

## Introduction: Geography and power, the power of geography

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# INTRODUCTION: GEOGRAPHY AND POWER, THE POWER OF GEOGRAPHY

by

Anita Veihe, Kirsten Simonsen, Jesper Brandt and Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt

This was the title of a jubilee seminar in 2004 celebrating 30 years of geography at Roskilde University. Since this was an occasion to reflect on the contemporary development of geography, this issue presents, first, invited papers by distinguished international speakers to the seminar, and second, contributions from strands of geographic research at Roskilde University.

Geography has always had a complex relation to its affinity with power and the way it has been used to exercise power in the name of colonialism. Geography at Roskilde University emerged in the aftermath of the 1968 student revolt as a central milieu in the development of problem-based project work, a hallmark of Roskilde University's pedagogic approach. This meant that geography at Roskilde was born in an atmosphere of both social critique and educational experimentation. Alongside the local and international development of radical geography, not least represented by the work of David Harvey, geography at Roskilde University was to be defined in new ways. Steen Folke explained very well how this happened in practice at the opening of the seminar. He was a member of the committee given the task to draft the first curriculum in geography at Roskilde University in 1974:

Work in the committee actually went smoothly. In spite of our divergent views we were able to reach consensus on all major issues. I believe we were all somehow influenced by the fluidity of the situation. Something new and different had to be created. After discussions in the committee I was given the task to make a first draft of the main contents built around a concept of geography as a field defined by three nodal points. These three nodal points were roughly:

- 1) The interaction between nature and society,
- 2) The development of human societies in historical perspective and
- 3) Differences within

and relations between regions. This constituted a radical departure from traditional concepts of geography as made up of a range of sub-disciplines, geomorphology, climatology, hydrology, population geography, economic geography etc. Moreover, it tried to avoid a sharp separation between human and physical geography. In a sense it was an attempt to base the study of geography on a new paradigm making geography more relevant to the solution of contemporary problems. A more holistic approach was seen as more appropriate than a disciplinary, fragmented approach

(Steen Folke, 'How it all started – Celebrating 30 years of geography at RUC', 26 October 2004)

Roskilde University was indeed developing in a state of fluidity, as also expressed in the motto of the university since its start in 1972: *In tranquillo mors – in fluctu vita* (In silence dead – while moving alive). However, the approaches developed in geography defined materiality as a common point of departure, though approaches were different. One way was to develop traditional themes of regional geography and human ecology, seeking new forms of synthesis between human and physical geography. Another way was to take material production as the starting point for studies of uneven development at different scales, also involving politics and planning. The holistic approach with materiality at the centre was a stabilizer but also a strait-jacket, and new approaches, as some of those represented in this issue, emerged and added to the intellectual milieu, also drawing on the cross-disciplinarity characteristic of the University. On one side there was the development of physical geography, theme-based with an emphasis on management aspects and with practical applications to land-use related and environmental problems seen in a critical perspective. On the oth-

er side, the development of a social and cultural geography that never lost its relation to the material because of its focus on practice rather than on only representations. With both of these developments, alongside the original focus on materiality, we hope the critical approach to geography and power is still an apparent, common, feature of geography at Roskilde University.

Geography cannot escape being a multifarious, trans-disciplinary discipline, in itself a characteristic contradiction in terms. It is hard to monitor the exact powers of geography at Roskilde University, fanning out as they do through the total of 867 candidates who graduated with a Master's degree in

geography in combination with another discipline during the period from 1974 to 2004. However, we do think that the celebration seminar provided a good occasion to reflect over the power of geography. And we hope this special issue will stimulate further debates.

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