

# GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT

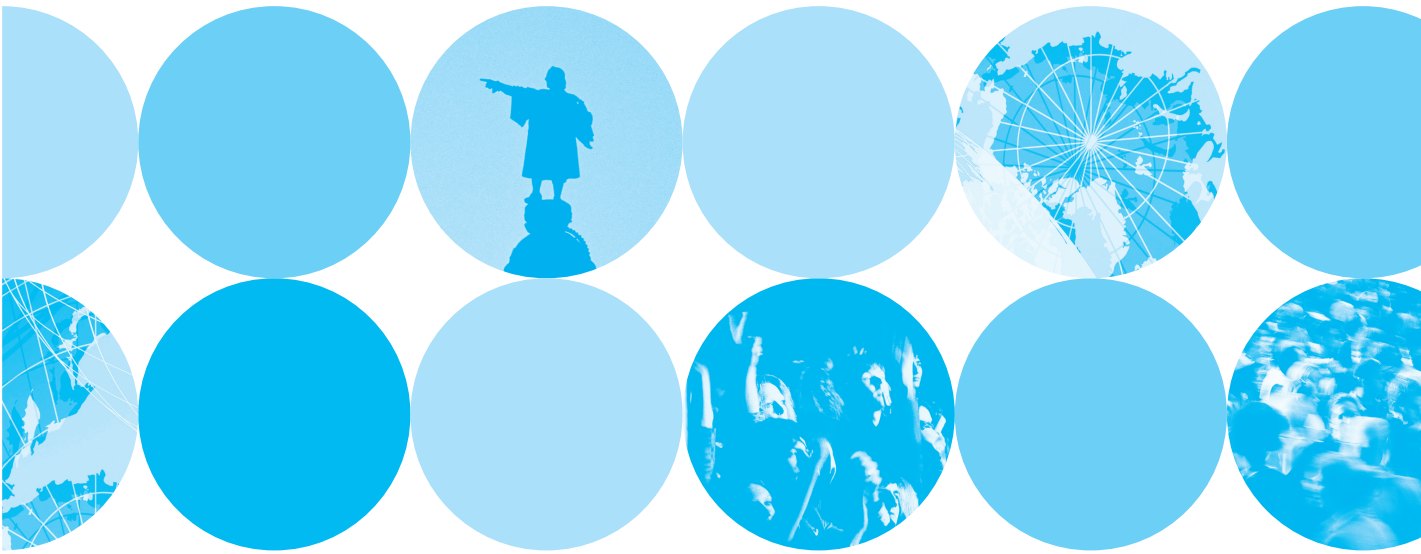
An Introduction to Ideas  
in Human Geography



Anoop Nayak and Alex Jeffrey

# Geographical Thought

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An Introduction to Ideas in Human Geography

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# Introduction

This book starts from a simple premise: that all ideas come from somewhere. Thinking about where ideas have come from helps us to understand how they are shaped by their historical and geographical context, how they have changed over time and how they relate to each other. Exploring the production of ideas also illuminates the process by which certain ideas are adopted and celebrated, while others are ignored and forgotten. These differences are not necessarily an outcome of whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’ ideas; they are often a product of the relative authority of the individual or group making an assertion. But ideas are not simply a product of their context; they also have to be persuasive, in order to convince others that they offer an alternative to existing thought or practice.

When we start to examine the nature of ideas, one of the first structuring devices we come upon is academic disciplines. The boundaries between academic disciplines are often blurred and appear quite arbitrary. While geography as an academic pursuit has been oriented towards questions concerning space, place and location, there is no definitive set of issues that constitutes scholarly geography. Instead we can trace over time, attempts by individuals and groups to assert what geography *should be*: to present particular ideas as central to the practice of academic geography. We agree with David Livingstone’s (1992) assertion that we should think of geography less as a discipline (since this suggests some fixed boundaries) and instead as a *tradition*: a set of practices and ideas that extend beyond those who self-identify as geographers.

This point is supported by the nature of academic geography in higher education. If you look at the variety of topics covered within different university geography programmes, you will soon see that, while there are some shared themes, the discipline is marked by a wide diversity of topics. On the one hand this reflects the innate breadth of a discipline that seeks to examine the relationship between people and their environment. On the other hand it also illustrates the rapidly changing research interests in geography, where academics that were trained 20 years ago may have different theoretical approaches to those who have just begun a career in research and teaching. As we will see over the course of the following 12 chapters, over the last century geography has been a ‘magpie discipline’ that has drawn on the work of economists, psychologists, sociologists and cultural theorists (amongst others) in order to develop our understanding of the world around us.

The diversity of ideas within geography makes it a hard task to reduce this to a concise introductory text. Thinking through what we have said above, when we divide up the history of geographical thought into 12 chapters we are not simply describing a neatly ordered history of the work of geographers. Rather we are presenting a particular story of the history of geography that suits our research interests. This is inevitably a *critical* history: it does not simply describe the ideas of others, but it weighs them up, presents criticisms and assesses their legacy. This is not just a consequence of our own interest in these debates; as we will explain in the book, we believe that there is no neutral perspective from which these ideas can be described. Our account reflects our own histories and geographies.

## The format of the book

This book is divided into 12 chapters across three parts. Part 1, 'Foundations', explores some of the most significant ideas that emerged over the course of the late 19th- and early 20th-century geography. Here we explore how the institutionalisation of geography was shaped by processes of European imperialism, the shift to quantitative approaches in the mid-20th century and the turn to more radical theories of humanism and Marxism in the 1970s. But writing about the emergence of specific aspects of geographical thought requires a critical engagement not simply with ideas of geography, but also with concepts of history. In setting out the history of early geographical thought there is a risk of presenting unanimity where there was disagreement, or suggesting a linear path for the discipline from one 'stage' to the next, where in fact there were multiple simultaneous perspectives conducted under the banner of geography. As you will see, the prominence given to certain theoretical or methodological perspectives is not always a reflection of consensus, but rather of the power of certain individuals and institutions to define what counts as geography.

Part 2, 'Geographies of difference', charts how geographical scholarship has sought to examine and challenge the marginalisation of groups on the basis of sex, sexuality or 'race'. Over the course of the last 30 years, geographers have been at the forefront of thinking about and confronting social inequality based on ideas of identity. Much of this work has been stimulated by feminist thought: work that sought to challenge the ingrained privileging of male perspectives within academic scholarship and political life. Initially this work sought to 'write women in' by including the voices of women and the spaces women inhabit within research projects. But over time a more theoretically ambitious project has emerged that seeks to challenge the notion of gender (masculinity/femininity) as an organising structure within social life. Rather than espousing an identity on politics based on the marginalisation of women, this work seeks to question the very category of 'women'. This may seem a little abstract, but it illustrates the way in which the scholarship exploring geographies of difference is not simply about 'adding in' ignored social groups, but confronting and transforming the way in which ideas about the world are produced.

Part 3, 'Representation and post-representation', considers how post-modern ideas have forever unsettled what had once seemed as the solid truths of modernity. For some researchers this may well feel like the 'end of the world as we know it', but for others it has offered a breath of fresh air – an opportunity to think and do geography 'otherwise'. Inspired by these openings recent work on critical geo-politics, post-colonialism, and approaches concerned with embodiment and performance at once remind us of the power of representation as well as its limits. If we take the example of post-colonial geographies, the problem of representation – who speaks for whom, under what conditions and why – suggests that representation is at best an incomplete, contested and unstable affair. Representation conceals as much as it reveals. The threads of this argument are interwoven through the material and discursive approaches found in work on critical geo-politics and post-colonial geographies. Some performative accounts have even sought to develop 'non-representational' modes of expression, paying attention to the ways in which bodily sensation, affect and feeling offer new ways for sensing and interpreting our earthly surroundings. Throughout these chapters we signal some of the ways in which geographers are working between the lines of representation and in so doing are pulling apart, unfolding and reassembling our geographical imagination.



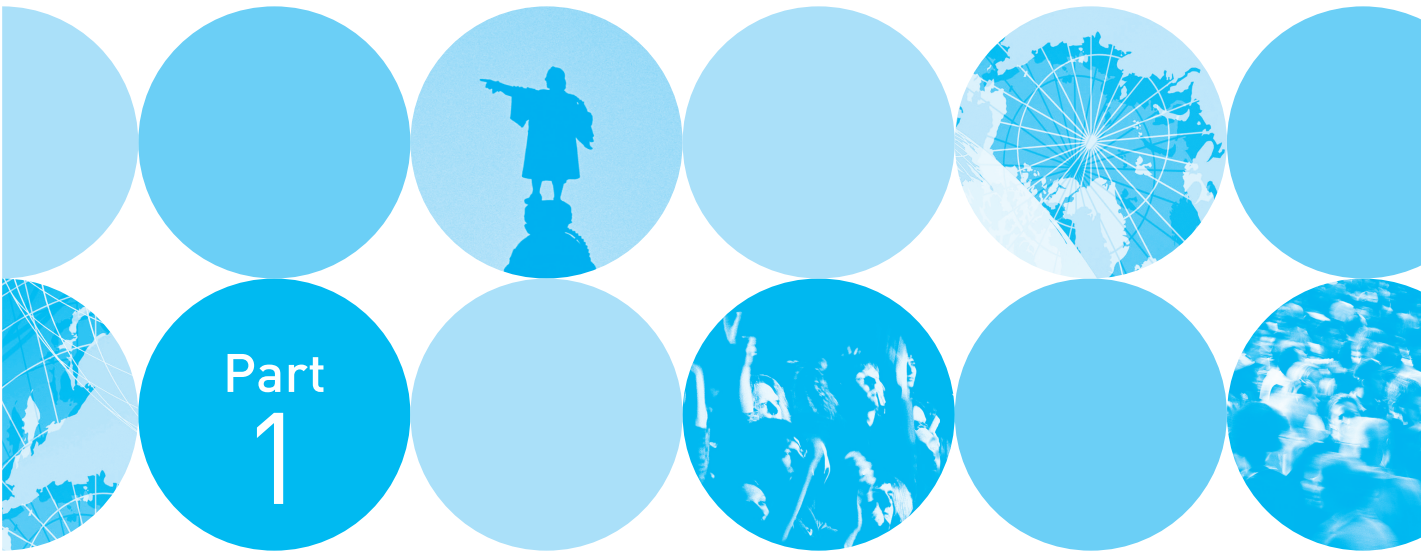
## How to use this book

We have written this book as an introductory text that presents geographical theory in a palatable and easily digested fashion. We have strived to use an uncluttered and a jargon-free tone throughout, although this is not always avoidable so we have included a glossary at the end of the book where key terms are explained. Wherever we can, we illustrate our arguments using examples, either from contemporary media or from the history of the discipline. As we have already explained, this is not written as a definitive account of geographical ideas, but rather as a text that we hope will encourage further engagement with these ideas. To that end we have included further reading sections throughout each chapter, in addition to the final bibliography. In particular we would encourage students to engage with the original sources if possible.

As you read these accounts think about the types of arguments you find persuasive and ask yourself the question: what type of geographer would I like to be? Use this text as a starting point for thinking about the types of theoretical and social problems you feel are most relevant to the discipline, and how these can be addressed using geographical ideas. If you get the chance, try and develop your own empirical project, perhaps through your dissertation, that allows you to generate your own ideas. And these could go on to shape future understandings of geography: because all ideas come from somewhere.

The chapters can be read as stand-alone pieces on the specific themes, although in places they follow on closely from one another. This reflects the legacy of particular ideas in shaping future interventions and the way in which certain ideas emerged as a reaction *against* previous approaches. It also should be repeated that although there is a rough chronology structuring the organisation of the chapters, this is not supposed to suggest a progression from the dark past of empire through to the enlightenment of post-representation. Instead, we can see through this account the cyclical nature of the emergence of what we understand as present-day geography, dependent as it is on the recovery of ideas from the past. *Geographical Thought* is not just an opening into these debates, but an aperture with no attempt at closure. To this extent it is up to the reader to wrestle with these ideas: to champion, demolish or elaborate upon the approaches outlined here. For it is only through this type of close critical engagement that geographical thought and practice can proceed.

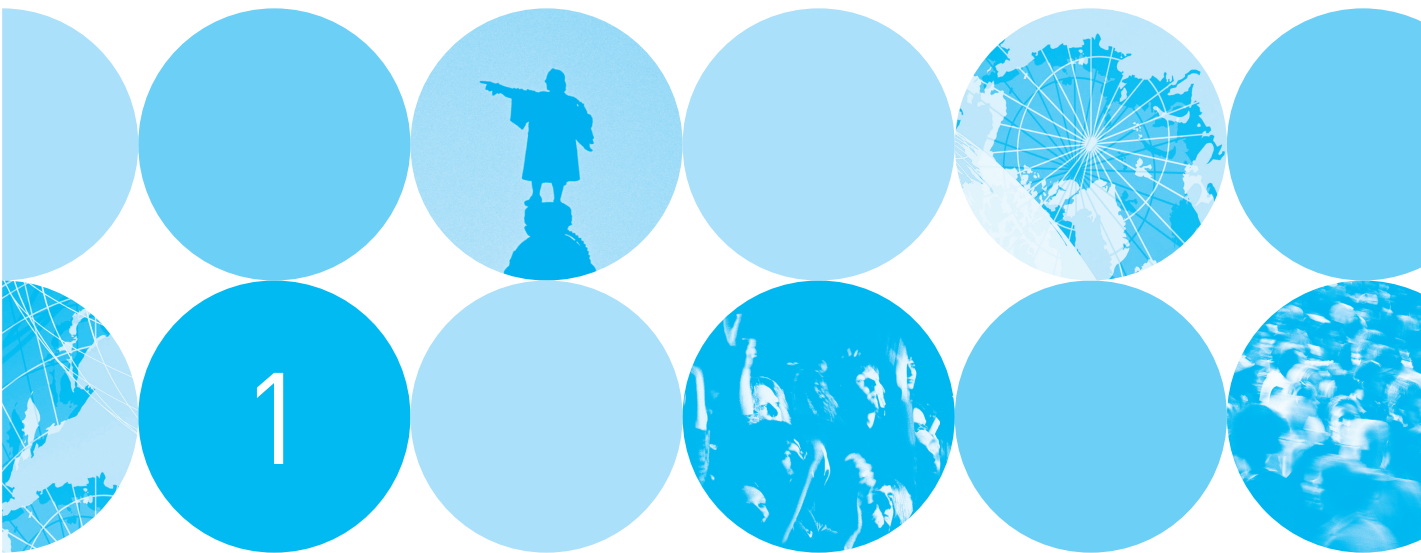
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Part  
1

# Foundations

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# Geographies of empire: the imperial tradition

## Learning objectives

In this chapter we will:

- Provide a working definition of empire, imperialism and colonialism.
- Explore the role of imperial expansion in shaping the content of academic geography and introduce the ideas of Halford Mackinder, Ellen Churchill Semple and Petr Kropotkin.
- Examine the theoretical frameworks emerging from the relationship between imperialism and geography.
- Trace the legacies of these theories and approaches for contemporary geography.

## Introduction

In this chapter we explore how geographical thought was shaped by, and shaped, the age of European imperialism. In confronting these relationships we are exploring an extremely important issue from geography's past. However, following the argument of geographers Cloke *et al.* (1991: 4), we are not engaging with **imperialism** and geography out of some 'antiquarian' concern for the discipline's history, but rather because many of the underlying themes and discussions that emerged in this period continue to shape current geographical debates and institutional priorities. This legacy is often difficult to discern, since it has shaped research agendas and institutional



The 1847 Indian Mutiny

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relationships in complex ways. These will be explored later in this chapter, but it is important to emphasise at the outset that imperialism is not a discrete phenomenon that can be confined to the distant past and is unrelated to the present. Rather, imperial institutions, practices, assumptions and imaginaries continue to shape the content of geography and the conduct of geographers.

As we shall see throughout this chapter, the 18th and 19th centuries were a time of imperial expansion, as powerful states, particularly those in Western Europe, used their military and scientific advances to claim territories in Africa, South America and Asia from their indigenous inhabitants (see photo). At the time, many explained this action as a 'civilising mission', bringing order to barbarous parts of the world that lacked the supposed civility of the European states. Although certain commentators, such as Harvard University's Professor Niall Ferguson, have sought to retain this celebration of benevolent imperialism, others have drawn attention to the violence, racism and plunder on which empire thrived. The position of geography within this story is not straightforward. Certainly, geographical skills of cartography and exploration were vitally important to imperialist objectives; knowing about the world and how to traverse its surface allowed European powers to lay claim to disparate territories. But the merits of imperial expansion were the focus of sustained scholarly debate at the time. While we cannot talk of a single intellectual position among geographical scholars, there is much evidence of the ideas and theories that geographers were developing to help justify the process of imperial expansion. As geography institutionalised, it produced a range of theories that helped to explain why it was morally just that imperialism was occurring, thus entering the realm of normative theorisation (how the world *should* be) as opposed to simply positive theorisation (how the world *is*). Theories such as 'environmental determinism' suggested that imperial powers were predisposed to

rule over colonial territories on account of their climate and topography. Therefore, for geographers Neil Smith and Anne Godlewska (1994: 2), empire was 'quintessentially a geographical project'.

In this chapter we explore this contention over five sections. In the first we explore what is meant by 'imperialism'. While we predominantly examine Western European imperial conquests in this section, we must be cognisant that, just as there are *many* geographies, there are *many* imperialisms. As we have mentioned, we cannot view the age of imperialism as a discrete epoch confined to the past, but rather we can trace imperial relationships and practices in the present day. The second section explores the institutionalisation of geography over the 19th and 20th centuries. It is important to note that this process is not restricted to the emergence of geography as a scholarly discipline in universities and schools, but rather as a practical pursuit documented in museums and exhibitions, and undertaken by geographical societies across Western Europe and North America. In the third section we explore the early content of geography as it was shaped by the demands of empire, in particular drawing out the reliance on the natural sciences and the primacy of **objectivity**. This position, encapsulated by the theory of environmental determinism, was thoroughly discredited in later years, although its influence in geography can still be felt. But we must not assume that there was unanimity in the adoption of any single theory or school of thought. The fourth section outlines the contemporary dissent at the nature of geography, inspired in particular by the work of Russian-born geographer Petr Kropotkin. In the final section we document some of the lingering practical and theoretical implications of geography's entanglement with empire.



## Empire, imperialism and colonialism

A brief glance at the available disciplinary histories of geography gives an indication of a long association between geography and the militarised attempts to claim territory on behalf of a particular imperial project. But if we examine these accounts more closely a number of initial – and very serious – questions come to light.

First, what is meant by the discipline of geography? There are no clear boundaries to any academic discipline, since intellectual activity takes place in a diverse range of settings: universities, schools, professional societies, public associations and so on. As the geographer David Livingstone (1992) has persuasively argued, we should not attempt to locate the boundaries of the discipline of geography – this would be pointless – and instead appreciate that geography has meant different things at different times and in different places. This means that we need to understand and explore geography in context and understand that what counts as geographical inquiry may mean different things to different people. In addition, the discipline of geography has always been characterised by debate and disagreement, so it is impossible to suggest that it displays a single political or intellectual perspective. It happens that much of the institutionalisation of geography as an academic discipline took place in the latter part of the 19th century, which coincided with a period of European imperial expansion. But this should not be taken as evidence of an obvious link between geography and empire; rather, it should lead us to question the nature of this relationship and explore the range of different perspectives on imperialism voiced within the geographical discipline.



The second question that immediately comes to the foreground when reading existing accounts of the foundation of geography in the age of empire is, what is meant by terms such as imperialism, **colonialism** and empire? These terms are explored throughout the chapter but, as an initial comment, we should say that we cannot understand these as simple descriptors, since there were many different practices of imperialism and colonialism that differed greatly in their form and substance. Just as we need to be careful not to assume a singular definition of geography, we must be similarly attentive to accounts of imperialism and colonialism that reduce these to simple characterisations. Geographers such as Livingstone, Mike Heffernan, James Sidaway and Klaus Dodds have provided rich accounts of imperial practices in a range of different places that illustrate the shared traits but also the considerable divergences between these processes.

The third question that comes to mind is to what extent was geography alone as a discipline that is inextricably linked to the age of European imperialism? This is a crucial question, since some accounts of the relationship between geography and empire present this as an occurrence unique to this discipline. Instead, we can trace similar processes in the institutionalisation of disciplines such as anthropology, biology and medicine. As we will see, the common thread between these endeavours is a desire to utilise the analytical strength and disciplinary prestige afforded by advances in scientific practices and theories. Processes of imperial expansion necessarily drew on these same scientific practices of measurement and calculation, and thus connections may be made between these disciplines and imperialism. But we need to be careful in our unproblematic presentation of science as a benevolent form of rationality desired by many different academic disciplines. Often scientific ideas were transformed or truncated in their adoption by different disciplines and therefore their meaning was changed. As we will see, one of the key examples of this troubled adoption is Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The geographer David Stoddart (1966) has provided a detailed account of the dangers of piecemeal adoption of Darwin's ideas, where certain facets of his theory were ignored and others accentuated.

## ● Defining terms

Empire, imperialism and colonialism are terms that are used to describe how people and territory are ruled. As we have discussed, definitions of these terms are necessarily of limited use, as it is in practice that we see specific differences. But as a starting point, it is important that we grasp the basic differences implied by these terms.

**Imperialism** is derived from the Latin word *imperium*, which roughly translates as power or ability to command. Therefore imperialism relates to the practice of enacting power over a particular group of people or territory. In conventional usage an empire is created through the successful deployment of imperial power. An empire can therefore be defined as an unequal territorial relationship between states often based on economic exploitation. This definition is somewhat problematic in the cases of ancient empires, such as the Roman Empire, where individual states may not have been discernable, but the economic system was still clearly structured around the extraction of wealth, or *tribute*, from peripheral areas back to the imperial centre in Rome.

In contrast to the idea of unequal imperial relationship, the Berkeley geographer Michael Watts describes **colonialism** as the 'establishment and maintenance of rule, for an extended period of time, by a sovereign power over a subordinate and alien people that is

separate from the ruling power' (2000: 93). Thus, while imperialism focuses on an unequal relationship between states, colonialism draws our attention to the physical settlement of territory for the material or military advantage of a colonial sovereign power. As these definitions would suggest, we cannot divorce the exercise of colonial or imperial power from the expansion of the capitalist system and the emergence of a global division of labour. Therefore we would draw attention to three aspects of empire:

- 1 The establishment and maintenance of rule by a sovereign power over a range of separate territories.
- 2 There is a fundamental economic imperative underscoring these imperial or colonial practices.
- 3 We can trace relations of exploitation from a discernible imperial centre towards a colonial periphery.

In order to understand the emergence of geography as an academic discipline and its entanglement with colonial practices, we need to identify some general historical points. In identifying such a historical narrative it is easy to rely on generalisations of large and complex systems of rule, for example to identify overriding characteristics of empires that covered large tracts of the Earth's surface for several hundred years. In short: we need to remember that imperialism and colonialism have always been diverse and dynamic practices of rule, that are best confronted and understood through empirical examples.

## Portuguese and Spanish empires

Let us take the example of European imperialism from the 15th century onwards to explore the central tenets of colonial expansion. Although preceded by Portuguese colonial exploration, we could isolate the voyages of Christopher Columbus between 1492 and 1504 and Vasco de Gama in 1498 as starting points of the era of European colonial expansion. Columbus was originally from Genoa (in present-day Italy) although he was largely funded by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. His voyages across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, Central America and the coast of South America ensured personal enrichment and paved the way for Spanish colonial expansion. At this early stage, geographical and navigational knowledge was vital, although not always well developed. For example, Columbus famously never accepted that he had landed on a 'new' continent for European explorers; he remained certain that he had sailed to the eastern coast of Asia. Vasco de Gama similarly assisted Portugal in its colonial ambitions, serving as the first European to round the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa and sail to India. These early explorations allowed Spain and Portugal to establish extensive colonial possessions. From the 15th to the 16th centuries, Portugal earned great wealth through the spice trade between Asia and Europe. At a similar time, Spain enjoyed a 'golden era' as its *conquistadores* (conquerors) decimated the Inca, Maya and Aztec populations in Central and South America. These acts of violence established access to lucrative reserves of silver and gold across their fledgling colonies, while the creation of sugar plantations in the Caribbean provided further revenue streams. In addition, both the Portuguese and Spanish empires were sustained through the trade and exploitation of slave labour.

At a straightforward level these examples illustrate how geographical knowledge, and particularly navigational skills of cartography, combined with military might to help

European powers project their power and economically exploit distant territories. But in the example of Portugal the geographers James Sidaway and Marcus Power (2005) have pointed to a more complex picture that underpinned processes of imperial expansion. In a line of argument that we will see repeated in later parts of the chapter, these scholars suggest that the effects of imperial expansion should not simply be traced in terms of militarism and economic exploitation. They examine how processes of imperialism have fostered forms of cultural transformation in Portugal that are still felt in the present day, arguing that imperial experiences are central to the country's culture:

This is a state whose 'national anthem' *begins* with the words 'herois do mar, nobre povo' (heroes of the sea, noble people), whose flag features at its *center* the navigational sphere, and whose coins and banknotes (before they were subsumed into the euro) featured maps of southern Africa and portraits of explorers. (Sidaway and Power, 2005: 528)

Consequently the authors argue that the imperial experience is central to Portuguese understandings of national identity, in particular centring on Portugal as the metropolitan centre of an expansive empire. The authors are making an important geographical point here. They are suggesting that rather than seeing imperialism as a process of territorial expansion (literally the amount of land ruled by one state) it is, in fact, a process of identity formation. The process of imperial expansion shifts how people think and act about themselves and others.

## ● British Empire

The combination of geography, militarism and exploitation exhibited in the Portuguese and Spanish examples was repeated on a greater scale in the case of the British Empire. Initially established in the Caribbean and North America in the 17th century, the roots of the British Empire can be found in England's superior naval power and geographical knowledge. The initial colonies established on the coastal fringes of present-day America and the Caribbean led to the establishment of significant trade flows in sugar, tobacco, cotton and rice as well as greater numbers in the slave trade. But the empire did not remain static; the colonies in the present-day United States of America were lost after the War of Independence from 1775 to 1782 and Britain outlawed the use of slave labour in 1807. But perhaps the most significant shift occurred as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom over the course of the 18th and 19th century. The profound economic and social changes that took place over this period transformed the pace and scope of British colonial expansion. The rise of new mechanised industries, driven by steam power, acted as a catalyst to emergent circuits of global capital, structured around a need for new markets, new access to raw materials and new opportunities to invest profit and surplus. Nowhere is this economic imperative more evident than in the case of India. British colonisation of India had begun in 1600 through the creation of the British East India Company as a focal point of the trade of spices, tea and opium. Despite these corporate beginnings, the process of colonising India over the 19th and early 20th century was often explained by the protagonists as part of Britain's civilising mission. Historians, geographers and economists have since questioned such altruistic motives, drawing attention to the fact that by the mid-19th century India had become a key export market for British products, absorbing goods that had previously been sold to continental Europe. As the historian Lawrence James (1994: 219) suggests, 'the process

of modernising India, which gave so much satisfaction to the Victorians, was vital for balancing the books at home’.

In addition to greater British control in India, advances in explorations and heightened demand for raw materials led to a ‘scramble for Africa’ between the Western European powers over the 1880s and 1890s. France, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Portugal divided the African continent into colonies by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. This process encapsulated the nexus of geography (exploration and cartography), violence (colonial warfare and suppression) and capitalist economics (need for markets, investment opportunities and unprocessed raw materials). Following the entrenchment of British colonial power over India and parts of Africa at the end of the 19th century, the British Empire reached its greatest extent, covering a quarter of the world’s land surface and comprising a population of 425 million, of which 316 million lived in India (see Figure 1.1).

European colonial expansion was a protracted and varied process that is difficult to summarise in a brief historical narrative. We would draw attention to a number of common themes prior to exploring the emergence of geography as an academic discipline and practical pursuit.

*First*, as we have seen, the process of colonial expansion required the intersection of scientific knowledge, military might and economic exploitation. Some of this scientific knowledge is directly related to geographical inquiry, such as: navigational competence, cartography, environmental and meteorological skills. The combination of science and militarism provided the tools necessary to establish (often exploitative) rule over distant lands.

*Second*, this form of imperialism was dependent on the establishment of colonies; that is, the transfer of populations to settle in newly appropriated territories in order to exert authority over the indigenous population. This was a vital process, since at this time the technology did not exist to rule at a distance. This process of resettlement may be of crucial significance to the endurance of colonial expansion. In the case of French imperial expansion in the mid-19th century, the historians Andrew and Kanya-Forstner (1988) suggest that the impetus for colonial expansion did not come from political elites in Paris; they were actually rather unconvinced of the need for the colonies. Rather, the drive to continue the expansion of the French Empire came from the military officers stationed in the colonies. As Heffernan (1994b: 95) explains, these ‘military empire-builders ran roughshod over the wishes of Parisian politicians and were effectively beyond the control of their civilian “masters” in France’. The process of colonisation, then, in some instances, created the conditions for the continuation of imperial policy.

*Third*, we should not restrict the processes of colonialism to the sites that were colonised: in the imperial core (whether London, Paris, Lisbon, Madrid or Berlin) the policies of imperial expansion needed to be legitimised. As we have seen in the case of the Portuguese Empire, the creation of ‘exotic’ and essentially *different* categories of peoples and places was a vital part of colonial rationality. Consequently, imperial ‘discoveries’ constituted important parts of museum exhibits, international expositions and theatrical shows. For example, Sidaway and Power (2005: 535) describe the mechanisms through which 1940 Exposition of the Portuguese World sought to position Portugal on a global scale:

. . . Lisbon’s Jardim do Ultramar [imperial gardens] and other public spaces and parks in the capital would house a cocktail of African peoples assembled and presented in their

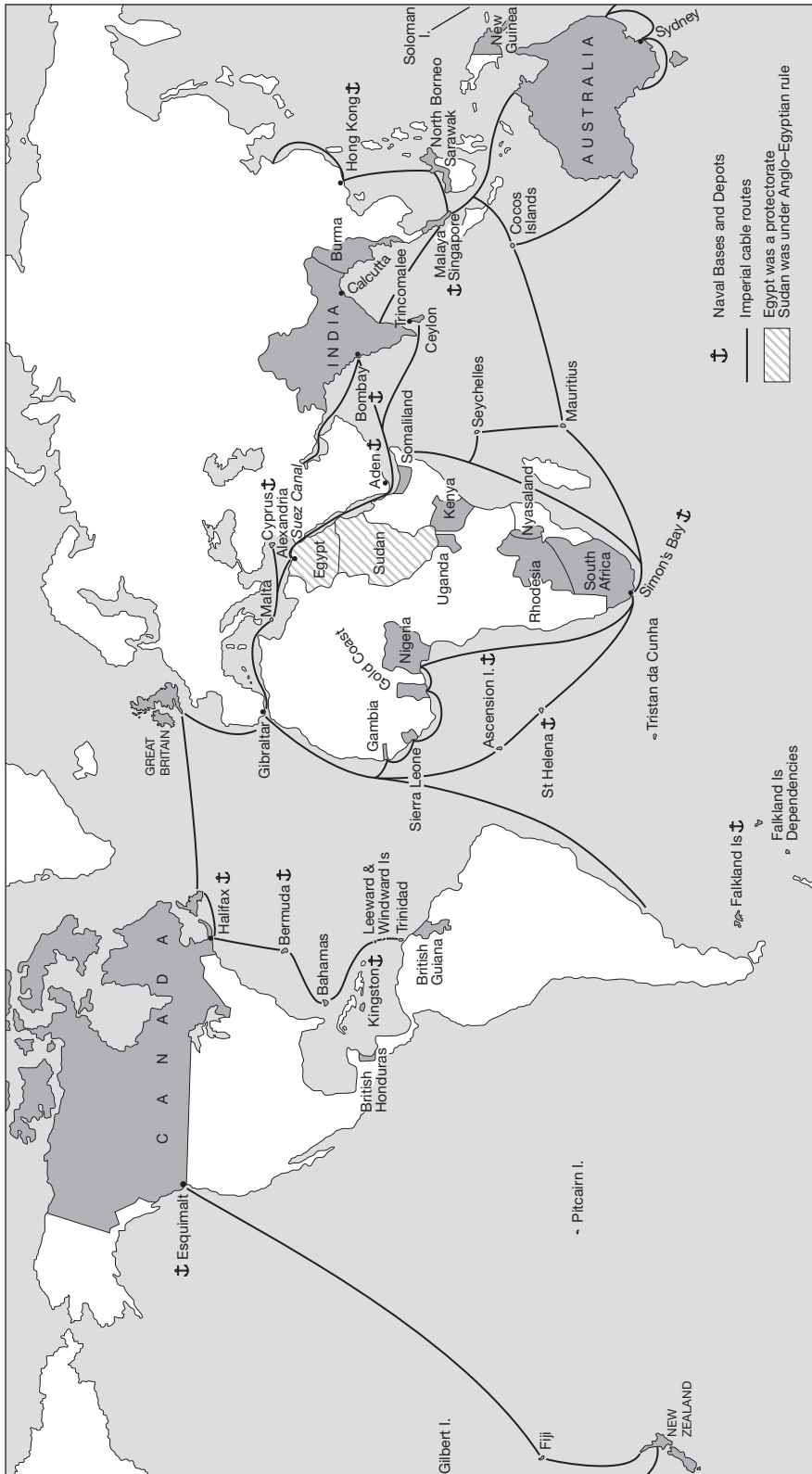


Figure 1.1 The territorial extent of the British Empire in 1914

Adapted from James, 1994: 352

'authentic' and 'original' habitats in order to disseminate a vision of Portugal and its peoples as part of a protected space, at the centre of empire, occupying a privileged position from which to imagine and define its sense of national identity and belonging.

*Finally*, the process of British colonialism produced a central contradiction between the professed ideals of liberalism (that is, individual freedoms) and the subjugation of colonial populations. This required sustaining an imagined division between the virtues of the colonisers over the perceived moral, social or political failings of the colonised. Although the formal colonies of the European powers have (largely) been broken up, the legacy of colonial relationships remains to the present day.



## The institutionalisation of geography

[A] geography may be worked out which will satisfy at once the practical requirements of the statesman and merchant, the theoretical requirements of the historian and scientist, and the intellectual requirements of the teacher. (Mackinder, 1887: 159)

When we consider the status of geography as a popular scholarly pursuit of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is hard to imagine a time when it was merely emerging as an academic discipline. To adequately trace this process we need to engage in more detail with the content and methodologies of geographical inquiry. A number of historians of the geographical discipline have found that the Ukrainian-born author Joseph Conrad is helpful in this regard (see Box 1.1). Conrad is best known for his fictional work, which often engaged with issues of imperialism and geographical imagination. Perhaps his most famous example of this **genre** is *Heart of Darkness* (1924b, originally serialised in 1899), where Conrad draws on his own maritime experiences to chart the voyage of a sailor named Marlow up the River Congo in Africa to search for a British Colonial agent named Kurtz. The themes of exploration, geography and empire that permeate *Heart of Darkness* were developed by Conrad in a non-fiction essay entitled 'Geography and Some Explorers', which was published in the *National Geographic* (1924a). In this brief essay Conrad isolates three stages of geography's development: Geography Fabulous, Geography Militant and Geography Triumphant. For Conrad, Geography Fabulous refers to a phase of imaginative and speculative geography where maps consisted of 'pictures of strange pageants, strange trees, strange beasts, drawn with amazing precision in the midst of a theoretically conceived continents' (Conrad, 1924b, cited in Driver, 1992: 23). In contrast, Conrad described the epoch of Geography Militant as an era of science and exploration, where the 'only object was the search for truth' and the explorers 'devoted themselves to the discovery of facts in the configurations and features of the main continents' (Conrad, 1924b, cited in Hampson, 1995: xiii). Conrad is explicit in connecting this new exploratory zeal with an 'acquisitive spirit', that exploration and scientific measurement are prompted by 'the desire to trade or the desire of loot, disguised in more or less fine words' (*ibid.*). Conrad identifies Captain Cook as the epitome of this intersection of exploration, science and accumulation. Finally, Geography Triumphant refers to the expansion of European geographical knowledge across the globe, to the point where space has succumbed to the dominion of science.



### Box 1.1 Joseph Conrad (1857–1924)

Joseph Conrad (born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) was born in the Ukraine in 1857. His parents died when he was still young and he was subsequently raised by his uncle. From an early age, Conrad had a desire to go to sea, and this was fulfilled in 1878 when he joined the French Merchant Navy. Nearly ten years later he joined the British Merchant Navy and, in 1890, he made a formative journey up the Congo River, a key inspiration for *Heart of Darkness* (1924b). In 1894 Conrad left his life

at sea and settled in Kent, England, where he produced a series of important novels challenging prevailing notions of morality and politics. He is often considered one of the greatest fictional writers in the English language, although his views on imperialism and race have been the focus of sustained literary criticism. In particular, Chinua Achebe (1977), the acclaimed Nigerian writer, is critical of what he perceives as Conrad's lack of awareness of the racism on which colonial practices were founded.

Conrad's three-part framework should not be mistaken for an unquestioned truth; instead it must be analysed with a critical eye. Conrad's account has been criticised for being Eurocentric, meaning that it is a history written from the point of view of a European and therefore makes assumptions about the 'correct' path of progress. Conrad's approach is also reliant on a form of thinking that emerged from the Enlightenment, structured around the triumph of science, rationality and reason over supposed superstition and myth. Conrad's dependence on this transition fosters a belief that the introduction of new scientific procedures and techniques can purge geographical insights of imaginative and irrational supposition. As we will explore later in the chapter, this belief in the possibility of a neutral and detached scientific observer has been widely criticised as a device through which Western ideas and interests could be promoted over other non-Western forms of knowledge and rationality. In addition, Conrad's model suggests that geographical inquiry can be divided into distinct epochs progressing to a final end point of geographical enlightenment. This concept, developed in Thomas Kuhn's (1996) conception of the 'paradigm', underemphasises the overlapping nature of eras of scientific thought and the debates that existed as to what constitutes geographical inquiry.

### ● From 'fabulous' to 'militant' geography

We would therefore view Conrad's framework as a *situated* account of the values of late 19th- and early 20th-century geography. By this we mean that it is best understood within the context that it was produced and as a set of guidelines rather than an unquestioned scientific truth. With this in mind, the aspect of Conrad's framework that we will look to here is the supposed shift from a 'fabulous' to a 'militant' style of geographical knowledge production. To understand this process we need to focus on the importance of geographical knowledge to the twin historical processes of expanding trade and the strengthening of the internal capacities of Western European states. Although at first sight these may appear disconnected from the dispassionate practice of scholarly inquiry, we will argue in line with Halford Mackinder's opening quote to this section, that geography has never simply been a pursuit of interest simply to the scholar or teacher, but it has also long served the interests of the 'trader and the statesman'. Knowledge of places, distances, measurements



and map-making were crucial in the emergence of mercantile exchange in Western Europe over the 16th century. This process is described by Miles Ogborn (1998) in his account of the increased infrastructural and bureaucratic capacity of the English state at this time. In Ogborn's account he traces the significance of the increased regulation of beer trade in England and Wales in the late 17th century, analysing in particular the state's increased capacity to govern trade through new instruments of regulation and the production of a uniform instrument of measurement: the beer cask. This process of producing 'calculable spaces' through careful measurement of distances and trading quantities proved vital to increasing tax income which, in turn, funded imperial expansion in the following two centuries.

Considering the mercantile and military requirements for geographical knowledge it is understandable that skills such as cartography and exploration began to be taught in British universities between the 16th and 19th centuries. The exact date is open to debate, since there is disagreement over what counts as 'geography' in early universities, with some scholars suggesting that we cannot claim the emergence of a geographical discipline until the appointment of Halford Mackinder as a Reader in Geography at Oxford University in 1887. But as historical geographers Withers and Mayhew (2002) have suggested, universities of the 16th and 17th centuries did not have the disciplinary frameworks we have become used to, so we would not expect to find a clearly defined 'discipline of geography' at this stage. They explain:

The early modern 'university' still held to the aim its etymology suggests: to provide an education in the whole world (*universitas*) of learning, not a particular discipline, this to be recognised in the form of a degree in the arts; both humanities and sciences in modern parlance. As such we should not expect the early modern university to teach geography separately, this being fundamentally at odds with its ideal of universal learning. (Withers and Mayhew, 2002: 13)

While methods of geographical inquiry were emerging within the curricula of British universities, there was a more concerted institutionalisation of geography outside the academy. As we have detailed, geography was both a practical and popular pursuit that captured an emerging public interest in exploration, travel and the empire. The Travellers' Club, founded in London in 1819, encapsulates the popular and adventurous nature of early geographical institutionalisation, where membership was granted to those who had 'travelled out of the British Isles to a distance of 500 miles from London in a straight line' (see Bonnett, 2008). Over the 19th century, museums, public fairs, lectures and international expositions sought to present the products of exploration and Britain's expanding colonial possessions.

## ● The Royal Geographical Society

But geography was more than a public diversion; scholars and politicians sought to establish geographical societies to promote geography as a scientific endeavour. First Paris (1921), then Berlin (1928) and then London (1930) established geographical societies to capture the public and governmental interest in exploration, cartography and knowledge of the world. Later, further societies emerged in the UK in the cities of Manchester (1884), Newcastle upon Tyne (1887), Liverpool (1891) and Southampton (1897). This institutionalisation serves as an important example of the close proximity of geographical inquiry to the interests of imperial expansion. We will take the London Geographical Society, which later gained a Royal Charter and subsequently became the Royal Geographical Society



The Royal Geographical Society, London

Source: Royal Geographical Society, with IBG

(RGS), as an example of this complex relationship. From its foundation through to World War II, the RGS served as a focal point for public and scholarly debate regarding the content and direction of geography. The society emerged out of a gentlemen's dining club on Savile Row, and moved its present location on Kensington Gore in 1913 (see photo).

The move to Kensington allowed for an increase in the fellowship of the RGS to 5,300 by 1914, ensuring that the RGS remained the pre-eminent institutionalisation of geography in the UK. The activities and archives of the RGS provide an unparalleled set of insights into the relationship between this phase of geography's institutionalisation and practices of British imperialism. We must be careful to avoid characterisations: the RGS was not simply 'imperialistic' even if some of its most vocal representatives were supportive of the British Empire. The fellowship of the RGS reflected wider UK society in containing individuals who both supported and criticised imperial practices. For example, regular speakers at the RGS's public lectures criticised either the practice of imperialism or the specific practices of agents of the British Empire, as we will see in the case of Petr Kropotkin, later in this chapter. But the organisation of the RGS grants us insights into the close relationship that was often forged between geographical inquiry and British imperial practices. We will focus on two in particular: the role of gender in the RGS constitution and the attempts to forge links between geography and the natural sciences.

### Women fellows at the RGS

Tracing the connections between geography and imperialism within the RGS requires an understanding of the marginalisation of women in the early years of the society. As we will see throughout this book, the role of women in the history of geographical inquiry is often marginalised on account of the male-dominated nature of academic societies and

universities. As Avril Maddrell's (2009) book *Complex Locations: Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850–1970* makes clear, many histories of geographical thought have consequently ignored women and provided a male-oriented account of geographical inquiry. While certain scholars have challenged the need for a feminist historiography (see Stoddart, 1991), Maddrell's account illustrates that a better understanding of women's contribution to geographical scholarship provides a more detailed picture of the relationship between the discipline and imperial practices. First, the inclusion of women's accounts can challenge an over-emphasis on the militarisation of the discipline, since it is often through military or ex-military service personnel that we engage with early geographical studies. Following this line of argument we find that the inclusion of more of the silenced women's voices may provide accounts of alternative, or anti-imperial, approaches to geographical thought. Second, and in contrast, a study of the writing of excluded women can support close links between geography and imperialism on account of the position of eminent female geographers such as wives or relatives of colonial or military figures. In part this is a reflection of the economic barriers to travel for many: it was only affordable to the wealthy, who may be less disposed to criticising a system that is supporting their relative advantage. Therefore we cannot make a generalisation as to the effect of greater attention to the voices of women geographers to our understanding of the relationship between geography and imperialism: we must look at the process of exclusion in practice.

The geographers Morag Bell and Cheryl McEwan (1996) provide such a practical account through their study of the debate surrounding women's exclusion from the RGS. Until 1913 women were barred from becoming full fellows of the RGS. Despite the fact that this reflected the wider unequal nature of British society, other geographical societies had allowed membership on an equal basis between the sexes for many years: Manchester since 1884, Tyneside since 1887 and Liverpool since 1891. The decision to exclude women seems to have been based on male assumptions relating to the relationship between gender and competence at scientific inquiry. This is encapsulated in the comments made in *The Times* newspaper by Lord Curzon, future Viceroy of India, UK Home Secretary and President of the RGS (1911–1914):

We contest *in toto* the general capacity of women to contribute to scientific geographical knowledge. Their sex and training render them equally unfitted for exploration, and the genus of professional globe-trotters with which America has lately familiarised us is one of the horrors of the nineteenth century. (Cited in Bell and McEwan, 1996: 298)

Beyond this assumption of the incapacity of women, other commentators at the time tied the possibility of women's fellowship into the wider public debate in the UK concerning political enfranchisement. As we will see in Chapter 7, the first part of the 20th century saw the rise of the Suffragette movement: a group of political activists seeking the right for women to vote in parliamentary elections. Indeed Bell and McEwan note that correspondence to the RGS in 1913 included letters that emphasised the need to exclude what were termed 'militant Suffragettes' who should not be eligible for fellowship of the RGS.

By the early decades of the 20th century these concerns no longer reflected the majority opinion within the RGS. In 1913 a vote was held, where around 75 per cent of fellows voted to allow full women fellows. While this provided the necessary institutional context for women to become fellows, individual applicants still needed to demonstrate a contribution to the advancement of geographical knowledge to be made a fellow. Bell and McEwan

note that this may have had the consequence of strengthening links between geographical practice and imperialism:

For those [fellowship applicants] who lacked professional authority, knowledge of the empire and imperial connections formed the basis for a convincing case. Indeed 'lived in India' appeared frequently on the nomination forms. (Bell and McEwan, 1996: 306)

Bell and McEwan (p. 302) suggest that over half the 163 women fellows in 1913 were travel writers and explorers such as Mary Hall, the first woman to cross Africa from north to south, and Charlotte Cameron who had twice circumnavigated the globe.

From this discussion of gender and the RGS we would like to draw a number of points. First, and perhaps most clearly, we need to be attentive to the role of women in the foundation of geography, a role that is often erased through a preoccupation with formal intellectual voices which were predominantly male. Second, this process of incorporation does not necessarily challenge the link between geography and imperialism: as we have seen, the eventual inclusion of women in the RGS in some ways strengthened this link through the value placed by the RGS committee on imperial ties and experiences. Third, and most fundamentally, we need to be attentive to the contexts within which geographical knowledge is produced and select our methodology of study accordingly. In order to understand the role of women in the history of geographical thought, feminist geographers have developed skills in biographical and archival methodologies in order to draw out the contextual factors that shape the production of knowledge.

### Science and militarism

The second consequence of the centrality of the RGS was the desire among prominent members of the society to position geography as a scientific endeavour with clear utility to the British imperialism. Studying the formal proceedings and the make up of the fellowship illustrates that the early preoccupations of the RGS were closely structured around the interests of the British Empire. This orientation is evident in the initial prospectus of the society in 1831 which made an explicit reference to the utility of geographical knowledge 'to the welfare of a maritime nation like Great Britain, with its numerous and extensive foreign possessions' and in 'conferring just and distinct notions of physical and political relations of our globe' (cited in Livingstone, 1992: 167). The geographer David Livingstone suggests that early proclamations of the RGS make plain 'the imperialistic undergirding of the institution's entire project and thereby [reveal] that Victorian geography was intimately bound up with British expansionist policy overseas' (1992: 167). Felix Driver uses the RGS presidency of Sir Roderick Murchison (president for four terms during the mid-19th century) to highlight the close intertwining of geography and empire. Driver's (2001: 43) account of Murchison's influence on the British military expedition to Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) highlights these interconnections:

The Abyssinian force, totalling thirteen thousand men from Britain and India under the command of Sir Robert Napier, was despatched to force the release of British consular officials and other Europeans held captive by the Abyssinian King, and more generally to restore British influence both in the region and beyond. Murchison used his political influence to secure the appointment of a scientific team to accompany the expedition, including a botanist, a meteorologist, a geologist and a geographer, Clements Markham (working in the India Office).

Although there was some resistance within the RGS to the close connection between militarism and science, the example of the Abyssinian campaign marks a crucial public

recognition of geography's service to imperial expansion. This relationship was also evident in British government financial support for the Society: after 1854, Sir Roderick Murchison secured an annual government subsidy for the Society's map room. In addition the RGS presidents and membership strengthened the connection, both material and imagined, between the RGS and imperial expansion:

The first two presidents of the RGS were colonial ministers, and many of their successors were career diplomats. Moreover, army and naval officers constituted around one-fifth of the 460 founding members of the RGS, and this proportion was to remain remarkably stable throughout the next seventy years. (Driver, 2001: 41)

Historians of geography often cite Halford Mackinder as a key figure in the connection between the RGS and state imperialism (see Box 1.2).



### Box 1.2 Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947)

Mackinder was a key figure in the institutionalisation of geography and an advocate for the close connection between imperialism and geographical study. His work has enjoyed a revival in interest in recent years, becoming the focus of geographical debate (see Dodds and Sidaway, 2004; Heffernan, 2000).

Mackinder originally studied zoology at Oxford (1880–1883), gaining an interest in the natural sciences that he incorporated into his later geographical work. Mackinder was the first dedicated scholar of geography at a UK university when he was appointed as a Reader at Oxford University in 1887. But he did not restrain his geographical practices to scholarly pursuits. In 1899 Mackinder rekindled geography's age of exploration when he led an expedition to climb Mount Kenya, the highest mountain in Kenya. There can be no doubt of Mackinder's motivation to lead this difficult expedition, as Brian Blouet (2004: 323) has remarked: '[t]he Mount Kenya expedition was part of imperial expansion'.

Mackinder's scholarship centred on attempts to map the opportunities and threats facing Britain in what he termed a 'post-Columbian era' – a reference to the end of the 'Columbian age' of European exploration and expansion, lasting from the 15th century to the late 19th century. He was a proponent of the incorporation of Darwin's ideas of competition and evolution into the social realm. Such social Darwinism highlighted the world as a stage for competition between races and between nations (Kearns, 2004: 341). This incorporation of the laws of natural science into political geography emphasised the role of the climate and topography on the

social development of human populations. For example, in 'The Geographical Pivot of History' (1904: 423) Mackinder identifies the topographic and climatic differences between Russia and Western Europe:

From a physical point of view, there is, of course, a like contrast between the unbroken lowland of the east and the rich complex of mountains and valleys, islands and peninsulas, which together form the remainder of this part of the world. At first sight it would appear that in these familiar facts we have a correlation between natural environment and political organization so obvious as to hardly be worthy of description, especially when we note that throughout the Russian plain a cold winter is opposed to a hot summer, and the conditions of human existence are thus rendered additionally uniform.

Mackinder (1904, 1919) identified the Eurasian landmass as the 'geographical pivot' (later renamed the 'heartland'), a phrase he used to imply the centrality of this region to world power. Mackinder's thesis sought to frame the potential power of different territories according to their topography and climate. As Klaus Dodds and James Sidaway (2004: 294) suggest:

Mackinder suggested that the resources, railways and the remoteness of the heartland would prove an irresistible force in the future. Britain and other sea-based powers such as the United States would have to respond to the challenge posed by the heartland power and defensive readiness and financial reform were a necessity.



**Box 1.2** continued

Mackinder's vision thus posed a clear warning to the powerful states and empires of the early 20th century, such as Britain. In *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919) he condensed his thesis of threat:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island;  
Who rules the World-Island commands the world.

Mackinder would therefore seem to epitomise geography's connection to empire: he emulated the imperial exploration in his sojourn to Mount Kenya, while he remained committed to securing British military pre-eminence. Geographer Michael Heffernan (2000: 348) agrees with this view describing his Geographical Pivot paper as:

part of an imperial, Eurocentric planetary consciousness. This was a masculinist ex-cathedra vision of a dangerous world viewed from the commanding heights of governmental and academic institutions.

But in tracing the connections between Mackinder and imperialism we need to be careful to reduce his complex affiliations and motivations to stark stereotypes. It is certain that across Mackinder's varied career choices (from lecturer, to MP, to his chairmanship

of the Imperial Economic Committee) he expressed a complex relationship with imperialism. A number of scholars have pointed to Mackinder's conviction that the British Empire could act as a benevolent structure, supporting free trade that would 'allow the economy to grow, British financial institutions would invest capital in developing areas to produce long-term income and prosperity' (Blouet, 2004: 328). Nick Megoran (2004: 356) draws attention to Mackinder's democratic instincts, citing Mackinder's commitment to the 'universal ideals of freedom'. While recognising this paradox between imperial domination and commitment to ideals of free trade and expression, we must not erase Mackinder's support for British imperialism, an unjust and oppressive structure of material accumulation and dispossession.

**Further reading**

- Kearns, G. (2004) The Political Pivot of Geography, *The Geographical Journal*, 170(4): 337–346.
- Mackinder, H. (1904) The Geographical Pivot of History, *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4): 421–444.
- Megoran, N. and Sharapova, S. (2005) Mackinder's "Heartland" Help or Hindrance in Understanding Central Asia's International Relations? *Central Asia and the Consensus*, 4(34): 8–21.

The contradictions we can see in Mackinder's views, where imperialist and democratic outlooks seem to be combined, serve to illustrate the broader contradictions in the emerging geographical discipline. Just as Mackinder's long career cannot be reduced to a simple imperial essence, so too the RGS represented a range of social, political and scientific interests. As Driver (2001: 47) explains '[i]t is difficult to characterize a body which finds room for missionaries, anti-slavery campaigners, roving explorers, mountaineers, antiquarians, geologists and naturalists'. We must, then, be wary of reducing the RGS to the single voice of its president and erasing from the historical record the many dissenting or divergent intellectual and political movements that the society encompassed. But in doing so it is important to recognise the tension between an appreciation of the complexity of an organisation such as the RGS and a disciplinary concern for its manifest links with British imperialism.

### The Société de Géographie de Paris (SGP)

The danger of reducing the nature of geography to a single imperial essence is further illustrated in the case of the foundation of the SGP in France. The geographer Mike Heffernan (1994a, 2005) has provided a series of insights into the connections between imperial expansion and the institutionalisation of geography in France. His investigations of the foundation of the SGP and, in particular, his examination of the intellectual positions of its key



members, provide a picture of the complex relationship between geography and empire building over the 19th and 20th centuries. Instead of drawing a link between geography and imperialism, Heffernan's account directs attention to the significance of the military defeat suffered by the French in the Franco–Prussian War in 1870–1871. He argues that this event, more than any other, stimulated a desire amongs the French people to reform education as a means of 'national rejuvenation' (1994b: 97). Geography's engagement with the physical and social aspects of the French state, as well as documenting France's imperial possessions in Africa, was considered by senior political and educational figures as crucial to bolstering this sense of national rejuvenation. The membership of the SGP reflects this increased interest in geography, as it rose from around 600 in 1870 to 1,353 in 1875 (Heffernan, 1994b: 98).

Heffernan's (1994b) account illustrates the different positions towards imperialism that existed within French geographical debates in the 19th century. He identifies five inter-linked perspectives within the geographical movement: utopian imperialism, cultural imperialism, economic imperialism, opportunistic imperialism and anti-imperialism. It is worth examining these in a little more detail, as they illustrate the considerable diversity of opinion as to the relative merits of imperial expansion.

### Utopian imperialism

The first perspective identified by Heffernan may come as a surprise, since imperialism is so often connected with processes of militarism and economic exploitation. He suggests that, in fact, many geographers, including prominent figures within the SGP, supported French imperialism on the grounds that it had the potential to bring more utopian forms of society into being. This utopian perspective was linked to a religious movement in the 19th century known as Saint-Simonianism. This group, founded on the thinking of social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon, was based on broadly socialist principles that stressed the importance of work, collaboration and science to advancing human society. In relation to imperialism, advocates of this mode of thought believed in the emancipatory power of technology and industrial development to bridge divides between religious and cultural communities (Heffernan, 1994b: 100). Therefore imperial expansion was supported on the basis that it allowed new infrastructures of trade and industry to develop, therefore increasing the productive capacity and collaborative networks between different groups of people. While Heffernan notes that this utopian perspective was rarely voiced within military circles, it was a popular intellectual thread within geographical communities in France.

### Cultural imperialism

Heffernan's second perspective is drawn from the role of geography in bolstering senses of France's cultural and national prestige. He suggests:

While the carefully directed study of France's rich and varied regional geography was to be a central educational component in fostering the spirit of patriotism and devotion to the Republic, the expansion of France overseas was interpreted as crucial to the nation's future survival as a vibrant culture and civilization. (1994b: 102)

This point shares aspects of Sidaway and Power's (2005) observation of the centrality of concerns of national identity and prestige within Portuguese imperialism (see above). But this was not simply a point about national aggrandisement: geography teaching sought to set France's imperial practices and motives apart from other European colonies. For