

Exploration

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History of exploration

Exploration can be broadly conceived as a process of building new knowledges through searching for and encountering new environments, people, and places. Although processes of exploration are integral to other disciplines as well, exploration has been most closely connected to geography through time; however, exploration does not begin with the discipline of geography, nor does it even necessarily begin with modern humans. The earliest forms of hominid exploration central to the migration and settlement of the human species took place at least 90 000 years ago when early hominids (*Homo erectus*) left East Africa. Taking into consideration the fact that every continent except Antarctica was settled over a 75 000-year span from those initial migrations, our ancestors were undoubtedly ambitious explorers. The methods of prehistoric migration, whether by land or sea, are still a subject of some dispute – indeed, some have argued that Australia was populated by ocean voyagers as early as 45 000 years ago, though early archaeological remains that could bolster this claim are unlikely extant. What is clear is that many of the earliest recorded historic voyages were undertaken at sea. As early as 670 BCE, the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II dispatched a Phoenician expedition to circumnavigate Africa over three years.

The enduring relationship between geography, exploration, and science began forming early in the “Age of Discovery” from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. This period of exploration may not have been any more ambitious than earlier eras, but manifested in large-scale public displays of power through financial investment, deployment of new technology, and, perhaps most importantly, a machine of publicity to document it all. The age of exploration and empire, perhaps most closely associated with the scientific voyages of Captain James Cook, relied not just on embodied exploration and encounter but on systems of documentation such as writing, painting, and mapmaking to establish colonial territories, filling in knowledges on what Europeans perceived as *terra incognita*. Geographers were complicit in contributing to European military expansion as part of the larger Enlightenment cultural project. Over this time, military and religious conquests installed European nation-states over much of the world, including the Americas, the Pacific, and Asia.

In the late nineteenth century, increasing pressure through competition to colonize more of the globe led to what has been termed “the Scramble for Africa”: the invasion, colonization, and annexation of the African continent from 1881 to 1914 (Driver 2001). Many of these African expeditions were sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in the United Kingdom (founded in 1830). Similar expeditions have been sponsored by the National Geographic Society in the United States of America (founded in 1888). Both institutions, as a result, have been embroiled in debates over the ethics of their involvement in imperial projects. It became clear to many in the

EXPLORATION

twentieth century that the tools of geographic exploration were the tools of empire. Because of these associations with governments, military, and spectacular cultural tourism, exploration as a concept became increasingly stripped from academic geography, seen as anti-intellectual endeavor. This view was reinforced by explorers themselves, who accused geographers attempting to theorize practice of being “armchair” academics, lacking the experiential credibility to guide narratives of exploration. Whatever the politics behind such expeditions, they were certainly successful from the point of view of European powers, leading to suggestions by the early twentieth century that there was nothing left to explore in the world; that humankind had entered the age of *Geography Triumphant* (Driver 2001, discussing a 1924 article in *National Geographic* magazine by Joseph Conrad).

Inevitably, however, a second land scramble of a slightly different nature began in the twentieth century and geographers were once again at the forefront of exploration under the guise of objective science. James Cook’s second expedition from 1772 to 1775 had fueled curiosity about *Terra Australis*, a new continent in the Southern Ocean. Between 1898 and 1910, seven major expeditions by European powers were launched onto the Antarctic landmass, the only continent on Earth without an indigenous population (Dodds 2012); however, this did not mean these explorations were without conflict. As with explorations in earlier ages, these expeditions were heavily financed by governments with political motivations leading to serious disputes over territorial claims. As with the scramble for Africa, in this period, the claims of nations were often pinned on “heroic” explorers. Norwegian Roald Amundsen was the first to reach the South Pole in 1911, to the dismay of British explorers who arrived just a few weeks later. Amundsen may have also been the first person to reach the

North Pole in 1926 via airship. With both poles then mapped, the “final” pole sought was the highest. Mount Everest (the highest mountain from sea level but not the tallest from the sea floor) was summited by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary in 1953, who captured photos as evidence of their accomplishment. As with the mapping of Africa, many once again declared the “end” of exploration by the 1950s.

Debates and issues around exploration

As on Everest, visual representations have always been important to exploration. Many prehistoric cave paintings may have been depictions, or visual maps, of explorations into new territory. In the age of discovery, representations took the form of resident artists (painters) hired to depict journeys. With the invention of photography in 1839, the medium was recognized almost immediately, in the context of the expansion of European overseas empires, as an asset to explorers seeking to document their journeys and achievements (Ryan 1998). From the mid-nineteenth century to today, exploration photography has become ubiquitous and expected. Photographs were thought to capture something of an objective “truth” of an expedition, event, or encounter, perhaps more accurately than painting where the painter’s subjective interpretation of events comes through more clearly in the framing, textures, rendering of expression and gesture, and choice of color. Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century, it was difficult to conceive of an exploration expedition without a photographer, or at least a camera (still or later video) as part of the field kit, a relationship that remains to this day. And although many still consider images “proof of achievement,” more contemporary geographic work has considered overlooked accounts of

images, the neglected home archives, and potential for additional mining of known archives to tell stories of individuals not foregrounded or those just out of frame.

These stories of exploration, while inspiring, are also stories of exclusion. The history of exploration until the twentieth century is a story largely told from a Eurocentric, androcentric, and science-centric point of view. Sustained critique followed from within geography to celebrate indigenous accounts of exploration and accounts of European exploration from indigenous perspectives. These narratives, many scholars argued, had been written from perspectives that failed to articulate the meanings and logics of non-Western peoples. Demands were also made to recognize the active exclusion of women from these expeditions and to rewrite history where women *were* involved and subsequently written out of history. In the history of Victorian exploration, for instance, as Mona Domosh (1991) convincingly argues, there were a number of women explorers written out of history because their explorations were not “goal oriented” or because their views and activities did not accord with geographic and scientific standards outlined by institutions such as the RGS. The RGS actively excluded women from membership and decision-making; women like Mary Kingsley, Mary Gaunt, and Isabella Bird were accused of being “travelers” rather than “explorers,” a gendered language divide still evident today. Interestingly, in the act of privileging process over goals, as many women who explored were accused of doing, these explorers often contributed more deeply to ethnographic and cultural understanding through their “subjective goals” than their male counterparts. The traveler/explorer divide highlights the always-present truth that exploration is as much internal as external, that exploration of the world is always an exploration of the self.

New themes in exploration

As a result of these sustained and important critiques, exploration fell even more deeply out of favor within geography. Few geographers embedded themselves on expeditions and even fewer labeled themselves “explorers” for fear of being perceived as anti-intellectual or, even worse, racist, sexist, or neocolonial. However, an American geographer called William Bunge disrupted this view in the 1950s; in short, Bunge argued that exploration could once again be a positive force, turned on ourselves. In the midst of stark racial and spatial division in 1969 Detroit, Bunge began undertaking what he called “expeditions” into low-income parts of the city under the auspices of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI). He argued that complete and full exploration of the urban environment would lead to democratization of space and a cultivation of deeper senses of community. Bunge offered tuition-free urban geography classes to low-income African-Americans and bused middle class white students into poorer areas of Detroit so that they could see how urban segregation was shaping their worldview and reinforcing inequality. A radical explorer for his time, Bunge was dismissed from multiple academic posts for his explorations. However, his message, that geographers should actively participate in the communities they are studying and strive to enact positive social change, has had lasting effect on the discipline and our considerations of the role exploration can once again play in geography.

The related philosophies of the Situationist International (SI), active in the 1950s and 1960s in Paris, were founded on the notion that due to the relentlessness and pervasiveness of commodity and administration under late capitalism, urban citizens had become passive spectators in a world presented to them as a

EXPLORATION

spectacle (Pinder 2005). Their solution to this problem was to reinstate active participation through explorations of the city in a process that might be considered a “counter-mapping” of place. Explorers were encouraged to undertake *dérives* or drifts through the city in the spirit of nineteenth-century *flâneurs* who refused to adhere to notions of “proper” places. The *dérive* opens out, in the spirit of exploration, chance for happenstance, which may lead to unexpected spatial discoveries and social encounters. Importantly, these explorations seek to redress earlier problems in exploration stemming from perceived overly objective and scientific goals by embracing the subjective *process* of exploration. And importantly, like Bunge’s expeditions, these were explorations not of distant lands or “foreign” people, but of the “home” and the “everyday.” The maps of the SI, drawn up from exploration of the exceptional in the everyday, were meant not to document and rationalize space but to disrupt social ordering, to draw up hypotheses for new constitutions of place that prefaced the social before the economic (see Bunge 1969).

The SI praxis was further drawn out through urban exploration, a globally recognized and socially significant practice from about the year 2000 to today (Garrett 2013). Urban explorers appropriated the language and imagery of colonial exploration and applied it to contemporary metropoli, which they claimed had become colonized by forces of capitalism, surveillance, and health and safety to the point of existential threat. Urban explorers called for subversion of dominant narratives of spatial regulation by undertaking explorations in cities without permission, sneaking into abandoned buildings, under construction skyscrapers, and subterranean tunnel systems, photographing the “discoveries” and distributing those photos publically online. The emulation of the colonial “explorer” ethos

in the culture extended into the declaration of “Golden Ages of Exploration” (some lasting only months), the naming of locations by explorers of “virgin territory,” and the aesthetic coding of the photography used to “document” their explorations. The appropriation of these languages and aesthetics is both a serious political statement about access to and control over space and a flippant sapping of colonial practices. It is in this collapse of binaries that urban exploration finds its form, being both an objective technique of observation that reveals and comments on the “hidden” in the tradition of exploration and an inclusive, internal subjective search for meaning. Urban exploration is closely allied with practices such as skateboarding, graffiti and *parkour* (free running), which also constitute modern forms of exploration of cities. These practices similarly colonize and occupy spaces in the context of popular practice rather than colonial exploitation, being undertaken by local groups and individuals without state or institutional support. Ironically, the state and connected institutions, who clearly sponsored (and continue to sponsor) far more militant and violent forms of exploration, often condemn these exploratory practices “at home,” as being inappropriate, illicit, and even illegal. It would appear that not much has changed since Bunge’s time – exploration is still meant to remain “Out There,” among “The Other.”

Within geography there has been a preoccupation with mapping, Cartesian coordinate systems and “accurate” photographic depictions of places and landscapes that amounts to, in essence, a two-dimensional imagination, which is being challenged as geographers explore the vertical world through practices such as caving, scuba diving, tunneling, mining, air travel, ballooning, and vertical architecture. Ambitious as these studies may be, attachment to the “geo” has meant geographers often still remain remiss in

their attention to exploration of the deep sea and outer space, indications that perhaps vertical imaginaries have not stretched far enough. With the boundaries of deep-sea exploration continually advancing through the use of robotics, there remains vast work to be undertaken on oceanic and maritime exploration. And beyond soil and sea, decades of concerted space exploration have also opened out new possibilities for discovery beyond Earth's exosphere. Overwhelming public interest in the photographs taken by the Mars Rovers, life aboard the International Space Station, and the possible colonization of Mars in the next decade should have geographers working overtime to consider the geopolitics of space exploration and the importance of the current political moment in the galaxy, where control over and exploration of outer space is being handed over from governments to private companies. Given the discipline's relationship with historic precedent, and the particular sensitivities that has engendered, geographers are well poised to critically comment on such activities. Additionally, attention to new spaces of exploration such as these, in the context of work by people like Bunge and the SI, should be seen as an opportunity for researchers to embed themselves on such missions and tell new ethnographic tales of exploration, critically filtered through our fraught past with exploratory practices (Naylor and Ryan 2010).

We might also consider the limits of exploration in a more (or less) phenomenological sense. For the endless accumulation and storage of information, again another proclivity of living under scientific frameworks emphasizing collection and retention, have also created new realms for exploration in the archive. It may be easy to imagine the physical archive or library as a place of exploration, a "great indoors," digging through old manuscripts, maps, and photographs; indeed, many have written evocatively

about the process of "delving" for material and having unexpected encounters with fragments of the past (Lorimer 2009). Further interrogation of the relationship between fieldwork and archives or what Felix Driver termed the field and "the cabinet" (Driver 2001) leads to a suggestion of a particular hybridity at work. Exploration of the archive rehabilitates archival fragments and lends itself to performance of landscape, place, and memory that might also be considered a form of activism. Archival exploration can answer the call of Domosh (1991) to recall the hidden histories of those who have been inadvertently or purposefully written out.

Archives can be "delved" beyond the obvious in a number of ways. First, one might consider, as Lorimer (2009) suggests, how Internet-based shopping on sites like eBay allows for collection of archives we may have never had access to previously and may encourage people to explore in an effort to find saleable cultural remains such as family photograph collections (another area of heated ethical debate). Second, the Internet most of us know and use, which is essentially an infinite archive, is only 0.03% of what is on the web. Behind, under, and entangled within this archive is a "deep web" where information accumulates without being categorized, tagged, organized, listed, and publically distributed. The daring virtual explorer or hacker may make forays into this zone, sometimes at great personal risk, to recover social and cultural data. Digging even deeper, one may find oneself in the "dark web," an ethically and legally murky landscape where important social research can and should be undertaken. Consideration is also due to increasingly multisensory inhabitations of virtual avatars and virtual environments. Virtual "sandbox" environments in games, for instance, many of which take months or years to explore, may soon become boundless. Within the next few decades, it may become increasingly difficult

EXPLORATION

to distinguish between “real” and “virtual” experiences as our “second life” online becomes indistinguishable from the first, changing our notion of exploration indelibly.

Finally, we might consider new research into processes of nonhuman exploration. Now that machine capacity is outstripping human capacity to explore, and humans increasingly embody machines to explore inhospitable environments, the boundaries of exploration will inevitably change. But this is nothing new, for as we have seen, if anything defines exploration, it is its constantly changing nature. If we knew what was going to happen, it wouldn't be exploration.

SEE ALSO: Archival and document research; Borders, boundaries, and borderlands; Geopolitics; Historical geography; Imperialism

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