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TGRG page

Repositioning transport geography

The previous TGRG Page reviewed a series of papers covering a variety of empirical research studies presented at the Congress of the International Geographical Union, in Glasgow, Scotland in August 2004. This Page is the second in this series, and focuses on two further papers, which provoked significant constructive debate during the conference sessions.

For several years, the TGRG has sought to reposition the sub-discipline of transport geography at the heart of academic geography as a whole. This reflects a number of trends. First is the immense success we have enjoyed in strengthening our links with our sister groups in the US and Germany. By pursuing such international links—and we hope more are to follow—the Group will be well positioned to capitalise on the increasing internationalisation of transport research and publication.

The TGRG's recent research activity has also been designed to raise the visibility of the Group and its members in the key policy debates surrounding transport policy. This not only reflects the theme of the 2003 RGS-IBG conference, namely "geographers serving society", but also contributes to revitalising linkages between transport geographers and our colleagues in other professional transport-related organisations, such as the Universities Transport Studies Group, with whom we have jointly convened recent events, and the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport.

All of this activity is designed to ensure the longer term sustainability of the sub-discipline of transport geography. Thus it was fitting that two papers presented at the IGC approached the issue of sustainability, not from the perspective of a particular transport mode or geographical region, but from the position that transport geography and transport geographers would have to adapt to changing academic contexts if their endeavours were to gain the recognition they deserve in future.

The first of these papers was presented by Dr. Jo Guiver of the University of Leeds. Jo's presentation addressed a central philosophical question, which has troubled transport geography for several decades. Put simply, this is the issue of how to reconcile the roles of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in transport geography research and, more generally, what these choices signify for our relationships with other disciplinary traditions, such as economics, engineering and sociology.

In treading a path between these "Different Worlds", Jo outlined how research findings derived from parallel qualitative and quantitative inquiries might at first appear to be compatible and complementary, whilst in reality hiding a range of conflicting assumptions about how the world 'works' and how research should be conducted. The paper then explored the conflict between the positivist method and other humanistic approaches.

In conclusion, the paper argued that whilst qualitative methods could enrich our understanding of travel behaviour, accepting alternative methodologies uncritically might undermine, or might be seen by others to undermine, some of the "authority" enjoyed by transport research based on quantitative methodologies. This, and the economic assumptions made by many quantitative approaches, raise critical questions about how our methodologies support or mitigate against moves towards more sustainable transport.

The final paper of the Congress developed a previous presentation given at the 2003 RGS-IBG meeting in London. Dr. John Preston (Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford) delivered a keynote contribution on current progress in transport geography, which was most enthusiastically received.

Although strongly influenced by social science disciplines (principally economics and planning), transport studies has become somewhat isolated from many of the developments in the rest of the social sciences. John's paper argued that a revitalised transport geography might provide the nexus between transport studies and the social sciences. This will require a number of issues to be addressed. First, and reflecting Jo Guiver's critique, the dominant epistemological and ontological paradigms underpinning much of the transport studies enterprise need to be re-assessed. In particular, more pluralistic methodologies need to be considered. In addition to the dominant logical positivist tradition, methodologies inspired by alternative traditions need to be considered (in particular, structuralism and humanism and the various developments they have inspired). This will require a mixture of state-of-the-art quantitative and qualitative approaches.

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Secondly, a more holistic, genuinely inter-disciplinary approach needs to be adopted. Sustainability might provide a useful, although far from perfect, integrating concept, particularly if political aspects are considered in addition to the traditional tri-partite division of environment, economy and society. Thirdly, transport geography will need to consider not only spatial and temporal patterns, but also the underpinning social processes if it is to achieve its full potential.

The vitality of the debate generated by these and the other contributions heard at the IGC suggests that transport geographers are indeed committed to the task of respositioning the sub-discipline at the forefront of academic geography, and the wider public policy debate. In this, the last TGRG page of my tenure as Secretary of the Group, I wish to pay tribute to those colleagues, and in particular the outgoing Chair, Dr. Jon Shaw, who have begun this process, and wish them well for the future.

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