

RGS acceptance speech
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It is a great honour to be chosen to receive this medal from the RGS and IBG. This is not merely because of the distinction of this society and its history, but also because the kind of research that I carry out in human and economic geography is a scientific endeavor that is deeply linked to a community of scholars who are committed to making a better world by understanding its geographies.

In scientific terms, human and economic geographers have long attempted to understand patterns of human activity – the “where” of the human condition. But more recently, we have moved to another stage. We are increasingly revealing not just the pattern of human activity, but how the places that we live in, where we do things, whom we associate with, and the natural and physical environments we come from shape our very biographies and what we are able to become as individuals and as groups.

The persistence of place and geography is something of a rediscovery . For more than a century, the perspective of “modernism” held that we would surpass the influence of place through schooling and other institutions of modern life. This turns out to be partially true, but only partially.

The interactions of people in places shape the institutions of modern life. Politics, culture, society, tastes are – as is obvious – not homogeneous across this planet. That’s not just a residue of the past – it is an ongoing way that humans in places, interacting with one another, create contemporary difference. Some of this difference can be shared, and is part of the great potential of global exchange that can enrich us all. Some of these institutions are good – when they create ways of life that offer freedom, opportunity, peace and progress. Some such institutions lock people in places that are oppressive, stagnant, and deny people to realize their potential.

Geography’s scientific progress in explaining both differentiation and exchange has been nothing short of astonishing in the last few decades. We can tease out people and place relationships with models and evidence that we never had before. Every day brings new and exciting scientific insights into the human condition, especially in my sub-discipline of economic geography.

And this links to our purpose in this world. The uneven distribution of opportunity, freedom, human realization, and progress is not only unfortunate for those who are locked in the places with big problems. Humanity’s global progress is threatened whenever significant parts of humanity cannot benefit from peace, opportunity, and expansion of capacities. Geography’s scientific advances are there to help us understand the sources of this unevenness but also how to spread opportunity, peace, progress and self-determination. Right now, we face global challenges that

come from resentment and unequal opportunity across places and within places. Geographers are central to spreading the opportunities from development to more people and places, but also to finding new types of development that respect humanity's differences and the planet we inhabit.