data collection methods”, through triangulation [31,35], for the most adequate analysis of the complex object of study that brings together visions of the past, present and future expectations. Triangulation refers to the combined application of some research methods and sources to study the same geo-historical phenomenon, through the articulation and use of multiple observations, sources and materials in files, documents and extensive field work.

In any case, the new generation of historical geographers uses the document-oriented approach to analyze the exceptional elements of the past; the archival sources for analytical interpretation, the ethno-geographical sources for live and experiences approach, in many cases in a combined way to adequately interpret the past. Informal experiences acquire a renewed value in the context of a people’s history based on the historical experiences of the population [22]. The current relevance of oral histories allows us to add a sense of lives and personal experiences from the past to the present. In the new geographical history the field evidences contribute actively to the detailed interpretation of the past in singular places. This methodological trend combines detailed experiences, opinions and memories of local people in each site and problematizes the multiplicity of nuances within each historical landscape [14]. Its purpose is to construct representative biographies of the cultural landscape between social identities and a sense of place through local narratives, critical discourses and observations. In definitive constructs and consolidates narratives of identity at a variety of spatial scales. This renewed historical and cultural geo perspective shows that a place can be built, used and reused from diverse ways and perspectives. In this sense, monuments would currently be emblems or focal points of domination/resistance used at different geographical scales.

Oral histories represent a reaction to traditional geographical histories based on positivism (archival sources and expert interpretation) and seek to connect memory, narrative and subjectivity associated with individual life experiences. In this way oral histories incorporate worldly voices and the voices of others habitually marginalized from geographical history [36,37]. Furthermore, oral histories have been revitalized by their interest in emerging areas of geographical history such as environmental history to situate past environmental practices, meanings and historical power relations [38]. Other research sources develop the possibilities of live biographies and autobiographies to integrate dark histories and experimental emotional histories of research in the new historical geography [39].

In the way of the Geographical History to landscape (cultural) history there have been two major phases: (1) from a (physical) landscape perspective, three themes have predominated [40]: the draining of the marshes, clearing the forests and reclaiming the heath lands. For example, in the case of forests areas, the investigation has been dispersed into different topics such as woodlands as landscapes of power, the rural regeneration, the changes in the traditional functions of forests areas... (2) Currently the concerns about the cultural landscape are ambiguous, they are more focused on the visual scene that should not be confused with the environment, the system that sustains us [40]. The production of the landscape by differentiated social classes in various urbanized or not scenarios are also relevant [41].

In the process of institutionalization of historical geography, various specialized journals have appeared. The main international journals where works related to the object of study of historical geography appear are: *Landscape History* edited by the British Society for Landscape Studies since 1979 and its American counterpart *Landscape* which has been published since 1951. In 1975 the *Journal of Historical Geography* emerged to give a wider spectrum to studies of historical geography. Other specialized journals on (cultural) Landscape where historical works also regularly appear from various points of view are: *Landscape Research*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* or *Cultural Geography*.

4. Considerations for the future research in new geographical histories

The new historical geography is characterized by a diversity of approaches and topics in the interpretation of the place and the landscape [11]. It is highly influenced in its conceptual and methodological tendencies by other geographical sub-disciplines such as rural geography, cultural geography, the emotional geography etc., a factor that clearly conditions its evolution. In any case, it is risky to drive towards a more conceptual historical geography that generates a sub-discipline that is more autonomous from the rest of the geographical fields.

A notable interpretive trend of the new geographical history is the memory studies that provide a new analytical dimension to concerns with heritage and cultural material/visual landscape [32]. The landscape memories must amalgamate the history of particular places and land uses and the repercussion in the socio-ecological changes. Historical geography has tended to investigate nature-culture and nature-society relations [42], not in the form of binary geographical relations, but in the context of more-than-human relations and hybrid geographies [43]. In this academic perspective, environmental history can constitute a notable path of progression of geographical history where questions of visions of landscape past, historical processes of environmental change and geographical dimensions of nature-society-cultural micro relations are analyzed.

The association of landscape, memory and identity contributes to the construction of local identity and to articulate in an adequate way the current strategies of resistance. Research in geo-historical act of resistance suggests adaptive cultural practices over time through the construction of biographies of landscapes and new geographical formulations in the diverse narratives and visions of past places in the present process of (rural) change. In the current postmodern stage of geographical history, each geographic area can bring together unique natural, cultural and heritage values [44]. Furthermore, the value of the materiality of heritage can have different meanings and visions at the local, regional and even global levels in different geographical contexts [45].

In sum as explain Philo [46] an adequate differentiation between historical geography is still necessary as a subfield of geography and geographical history that gathers the tradition of history. The influence of current trends in rural geography, cultural geography conditions the autonomy of historical geography. One could even speak of a historical perspective in the works of rural or cultural geographers who study the roots of the landscape and the singular countryside. This situation is even more complex when we (re) consider traditional knowledge [47] in different spatial contexts [48].

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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