

# 11 Anne Buttimer

## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

It was a rediscovery of earlier geographical writing attuned to the humanities and a heightened attentiveness to cultural differences in environmental knowledge and perception that inspired the rise of humanistic thought within geography during the 1960s and 1970s. The Irish geographer, Anne Buttimer, born in 1938, is generally recognised as one of the key promoters of this humanist turn. Her association with humanism in geography can be traced back to an early interest in phenomenology and existentialism, and a concomitant focus on human experience, lifeworld, and dwelling. Her work has left an imprint on three broad fields of research: geographical thought and practice; the experience of place, space and movement; and the relationships between science and policy.

Early in her professional life, Buttimer developed an interest in the practice, history and philosophy of geography. After graduation from University College Cork with a BA in Mathematics, Latin, and Geography (1957) and MA in Geography (1958), Buttimer joined the Dominican Order and moved to Seattle. The Dominican principle of 'sharing with others

the fruits of one's own contemplation', would provide direction and motivation of her work during and subsequent to the 17 years she spent in the Order. Throughout her career, Buttimer also held on to the principle of alternating between attention to reflective issues and empirical concerns.

Her doctoral studies (1962–1964) at the University of Washington came to focus on social geography, especially in the French tradition – a field of research then barely considered in American academia (Buttimer, 1971). Returning to Europe as a post-doctoral fellow of the Belgian American Foundation, she devoted the late 1960s to studies in phenomenology and existentialism at the University of Louvain (1965–1966), visiting France to gain a better grasp of how social space could be used in empirical work, and lastly got involved in the evaluation of urban planning standards and residential area design in Scotland (1968–1970). In Glasgow, Buttimer interviewed working-class households that had been relocated from central city slum clearance districts to modern housing estates. Her aspiration was to understand everyday life experiences, and dimensions of social space which were not seriously considered in conventional practice. Results from the study claimed that social reference systems and collective memory were of crucial importance to how groups assigned meaning to space (Buttimer 1972). Where the Glasgow study

still showed traces of a positivist approach, its general tenor was also influenced by existentialist and phenomenological ideas from the earlier sojourn in Belgium. Subsequently, this resulted in a more full-fledged philosophical surge in Buttimer's work that inspired several doctoral theses on environmental perception at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, where she worked from 1970 onwards (Buttimer and Seamon 1980).

With 'Values in geography' (1974) Buttimer pioneered the now commonly accepted point that knowledge always emanates from, and is legitimised by particular sets of values and social commitments. This essay argued that conventional models, theories and practices in the discipline of geography were often insensitive to contextual differences and even had a clear affinity with imperialism and the conquest of the earth. Buttimer would later describe the essay as 'an emancipatory turning point; many contradictions and inconsistencies which I had unmasked in my own life and thought became challenges to confront. Integrity demanded, among other things, transcending those comfortable "-isms", "-ologies" and *a priori* biases, seeking the spirit rather than the letter, the ethos rather than the structure in whatever life situation' (Buttimer, 1987: 313).

While spelling out her position, Buttimer began a collaboration with the Swedish geographer **Torsten Hägerstrand** – one of the commentators of her 'Values' paper. Buttimer's subject-oriented position on human experience obviously differed from the more material and objective approach of time-geography as developed by Hägerstrand, but they shared an interest in temporal and spatial aspects of everyday life. Joining Hägerstrand at Lund University, Buttimer sought to integrate a temporal dimension to her understanding of social space. A subsequent

exploratory essay (1976), heavily resting on existentialism and phenomenology, proposed rethinking geography in terms of lived time-space rhythms. Buttimer and Hägerstrand also commenced an international project aiming at 'knowledge integration', which Buttimer translated into a process of storytelling by individuals. The so-called *Dialogue Project* lasted from 1977 to 1988 and involved a substantial number of video-recorded autobiographical interviews with senior and retired professionals. Shared career experiences and the identification of grounds for self- and mutual understanding were central themes, but the project also explored intellectual history, the social construction of geographically-situated knowledge, humanism, values, and the relationships between natural and social sciences.

The Dialogue Project yielded a wealth of new empirical knowledge about people, places and events – unique material on which Buttimer's major conceptual reading of disciplinary history and practice was subsequently built. Her *Practice of Geography* (1983b) portrayed the career trajectories of an international selection of geographers as being the result of how structural and material circumstances were combined with personal values, skills and preferences, while *Geographers of Norden* (Hägerstrand and Buttimer, 1988) was a collection of essays on career experiences from Nordic geographers (more than a decade later, this was followed by a companion volume on the history of Swedish geography – Buttimer and Mels, 2006). With the publication of *Geography and the Human Spirit* (Buttimer, 1993), Buttimer shifted attention from personal accounts to a more general focus on the history, practice and societal context of geographical thinking, reading geographical inquiry as shaped over the centuries by the different guises of Western humanism.

Notwithstanding her personal connection to the Irish countryside, Buttimer's career has therefore always had a conspicuous international orientation. She served as Council Member of the Association of American Geographers 1974–77 and the Royal Geographical Society 1996–99, was elected member of *Academia Europaea* in 1993, and President of the International Geographical Union 2000–2004. In 1991, Buttimer returned to Ireland as the Chair of Geography at University College Dublin. Here, she continued working on agrarian life and sustainable development – issues which Buttimer thought required both international dialogue and the sustained integration of both physical and human geography knowledges.



## SPATIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Generally, Buttimer's thinking about space and place has been associated with a broadly defined humanistic geography. Yet, such labelling remains unavoidably indistinct and may even mistakenly suggest a clearly defined academic mission. By extension, it has more often than not obfuscated Buttimer's more imaginative intellectual contributions. Concerning the latter, Buttimer has offered an original reading of what humanism and humanistic geography entails.

Buttimer's early work revolted against the dehumanisation and abstract space in positivist science in at least three inter-related ways. First, she explored the term social space (*l'espace social*) as it was emerging in the borderland between French geography and sociology, and introduced it into Anglophone human geography. This would offer a guide for

an investigation of lived experience not only in a purely sociological or psychological sense then favoured in Anglo-American writings, but also in the sense of providing a physical spatial framework. Buttimer's understanding was influenced by the French scholars Maximilien Sorre and Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, who sought to integrate the 'subjective' and 'objective' components of space. Drawing on these authors, Buttimer depicted social space as a relational concept bringing out the intermingling of subjective dimensions, such as attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of place, and objective spatial environments on a variety of scales (Buttimer, 1969: 142).

Secondly, in the 1970s Buttimer was an original voice in the shaping of post-positivist thinking about space and place in the discipline of geography. By connecting to philosophical manoeuvres in existentialism and phenomenology she has played a vital role in prodding an awareness of normativity, values, the taken-for-granted, power and lived space. Inspired by diverse sources such as Bachelard, Eliade, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schütz and others, Buttimer contributed to the rethinking of spatio-temporal experience. In contrast to conventional thinking about linear clock-calendar time, mapping patterns of overt behaviour and routines, her aim was to understand environmental experience as a whole. Time-space rhythms also included the far more complex and relative dimension of embodied experiences and biological rhythms (Mels, 2004).

As suggested, a third contribution concerns a particular reading of humanism which was developed through a contextual approach to geographical knowledge production and disciplinary history. For Buttimer, the relationships between humanism and geography are as deep-seated as they are diverse: 'For each facet

of humanness – rationality or irrationality, faith, emotion, artistic genius or political prowess – there is a geography. For each geographical interpretation of the earth there are implicit assumptions about the nature of humanness' (Buttimer, 1990: 1-2). Rather than offering any clearly delineated agenda of humanistic geography, Buttimer characterises Western humanism 'as the liberation cry (*cri-de-coeur*) of humanity, voiced at times and places where the integrity of life or thought was in need of affirmation' (ibid. 2). In geography, this crucially translated into a dissatisfaction with what she perceived as the widespread abstraction of human beings and space in scientific writing: 'From whatever ideological stance it has emerged, the case for humanism has usually been made with the conviction that there must be more to human geography than the *dance macabre* of materialistically motivated robots which, in the opinion of many, was staged by the post-World War Two "scientific" reformation' (Buttimer, 1993: 47).

As such, Buttimer argued Western humanism attained distinct, though not mutually exclusive, constellations of vocational *meaning* in different contexts. Analytically (*logos*), there was a commitment to varieties of situated knowledge and discourses. Educationally (*paideia*) the impact of humanism involved a heightened engagement with the humanities. From an applied point of view (*ergon*), it has implied a firmer social and political interest in the human condition. In what is far more narrowly labelled 'humanistic geography', these different strains have intermingled in a variety of ways. However, according to Buttimer, it remains crucial to recognise that the case for humanism has typically encompassed an emphasis on critical reflection (*poesis*). This includes a concern with

ontological questions about the nature of reality and humanness and conventional ways of construing them. In contemporary human geography, this contextual responsiveness has emphasised the 'inextricable connections between thought and context, experience and expertise, and the adequacy of all our practices for the elucidation of contemporary reality' (Buttimer, 1996: 841).

Adapting the American philosopher Stephen Pepper's work, Buttimer continued to explore the different ways in which key *metaphors* (mechanism, organicism, arena/contextualism and mosaic/formism) and their poetic, cognitive and heuristic qualities were used in geography. Metaphors, as Buttimer perceived them in the 1980s, 'could be regarded as the *Dramatis Personae* of Western intellectual history, the actual narrative and plot of particular pieces staged in the material and ideological contexts in which scholars thought and practiced their professions' (Buttimer 1982: 91). This focus on cognitive style or basic worldview underlying research contrasts to more conventional accounts on the succession of paradigms. According to Buttimer, the appeal of a root metaphor lies in aesthetic, moral, emotional and experientially-grounded understandings of reality, not just in its epistemological claims. Buttimer's original contribution here was also to broaden what sometimes was conceived of as a mere succession of ideas and more narrowly defined metaphorical style, to a consideration of *milieu*, i.e., the mediation of a scholar's personal background and the structural influence of social environment, power, and public interests. Related to this is what she dubs the variation in *horizons* of geographical inquiry, ranging from local to global concern.

Finally, in order to explore the modes whereby the root appeal of humanism

was mediated and transformed in Western history, Buttimer discerned three mytho-poetic figures: *Phoenix* (offering the symbol of new life and emancipation from the formerly taken-for-granted), *Faust* (the building of institutions and formal structures) and *Narcissus* (reflection and questioning). These symbolise what Buttimer from the 1990s onwards probed as broad themes in a cyclically-recurring drama in human experience, material life and thought. Rather than a rigid taxonomy or an expression of teleology, this heuristic trilogy of themes and cycles connected to Buttimer's earlier efforts to contextualise geographical thought and practice in society.

All of these interpretive entries (the diachronic perspective of Phoenix-Faust-Narcissus, and the synchronic Meaning-Metaphor-Milieu and Horizon) served to gain personal, contextualised and more macro-perspective understandings of geographical knowledge production. Methodologically, part of this effort was based on a self-reflexive, narrative-oriented approach, which has resulted in an oral, video-recorded history of the field complemented with an archival record of transcripts: The Dialogue Project and its subsequent offspring were instrumental for the exploration of (auto)biography and personal relationships to societal and geographical context.

Dialogue also helped shape an understanding of sustainable development. In the 1980s and 1990s, Buttimer coordinated major international research projects on sustainable landscapes, which brought out the significance of scale in the implementation of EU policies, and issues concerning communication (e.g., Buttimer, 2001). Here, questions of dialogue returned in view of the highly contrasting taken-for-granted outlooks on planning and development that were

held by researchers in different European countries.

## KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

Buttimer's earlier examination of social space and geographical experience, decades of practising the method of dialogue and (auto)biography as well as her original understanding and analytical framing of disciplinary history and change, are widely recognised as humanistically-gearred contributions to thinking about space and place. They have also been subject to criticism.

Critical appraisal of Buttimer's work can be traced back to some central controversies associated with the revival of humanistic geography. According to some critics, there were antinomies involved in Buttimer's early efforts to wed existentialist and phenomenological philosophy with more conventional, largely positivist methods. This uneasy arrangement was identified in the mapping of social space, and in Buttimer's approach to time-space rhythms, which explored how the conceptual world of lived experience, dwelling and subjectivity can be explored empirically with techniques of time-geography and spatial analysis.

In partial contradiction to these criticisms, a parallel debate suggested that Buttimer tended to misconstrue phenomenology as an anti-scientific position, which is concerned with the integrity of human experience and rejects any causal subject-object relationships. Accordingly, her flexible view of phenomenology as

a perspective rather than a disciplined method with clearly operational procedures for ascertaining the nature of human experience has been questioned. Finally, the central phenomenological concept of intentionality in Buttimer's work is sometimes seen as erroneously being reduced to a psychological level, which fails to get beyond the individual subject. This critique usually highlights the pervasiveness of a kind of mentalism, in which subjectivity and the world of ideas tend to underrate the importance of material practice.

This also raised more specific questions about the nature of socialisation processes, including systems of power and interest, behind particular value claims and knowledges. The increasing popularity of structuration theory in the 1980s not only welcomed a serious engagement with knowledgeable and capable human beings, but also criticised

humanists for neglecting society's structural properties involved in the reproduction of human behaviour. Several critics noted that Buttimer remained far too silent on these issues. Granted, in her work, the individual was not portrayed as an isolated being, but rather as an existentially self-aware person, immersed in social space and practice, and inevitably engaged in the creation of community and social life. Yet, as several commentators have argued, Buttimer failed to offer an explanatory moment which would try to explain how constraints were socially produced, why certain projects and orchestrations became dominant, or why and how abstractions of time and space came to dominate lived time-space. It may be worth noting that this critique tends to be aimed at Buttimer's theoretical writings, rather than her more firmly societal contextualisation of geographical knowledge production.

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