

**ARTICLE**

# Revisiting the history of ideas: A forgotten resource for historians of geography

Mette Bruinsma MA 

School of Geographical and Earth Sciences,  
University of Glasgow, UK

**Correspondence**

Mette Bruinsma, School of Geographical and  
Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow,  
Glasgow, UK.  
Email: m.bruinsma.1@research.gla.ac.uk

## Abstract

In this paper I revisit the mid-twentieth century body of literature founding the field of the history of ideas, emphasising the work of Arthur Lovejoy (1873–1962). This branch of intellectual history is often overshadowed by both the history of knowledge and the history of science. I will argue that the history of ideas is valuable to any historian of geography, even though some of its key arguments are justly criticised and rejected. Subsequently, I will reflect on recent examples of how histories of geography have been written and the role of geographers within a “spatial turn” taken by intellectual history. These elements will then be connected to the history of ideas, explaining why this field might be valuable to disciplinary historians, and brief reference will be made to the most explicit borrowing from this field by “idealist human geography.” The central argument is that a Lovejoyian history of ideas has contributed to the inclusion of and emphasis on certain non-elitist voices in academia and the crossing of boundaries between disciplines, language areas and countries. Although certain epistemological aspects of this field might not withstand criticism, other aspects of what it has achieved might still be worth revisiting.

## KEYWORDS

historiography, history of geography, history of ideas, intellectual history, knowledge, Lovejoy

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“Ideengeschichte ist tot, lang lebe die Ideeengeschichte!”<sup>1</sup> (Goering, 2017:7). With this opening statement, Goering sets the tone for his book on the current status of the history of ideas in Germany. The allusion to the accession of a new monarch refers to the revival of an intellectual tradition or field that was declared dead long ago. That field was clearly discernible in the Anglophone and German academic communities of the mid-twentieth century (Goering, 2017). Examples include the works of Rothacker (1940) in Germany, Collingwood (1946) in Britain and Lovejoy (1936, 1940, 1941) in the United States. In this review, I will emphasise the work and ideas of the latter, Lovejoy, offering pointers as to why this field of history of ideas might be reappraised as a resource for academic geography.

By means of a broad-brush encounter with Lovejoy’s history of ideas followed by a short discussion how histories of geography have been written, I will address the value of revisiting this “dead” field of intellectual history. First, I will explore recent signs of a resurgence of history of ideas against the broader context of intellectual history (Goering, 2017), pursuing the interdisciplinarity for which Lovejoy aimed; and second, I will address how discussions concerning history of ideas have contributed to the inclusion of and emphasis upon non-elitist voices in academia, including in histories of geography. This analysis will demonstrate that, although not all arguments by historians of ideas such as Lovejoy are justified or can withstand criticism (e.g., Foucault, 1975; Skinner, 1969), the field known as history of ideas *has* influenced both intellectual history and human geography. Exploring the mid-twentieth century history of ideas is thus valuable to any historian of geography: questions about temporal and spatial scales of research and on whose voices should be included in historical research were relevant to historians of ideas, as well as to their adversaries, and arguably remain highly relevant to historians of geography today.

### 1.1 | History of ideas as a branch of intellectual history

The ordering and naming of different branches of intellectual history (e.g., history of science, history of knowledge, history of ideas: see Table 1) is messy, tangled and somewhat arbitrary. It reflects battles between rival “schools” with differing philosophical and maybe ethical-political preferences, as revealed in a statement such as this: “For most historians of science trained in the past thirty years, doing history of science has meant avoiding the history of ideas” (Tresch, 2014:153). Conflating some of the distinctions drawn above and in Table 1, Wickberg (2001) distinguishes two broad schools of practice in intellectual history: the history of thought, concentrating on the “internal” movement of ideas, and the social history of intellectuals, addressing the “external” influences of who, where and when produces the ideas. The former includes “history of ideas, language, texts, ideology, meaning and cultural

**TABLE 1** A succinct overview of different branches of intellectual history

Branches of intellectual history	Core concerns	Exemplary text	Example in geography	Exemplary journal
History of science	Origins and uptake of key scientific concepts and practices	Kuhn (1970)	Livingstone (2005)	Isis (founded in 1912)
History of knowledge	Development and application of identifiable subjects, disciplines, substantive foci	Burke (2016)	Wright (1947)	Journal for the History of Knowledge (founded in 2020)
History of ideas	Appearance, reiteration and sedimentation of specifiable ideas of the world	Lovejoy (1936)	Guelke (1982)	Journal of the History of Ideas (founded in 1940)

representations" (Wickberg, 2001:384). The history of thought, on this reading, has a strong focus on language, on how texts and speeches are composed and communicated, as well as an awareness of how thought is indelibly caught in the workings of power, an angle expressed—by both geographers and others—through genealogical studies (e.g., Foucault, 1975) and inquiries into the persuasions of ideology (e.g., Althusser, 1971; Cresswell, 1996). history of ideas, although a term regularly used as a synonym for "history of thought," is characterised by—unsurprisingly—the organising concept of *ideas*, and is hence often taken as occupying its own distinctive and, for some, unfashionable niche.

Using ideas as a central concept in writing history is connected to the ontological and epistemological status lent to ideas and other *mentalities* within the philosophical framework of idealism. To summarise baldly, there are two fundamental conceptions of idealism: first, idealism in the sense of the foundation of all reality being "something mental" (such as "the mind," or ideas); and second, idealism in the sense that *knowing* reality is always dependent on activities of the mind (Guyer & Horstmann, 2019). For idealist historians, the dynamics of ideas held by humans are precisely what shape history, once humans enter the historical record, and all else is secondary. Idealists thus confront both realist and materialist accounts: realism as the doctrine "that there is a world of physical things that exists independent of our perceptions and cognition of them" (Gibson, 1981:148), prioritising what is ostensibly real in the world; and materialism as that "which takes matter to be all there is" (Guyer & Horstmann, 2019, page no.), prioritising the material dimensions of any human situation or process. Idealism sits apart from both these doctrines, in the wider universe of philosophy as in the narrower pastures of academic geography, resulting in it often being regarded as too partial, only accessing one small corner of how "real" peoples, places and periods are constituted. Moreover, if the idealist focus homes down specifically on "ideas," then that focus arguably becomes even more tightly drawn.

## 1.2 | Lovejoy's interdisciplinary tracing of "unit-ideas"

History of ideas emerged in the eighteenth century (Berlin, 2000), but in this review I will emphasise the contributions of Lovejoy during the twentieth-century interwar period, coinciding with the institutionalisation of history of ideas, in certain quarters, as a recognisable academic field. Arthur Lovejoy (1873–1962) was an American philosopher and historian. He was Professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University from 1910 to 1938, where he founded the university's "History of Ideas Club" together with George Boas, another philosopher, before he founded the still existing *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940. In the first volume, he gave the *raison d'être* of this new journal:

"The history of political events and social movements, of economic changes, of religion, of philosophy, of science, of literature and the other arts, of education, have been investigated by distinct groups of specialists, many of them little acquainted with the subjects and the researches of the others. The specialization which—the limitations of the individual mind being what they are—had this as its natural consequence was indispensable for the progress of historical knowledge; yet the consequence proved also, in the end, an impediment to such progress. For the departmentalization—whether by subjects, periods, nationalities or languages—of the study of the history of thought corresponds, for the most part, to no real cleavages among the phenomena studied." (Lovejoy, 1940:3–4).<sup>2</sup>

This call for interdisciplinary historical research based its arguments on the unifying and structuring element of so-called "unit-ideas" previously introduced in Lovejoy's most famous text *The Great Chain of Being* (1936):

"There are, first, implicit or incompletely explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits*, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation. It is the beliefs which are so much a

matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for, the ways of thinking which seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness, that often are most decisive of the character of a philosopher's doctrine, and still often of the dominant intellectual tendencies of an age." (Lovejoy, 1936:7).

Unit-ideas would be traceable in "different provinces" of history (Lovejoy, 1936), and Lovejoy presents an example of how philosophy, romanticism and landscape-gardening are contexts in which one unit-idea appears: thus, in different provinces (Lovejoy, 1936:15). Such unit-ideas can be "disguised," but that is exactly what the historian should solve: making connections between the different appearances of the same unit-idea. Lovejoy emphasised how ideas constantly "migrated" (1940:4) and were in "perpetual interplay" with each other (1940:19), and these descriptions already reveal that his history of ideas as anything but fixed or exemplary of ontological idealism. It is the name of "history of ideas" that suggests such ontological idealism,<sup>3</sup> but, on the contrary, Lovejoy's history of ideas was intended to be a "hybrid creature": combining some aspects of Anglo-American empiricism with aspects of German idealism (Parsons, 2007) without fully adopting their respective ontological and epistemological postulates. It was specifically this mixture that proved fruitful: it could appeal to different audiences, perhaps ones with differing ethical-political commitments, and thus be an appealing intellectual field for many scholars in the humanities (Parsons, 2007:688).

Lovejoy himself emphasised the unit-idea being determined by "usage," not by "meaning" (Lovejoy, 1941:258): unit-ideas hence are "historical conglomerates more than they are logical entities" (Taylor Wilkins, 1956:322). In practice, he considered unit-ideas as "meeting points" for academics of diverse backgrounds, a claim that will form the bridge from Lovejoy's history of ideas to my reflections on its value for (historical) geographers and disciplinary historians. Additionally, moreover, for Lovejoy history of ideas:

"is especially concerned with the manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers." (Lovejoy, 1936:19).

Notwithstanding occasional appearances to the contrary, then, Lovejoy envisaged history of ideas to be non-elitist, not prioritising the great thoughts of "Great Men," but rather ideas sedimented into the worlds and doings of ordinary people, even if originating from the "profound" and "eminent." Non-elitist notions of knowledge were given voice louder and clearer towards the end of the twentieth century, of course, both in studies by historians of geography and across other subdisciplinary fields of academic geography.

### 1.3 | History of ideas and contextualism

Critique of Lovejoy's history of ideas grew in the 1960s, exemplified by a banner with the text "Just Say No to the History of Ideas" attached to Princeton's Department of Philosophy, demonstrating negative attitudes towards the methods and objects of the history of ideas (Grafton, 2006:18). This critique of Lovejoy objected to his seeming reduction of all art and literature to illustrations of *particular* ideas or philosophical doctrines (Grafton, 2006) and insisted that his posited historical continuities between given unit-ideas were spurious (Mandelbaum, 1965). One of the leading opponents of Lovejoy's history of ideas was Skinner (1969). Along with Pocock and Dunn (James, 2018), he represented the Cambridge School of intellectual history which proposed a contextual mode of historical understanding (Gordon, 2014), wherein thought always needs to be understood in its time, place, situation and circumstances, never through tracing "decontextualised," essentialised, unit-ideas down the ages.

Contextualism offered many justified arguments against a mid-twentieth century history of ideas, and yet there is now a recognisable comeback occurring for a Lovejoyian history of ideas. The main emphasis in this newer

incarnation of history of ideas is the temporal ambition of this approach, the *longue durée* (Armitage, 2012; McMahon & Moyn, 2014), as well as the crossing of all kinds of boundaries and boundaries beyond “the material” as in the immediacy of specific places (Goering, 2017). The call for a long-term, large-scale- and non-elitist history of ideas is also perceptible in papers published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* over recent years (e.g., Chaplin, 2017; De Bont, 2015; Shogimen, 2016), one example being De Bont’s inquiry into international conservation and the shift of discourses of exclusion to discourse of inclusion, considering the knowledges of indigenous people between 1910 and 1975 (De Bont, 2015).

Besides this influence on temporal, spatial and conceptual scales of intellectual history, the history of ideas also helped to break down “the barrier against philosophy” (Gordon, 2014:52) that contextualism had built, allowing historical study to open itself to realms of imagination, conjecture and speculation beyond the mundanely “real” and “material.” The history of ideas is hence one field where history and philosophy can arguably be brought together (Bevir, 1997), similarly to the collaborations that Lovejoy envisaged in the 1930s–1940s. To have some kind of “shared playground” of interaction between historians (and not just theorists of history!) and philosophers might benefit intellectual history as a whole. Calls for historians of science not only to focus on theoretical knowledge but also on intuitive and practical knowledges (e.g., Renn, 2015) are clearly grounded in these epistemological discussions.

Already in the 1980s, some efforts to unite, or at least to connect, contextualism and traditional history of ideas were undertaken (LaCapra, 1980). What I would like to urge here is a return, even if it is just a short visit, to history of ideas as it was proposed halfway through the twentieth century, because much of what might be termed non-idealist intellectual history, as in contextualism, is to some extent precisely a response to history of ideas. Indeed, the history of ideas influenced neighbouring academic fields such as philosophy of language, philosophy of action and theories on textual interpretation, as well as the history of political thought (Boucher, 1985). Further, whereas perhaps the structuring concept of the unit-ideas is less easily justified (Armitage, 2012), Lovejoy’s call for interdisciplinary historical-theoretical experimentation is a remarkable for anyone interested in knowledge exchange and migration (McMahon, 2014) alongside disciplinary developments and institutionalisation.

More contemporary works on history of ideas, such as the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Horowitz, 2005), express a broad conception of what constitutes ideas. Indeed, ideas discussed in the *Dictionary* include concepts such as Bioethics, Citizenship and Hate. Yet, this edition also explicitly covers an extensive number of possibilities, ranging from many “-isms” such as Aristotelianism, Pragmatism and Socialism to practices such as Dance, Volunteerism and Ancestor Worship. Horowitz explains the difference between this *New Dictionary* and the original *Dictionary* (Wiener, 1973) mainly by a shift from a focus on the history of influential texts to the inclusion of ideas expressed orally, visually and in public debate (Horowitz, 2005: xxvii). In the process, she refers to the mid-twentieth century field of history of ideas “as a trendsetter in establishing ‘interdisciplinarity’ in academia, encouraging the pursuit of ideas across the borders of academic disciplines” (Horowitz, 2005: xxvii). This claim directly connects to one of Lovejoy’s ambitions—the cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approach—but utters a broader conception of ideas than is arguably contained in Lovejoy’s sense of unit-ideas.

## 1.4 | Non-elitist knowledges in disciplinary history

In his book chapter on the return of history of ideas, McMahon (2014) explores four different domains in which the history of ideas might have influenced later historiographers: the broadening of temporal ambition and scope; the discussion about universalism versus provincialism; “writerly craft”; and the travels and migrations of ideas, both in a literal and conceptual sense. McMahon also reflects on the common emphasis upon “elites” and elitist knowledge in intellectual history writing. Various developments in the second half of the twentieth century opened the floor to “voices from below.” At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s some Marxist historians began publishing works on “history from below”: the formative contribution of Thompson, notably *The Making of the English Working Class*

(Thompson, 1963), epitomised the experiences, agency and self-consciousness of “the working class” (Featherstone & Griffin, 2016). This history from below contested “the passivity to which ordinary people have been consigned by so many historians” (Tosh, 2002:71).

Genealogical research, emphasising historical *meaning* as well as accounts that include historical *usage* of concepts, are also traceable within geography. Agnew (2014), for instance, explores some of human geography’s “basic concepts,” paying attention to their longer-term genealogies. Intriguingly, he refers to the history of ideas in his argument:

“It [a dialogue about the uses and limitations of a ‘history of ideas’ approach] is inspired by a fear that the field has become so obsessed with tracing the intellectual genealogies of its concepts (as singular words) that the practical lives to which the concepts can help provide tentative understandings have been increasingly forgotten. (...) My point is not totalistic (...) an interest in the history of ideas has been a welcome one for the field as a whole. More specifically, however, that static nominalism that the approach sometimes entails leads to a rigid essentializing of terms.” (Agnew, 2014:318).

Although such genealogies are different from Lovejoy’s history of ideas, they share a concern for the *longue durée* in historical research, as popularised in *Annales School*<sup>4</sup> histories concerned with the articulation of long-term (structural) processes (e.g., Braudel, 1949, 1980).

When turning to historiographies of geography, there are many ways of telling such a disciplinary history. The scope of every historiography influences the voices and contributions that are prioritised. Livingstone’s *The Geographical Tradition* (Livingstone, 1992) covers more than 2000 years of history, during only a relatively small period of which geography was institutionalised in research centres and universities. Because of this, Livingstone includes a colourful collection of characters and texts: contributions of voyagers, navigators, and scientists from both humanities and natural sciences are prominently staged. Other classic historiographies, such as *Geography and Geographers* (Johnston, 1979; Johnston & Sidaway, 2015), give the university as an education and research institution a central place in the history of geography. There is hence a distinction—to an extent captured in the contrast between the two texts just mentioned—between two kinds of historiographical sources: works on the history of geographical *ideas* versus works on the history of geography as an *academic discipline*. This distinction is not always clear-cut: for instance, Cresswell’s *Geographic Thought* (Cresswell, 2013) can be placed at a midway position on the spectrum. The justification of the narrative that a historiographer is telling is complex: what should be included? the masterpieces of each era? the approaches followed by a majority in a discipline? the methodology that has sustained for the longest time? the theories most influential in contemporary works? In recent years, some historians of geography have called for attending to “uncommon” voices are from within the academic community. Their voices are not obscure in any way; but, for whatever exact reason, they are not discernible, or strongly under-represented, in the well-known historiographies of geography: meaning voices from female geographers (e.g., Domosh, 1991; Maddrell, 2009), “dissident” geographers (e.g., Barnes & Sheppard, 2019; Blunt & Wills, 2000) and non-Anglophone geographers (e.g., Oldfield & Shaw, 2015).

## 1.5 | The spatial turn in histories of geography

Science has often been regarded as “an enterprise untouched by local conditions” (Livingstone, 2003:1), with socio-spatial contexts for the making of science rarely acknowledged (Finnegan, 2008). However, just as sociologists and anthropologists are now discussing science, so are social, cultural and historical geographers (e.g., Livingstone, 2005). Geographers engaged more with social theory, cultural studies and related disciplines in order to begin framing how to research and narrate the geographies integral to the histories of science and, indeed, as shaping the histories of geography as knowledge and as a form of science, resulting in what has been termed a

“spatial turn” in such endeavour (Withers, 2009:641). Several different emphases arise in research on the spatialities of knowledge and science. Some discuss the “locationality” of the production of knowledge (e.g., Livingstone, 2003), while others emphasise the circulation of scientific knowledge (e.g., Naylor, 2005a, 2005b), the movements of academics themselves (e.g., Jöns, 2010), or the *milieux* for the “consumption” of scientific knowledge (e.g., Keighren, 2006).

Reflection on the history of ideas might aid understanding these different approaches to narrating a disciplinary history: the travelling and migration of ideas in different provinces, as Lovejoy suggested, meant that the unit-ideas would be found in collective (or not-individual) thought. Similarly, the exploration of unit-ideas crossing boundaries and surfacing in other languages than English was central to Lovejoy (1936: 17). However, it is unfair to ascribe the acknowledgement of non-elitist knowledges and focus on circulation and migration of ideas only to the adversaries and successors of history of ideas: a plural conception of knowledge, emerging in the above-identified “spatial turn,” is epistemologically different from the tracing of ideal—in some sense invariant, unchanging—unit-ideas around different contexts, communities and times. Methodologically, as well as in terms of spatial and temporal scale, history of ideas and pluralist accounts of knowledge do have much in common, however, rendering it worthwhile to return to mid-twentieth century discussions ideas about history of ideas.

## 1.6 | A note on idealist human geography

The field of history of ideas as a whole is more extensive than Lovejoy and thinkers from within the Lovejoyian “tradition.” It is associated with a variety of philosophical thought argued from an epistemological and ontological idealist point of view, exemplified, for instance, within the discipline of geography by Leonard Guelke. Guelke argued for a Collingwoodian conception of how history can be studied by historians and historical geographers (Guelke, 1997), the reference being R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943), the English philosopher, historian and archaeologist. Collingwood's posthumously published *The Idea of History* (1946) engaged with the epistemological problem of how to know the past:

“All history, then, is the history of thought, where thought is used in the widest sense and includes all the conscious activities of the human spirit. These activities, as events in time, pass away and cease to be. The historian re-creates them in his own mind: he does not merely repeat them, as a later scientist may re-invent the inventions of an earlier: he re-enacts them consciously, knowing that this is what he is doing and thus conferring upon this re-enactment the quality of a specific activity of the mind.” (Collingwood, 1946: 445).

The idealist, Collingwoodian, approach that Guelke advocated did not neglect material aspects of human existence, but insisted that material aspects should be treated in relation to the thought of individuals involved (Guelke, 1982:33). Understanding history meant understanding the rationalities of thoughts from people in the past: they should be prioritised, instead of “our” own rationalities.

Idealist human geography did not establish itself as a significant theoretical approach within the discipline.<sup>5</sup> This does not imply that idealist thought in its broader sense did not influence the discipline. Some say Guelke might deserve some credit for formalising an explanation “that has long been present in human geography” and for “complementing” the heightened sensitivity to the ideas of given peoples in given places (Cloke et al., 2004: 70). J.K. Wright's argument for the field of “geosophy” is another example of how thought on ideas—the “imagined ideas” he addresses in *Terrae Incognitae* (1947)—have influenced later developments within human geography (Keighren, 2005). These examples, though very different in their orientations, demonstrate the versatility of historical thought on the role of “ideas,” both in historiography and in historical geography, and thus once again invoke the value of revisiting thinkers such as Lovejoy.

## 2 | CONCLUSION

The connections between the history of ideas and plural non-elitist notions of knowledge are perhaps not always very direct. In this paper, I have emphasised the value of looking back at Lovejoy's mid-twentieth century body of work within the field of history of ideas, one that did have some influence on the relationships between history and philosophy, and on historiographical thought, later in the century. Acknowledging the multiple "provinces" wherein ideas can be expressed might have contributed to the broadening of "what and who should be studied" in academia. My central point is that, even when the epistemological aspects of an approach might not withstand criticism, other aspects of an approach might still be worth revisiting. The broadening of temporal, spatial and conceptual scale and the tracing of non-elitist historical thought are all very much present in history of ideas, even in Lovejoy's original conception. With recent academic debates about the voices of "dissidents" or social or spatial "outsiders," as shortly discussed in this paper, the crossing of boundaries that is advocated by historians of ideas seems very relevant today. Furthermore, there are several recent examples of comparative studies on national or local disciplinary differences (e.g., Hoyez, Collins, & Fleuret, 2016; Peake, 2011). Such studies often focus on one specific geographical subfield such as, for instance, social or health geography, but because of its comparative and spatial scope the Lovejoyan notion of "different provinces" and his notion of ideas as "meeting points" become apparent. Historians of geography and historical geographers often sketch parallels with diverse approaches taken within research on the history of science and history of knowledge, but the less fashionable branch of intellectual history—history of ideas—might provide an unexpected sense of recognition and kinship.

### ORCID

Mette Bruinsma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5256-1470>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"The history of ideas is dead, long live the history of ideas!"

<sup>2</sup>This paper will not discuss the notion of "science as progress" as it is expressed in this quotation by Lovejoy. Some interesting sources about this notion in general are, for instance, Krige (1980) and Bowler and Morus (2005), or, more specifically about progress in geography, Livingstone (2006).

<sup>3</sup>Ontological idealism, as described above, is the conception that the foundation of all reality is "something mental", such as ideas, will, the mind (Guyer & Horstmann, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>For its influence on geography, see, for instance, Baker, 1978.

<sup>5</sup>It rather became lost in the midst of a more broad-brush humanistic geography (of the 1970s-1980s), within which more challenging "philosophical" claims about phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics and the multiple dimensions of "human agency" – as set against versions of radical, structural, political-economic geography – came more prominently to the fore (Gregory, 1978; Cloke et al., 1991).

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Mette Bruinsma** is a PhD Student at the University of Glasgow, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Mette's research focuses on the history of geography (1950-present) from a bottom-up, student perspective. Working with the undergraduate dissertation archive at Glasgow's School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, she addresses disciplinary changes and explores the spatial and social contexts of many generations of geographers-in-the-making.

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