



## In search of the landscape theory of Torsten Hägerstrand

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## In search of the landscape theory of Torsten Hägerstrand

Hägerstrand is one of the internationally most well-known Nordic social scientists of the twentieth century and has greatly influenced the development of a broad range of research areas, such as innovation studies, demography, transport geography, social geography, and, not least, time geography, which he and his students developed in the late 1960s and 1970s (Ellegård, 2018). While his relevance to ‘the quantitative turn’ in human geography has been acknowledged, his role as a landscape scholar has rarely been internationally recognised. As an illustrative example, only nine full-length papers in *Landscape Research* cited Hägerstrand prior to the papers in this special section, and most of them only in passing, with one reference each. The use of his work, however, hint at several different aspects of Hägerstrand’s theories being of value for the field, for example, his ambition to go beyond the nature–society divide (Stenseke, 2016), his ideas on territorial competence (e.g. Vesterager & Lindergaard, 2012), his conceptualisation of space (Nelson, 2017) and, of course, his theoretical development of the ‘processual landscape’ (*förloppslandskap* in Swedish), which Emmelin employed for landscape scenarios already in 1996 (Emmelin, 1996). One reason for his moderate influence on landscape studies, beyond the Nordic countries, is that some of his key publications on the processual landscape and place were published only in Swedish (see Latham, 2020, for a complementary discussion). This leaves much of Hägerstrand’s landscape theory to be explored and to be brought into a dialogue with other more recent theoretical developments within geography and landscape studies.

However, Hägerstrand’s comprehensive and innovative approach to landscape is as alluring as it is difficult to fully grasp. First, the sheer complexity he aimed for, and the multidisciplinary knowledge it required, could be a reason, as Sörlin (2020) suggests, that he did not form a school. With landscape, Hägerstrand aimed for a language to describe the interplay between society and nature, and to study a wide range of (abiotic, biotic, or societal) phenomena on equal terms (Hägerstrand, 1993, see also Stenseke, 2020). Furthermore, he used landscape to express his increasing concern for sustainable development, which according to him, required a far better understanding of the geography of the complex interactions between society and nature. As a strong advocate of interdisciplinary research, Hägerstrand brought forward the landscape as an integrative concept. Furthermore, in his writings on landscape and place in the 1990s and 2000s, he drew attention to the taken for granted materiality of the inhabited world, its implications for an ecological understanding of our everyday environment and for sustainable development. In his posthumously published book (Hägerstrand, 2009), he elaborated in more detail on the existence and materiality of ‘complement spaces’, some of which are made up of air and water, which are in turn part and piece of the continuous human–nature interaction. While such a perspective might echo discussions in ecology, Hägerstrand’s emphasis on everyday life and frequent references to phenomenologists are noteworthy in this book. In light of his ambitions to capture an ‘all-ecology’, one can easily feel intimidated, as it reveals a limited capacity to cover all facets of life. A more disciplined approach makes the everyday struggle as a researcher more comfortable.

Second, if landscape was used primarily in the 1980s and 1990s by Hägerstrand to frame his intellectual endeavour (with a stronger emphasis on place than before), it was nevertheless a theme that related to his previous research and practice (Stenseke, 2020). By using the concept of landscape, he returned to his roots in regional geography, this time with a (partly imaginary) set of tools for a more structured examination (Hägerstrand, 1983). This interest in landscape furthermore had never been entirely absent

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during his career, though it might have been set aside in the biographical notes as an anomaly within the writing of one of the pioneers of the quantitative revolution in geography. Symptomatically, Sörlin (2020) divides Hägerstrand's work into three phases, but notes that the third has the characteristics of synthesis rather than a new path. Landscape played a key role for this synthesis, as Hägerstrand explained in 1983 publications, in which he brings landscape to the forefront as his key concept:

Today I maintain a world-picture in my mind, which I feel to be sufficiently coherent and productive as a source of questions and insights for keeping me busy during my remaining days. It rests on that central part of the geographical tradition, which tries to grasp phenomena where they appear as neighbours in the given world instead of separated out and removed from their situational ties as the dominating species of scientists prefer to do. But it radically departs from the tradition by assuming that people and things are processes and that the essence of any geographic now (a landscape in its fullness, if you like) is not best understood in terms of its stable individuality but in terms of its double face of graveyard and cradle of creation' (Hägerstrand, 1983, p. 239).

The notion of graveyard and cradle of creation clearly relates to his time geographic approach. Thus, as Latham (2020) makes clear, his seemingly abstract diagrammatical thinking needs to be understood as part of his landscape theory, which makes the ambition to interpret his understanding of landscape even more daunting.

Landscape, finally, is something that Hägerstrand explores only in theory. Sörlin (2020) even refers to the processual landscape as 'a utopian idea', which comes close to Hägerstrand's own account (Hägerstrand, 2000). He thus left others to translate his ideas into empirical studies. As this requires active (and thus innovative) translation and can perhaps never be done to its full magnitude, it would be a mistake to only provide one such attempt. Yet, for the application to come close to Hägerstrand's ambitions, one thing needs to be considered. His consistent focus on geography *as such*. While other geographers have sought inspiration in related disciplines, Hägerstrand famously searched for postulates given by the constraints of the time-geography of everyday life. However, this search for a 'pure geography', to use the words of Granö (1929/1997), was not primarily a search for the foundational stones for a new ivory tower, but as a tool to be able to communicate and collaborate with other disciplines. His radically reductive approach aimed to provide a backbone for a rich description of the everyday world beyond disciplinary divides (see Latham, 2020). This makes Hägerstrand's writing compelling, but also challenging as the texts shuttle between extreme reductionism and examples in which a multitude of disciplinary perspectives are brought into conversation to reveal the rich constellations of the world.

In order to overcome some of these challenges, we brought together an interdisciplinary and international assembly of scholars to explore his theories together. The event, which marked the 100th birthday of Hägerstrand, had a particular focus on his understanding of landscape. This special section is a result of the symposium. Given the challenges of grasping Hägerstrand's landscape theory through his oeuvre, as discussed above, we are very pleased to be able to present three papers, which can support further interpretations and elaborations of Hägerstrand's notion of landscape.

The papers in this special section trace the geography of Hägerstrand in three complementary ways. Hägerstrand appears as (an unconventional) historian (Sörlin, 2020), a social scientist (Latham, 2020) and a sustainability scientist (Stenseke, 2020), but also as someone who moves beyond these categories, with the support of his innovative approach to geography.

Marie Stenseke offers an overview of Hägerstrand's conceptual development concerning human-environment interactions, in which his understanding of landscape plays a key role. As Stenseke notes, environmental challenges were a primary concern for Hägerstrand throughout most of his career, and this concern forms a base for Stenseke's reading of his 'all-ecology'. She concludes that Hägerstrand's specific emphasis on the materiality of the processes shaping the land, and on landscape as an integrative framework, resonates with contemporary theoretical strands yet still has its own niche, which has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Alan Latham elaborates further on the relative invisibility of Hägerstrand's theories and methodologies in contemporary social science, which is partly due to a critique of his abstract graphs and

a 'nervousness towards diagrams'. Latham argues that Hägerstrand's graphs differ from other models, which were derived from the quantitative revolution, as they 'explicitly focused on the individual'. Further, he explores recent innovative examples in which diagrammatic thinking has brought geography back to a social science governed by textual theories. By doing so, the paper offers an excellent foundation for not only writing about, but also exploring ways to draw the dense materiality of the processual landscape or the matter of everyday life.

Finally, Sverker Sörlin offers an interpretation of Hägerstrand as a historian, a study that sheds further light on Hägerstrand's notion of history, time, and process. Sörlin argues that Hägerstrand, as a historian, went beyond the study of action and interaction to capture the interplay between events and actions. Hägerstrand does not, Sörlin notes, offer the conventional historical explanations of forces or intentions; instead, he traces geography (or phenomena) through time. Again, the socio-material focus of Hägerstrand comes to the forefront, in an approach to history, which aims to go beyond a society–nature divide. In addition, the paper offers a historical account of Hägerstrand's career, which reveals his multi-disciplinary sources of inspiration and his constant ambition for an interdisciplinary understanding of the world.

The three papers, especially when read in combination, provide a basis for further examinations of Hägerstrand's landscape theory. We hope that these texts will inspire more innovative and empirical studies of the processual landscape.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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*Mattias Qviström* is professor in landscape architecture, especially spatial planning, at SLU in Uppsala. Qviström combines relational geography and landscape theory in ethnographic and/or historical studies in order to scrutinize contemporary planning. His current studies focus on urban densification, recreational mobilities and recreational planning, and the landscape/planning history of the welfare state. Torsten Hägerstrand's landscape theory has been an important source of inspiration for his work since the late 1990s.

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