Radical Theory/Critical Praxis

Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?

Edited by Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin
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Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Academic Geography Beyond the Academy?

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Introduction

For the past thirty five years, geographers have systematically engaged with and developed radical and critical theories of social, economic and environmental issues, and undertaken critical praxis. Pioneered in the late 1960s as a reaction to the politically sterile and peopleless quantitative geography and a desire to enact fundamental changes to the organisation and structures of society, radical geography engaged with Marxist theory to envisage a new kind of human geography (see Peet 1977). As a consequence, at this time there was hyperbole about revolutions of relevance (Dickinson and Clarke 1972) and ‘social responsibility’ (Prince 1971). In Britain, such ‘revolutions’ were set against a context of geographical concern for the impoverished dating from the inter-war years and increased concern about the ‘Third World’. In America, protest against the Vietnam war, and numerous civil rights demonstrations and rioting concerned with the impoverishment of urban populations and race relations provided similar impetus. According to Dickinson and Clarke (1972) this radical shift in emphasis and ideology of research (not necessarily methodology) was driven by three main aims: (1) to highlight socially relevant issues at ‘home’ as well as abroad; (2) to place greater emphasis on the ends rather than the means of research; (3) and to strive to influence those making policy, in addition to the general public. This is encapsulated in David Smith’s (1976, 84) impassioned plea:
We are beginning to realize that masses of numerical data and sharp analytical tools are not in themselves enough: basic mechanisms for resource allocation and real-income distribution must be changed if spatial inequality/discrimination/injustice is to be reduced or eliminated. This, in its turn, requires changes in personal and professional values. We cannot retreat into abstract analysis and ethical neutrality. The real world requires involvement in social change, for we are among the ‘actors’ ourselves. As part of the problem, we must participate in the solution.

In many ways, however, the intended shift in the actor status of geographers manifested itself in two main forms – on the one hand, the radicalisation of both the writing of academics and the material taught to students (who in turn would go forth into the world and make change) and, on the other, via engagements with policy and policy makers, with geographers seen to be ‘the best equipped intellectually to interpret social goals in terms of planning outcomes’ (Blowers 1974, 36). In contrast, participation, specifically related to notions of action and activism, appears to have been somewhat restrained, particularly in terms of direct contact and co-operation with those traditionally deemed to be ‘under study’ or ‘the victims’. In other words, social change would be directed by geographers distant from the locales and people whose lives they wished to transform, with their attention being directed at those in power, specifically those who could change policy, and to the students who would become the next generation of policy makers and shakers. Only a few geographers, such as Bill Bunge (1971, 1973) and Bob Colenutt (1970), appeared to take the step ‘onto the streets’.

Fuller (1999) notes how, in developing his ‘geobiography’ of his home area in Detroit, Bunge achieved a ‘redefinition of the research problematic and intellectual commitment of the researcher away from a smug campus career, to one incorporating a dedicated community perspective which pivots around what Howe (1954) in another context called a ‘spirit of iconoclasm’’ (Merrifield 1995, 57). This redefinition, however, was an uncomfortable process. Through the embrace of such a perspective, Bunge’s ‘critical positioning’ (Merrifield 1995, 52) manifested itself through an awareness that his ‘life had been spent buried in books’, and a desire to ‘bring global problems down to earth, to the scale of people’s normal lives’ (Bunge 1979, 170 cited in Merrifield 1995, 53). As Merrifield highlights, the interaction between Bunge and the Detroit locals, his integration with them, became defined in terms of survival, or ‘the fragile thread binding logic, ethics and politics’ (1995, 54). To a degree pre-empting debates that would follow, Bunge, through his awareness of his positionality in relation to the Detroit community, questioned the ability of the researcher to empathise and situate him/herself within an impoverished community. This was encapsulated within his acceptance of the ‘big important gaps’ that would exist as a result of his inability to situate himself outside of his past. In particular, he recognised that the route of ‘survival’ would involve emotional difficulty, an honest political and intellectual commitment to the expedition, and dogged determination (Merrifield 1995).

Geographers’ engagement with Marxism and limited forms of radical praxis continued throughout the 1970s, particularly after the publication of David Harvey’s influential ‘Social Justice and the City’ (1972), accompanied by other projects that drew on alternative theories of social justice (e.g. Smith 1977). However, in the 1980s, radical geographers’ preoccupation with Marxism began to wane (though it remains a central
philosophical position in the discipline; see Castree 1999, Smith 2000, Harvey 2000, and Merrifield 2003) as interest developed in other critical social theories, notably structuration theory (e.g. Thrift 1983; Gregory and Urry 1985), political economy (Peet and Thrift 1989), realism (Sayer 1984) and feminism (e.g. Massey 1984; Women and Geography and Study Group 1984). Of these, feminist geography, in particular, drew attention back to issues of praxis, raising fundamental questions concerning ontology, epistemology and methodology.

As summarised by the Women and Geography and Study Group (1997), throughout the 1980s and early 1990s feminist geographers examined, in detail, ways of knowing, ways of asking, ways of interpreting, and ways of writing (also see Jones et al. 1997; Moss 2002). Through its theoretical focus on the imbalance of power-relations in society, particularly but not exclusively in relation to patriarchal relations, feminist praxis concerns not only studying those relations but challenging them, seeking an academic praxis that is emancipatory and empowering for the participants in the research. This recognises that the research process itself is loaded with power-relations between researcher and researched that need to be carefully thought about and negotiated. Here, there is a need for the researcher to adopt a reflexive stance, considering their own positionality and how it might be mitigating the research being undertaken. This reflexivity recognises that the production of knowledge is situated, shaped by the values and knowledges of the researcher and the complex social relations that exist between researcher and researched. Of course, these ideas posed a serious challenge to traditional conceptions of research as objective, value-free and impassionate and not unsurprisingly were, and have continued to be, hugely influential across the discipline. As a consequence, feminist praxis has been drawn on widely by those undertaking research in relation to other oppressed groups and issues.

In the 1990s, feminist and political-economic approaches were themselves complemented by, or re-worked in relation to (or in some cases replaced by) postmodern (e.g. Soja 1995), poststructuralist (e.g. Doel 1999), postcolonial (e.g. Blunt and McEwan 2002) and psychoanalytic (e.g. Sibley 1995; Social and Cultural Geography 4, no. 3) theories. In the main these approaches work as theoretic critiques of academic practice and society, rather than driving ‘on the streets’ empirical research. This is not to say that, as Dempsey and Rowe (this volume) argue, that they cannot be used as theoretic toolkits for underpinning activism or other kinds of praxis, but that such radical use is relatively rare (also see Houston and Pulido 2002; Sibley this volume). Indeed, postmodern approaches have been criticised severely for their eschewal of the concept of ‘truth’ which is seen to create a political field in which justice and rights become slippery and relative (see Mitchell, this volume). Similarly, poststructural approaches have been criticised for their supposed undermining of organised resistance as they destabilise the very categories (e.g. class, gender, race, sexuality) around which mobilisation might occur (Knopp 1995).

In contrast, and partly as a reaction to the perceived retreat into the ivory tower away from both policy and the streets, other radical/critical geographers from the mid-1990s on have begun to explore more activist-led research. Here, there has been a concern with the academic/activist divide, surprisingly a previously little discussed interface (see Kitchin and Hubbard 1999). Indeed, despite Bunge’s ‘step onto the streets’, until this time few geographers had married their empirical research, activism and writing strategy. This has started to change, with for example, Chouinard (1994), Routledge (1996) and Maxey
(1998) arguing that academics have a social responsibility, given their training, access to information, and freedom of expression, to make a difference on the ground (rather than contribute from a distance). As Chouinard (1994, 5) argued this move to activist/academic identity:

means putting ourselves ‘on the line’ as academics who will not go along with the latest ‘fashion’ simply because it sells, and who takes seriously the notion that ‘knowledge is power’. It means as well personal decisions to put one’s abilities at the disposal of groups at the margins of and outside academia. This is not taking the ‘moral high ground’ but simply saying that if you want to help in struggles against opposition you have to ‘connect’ with the trenches.

This is not necessarily to say that activist research is ‘better’ or morally superior than that conducted at a distance, but rather that it should be considered as a serious potential course of action (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999).

This focus on academics as professional activists (rather than activism being seen as separate from academia and conducted away from the university) has been accompanied by an exploration of participatory approaches to research (e.g. Fuller et al. 2003; Kesby 2000; Kitchin 1999). Again building from feminist praxis, participatory action research, for example, aims to build a deontological approach (judges research according to whether the researcher would wish it upon herself/himself, and whether the participants are treated with the respect due to them) by joining with a group to explore a particular issue and to effect an action, some social change. Here, the group takes an active role in the whole research process, from ideas to hypotheses to data generation to analysis and interpretation, to writing the final report, to using the findings to lobby for change. The role of the academic, then, is not simply as expert but as primarily as enabler or facilitator, and the role of the participants is one of co-researcher or co-activist. This arrangement allows the research to become more reflexive, reciprocal and representative (Kitchin 1999). Here co-researcher expertise is acknowledged as equal but from a different frame of reference than the academic, with co-researchers occupying insider positions (their knowledge on a particular subject is tacit, practical led, from first hand experience) and academics occupying outsider positions (they have specialised skill, systematic knowledge, are theory led, and based upon second-hand experience). Such a research strategy works to empower participants with skills and places the academic in the community.

In crude terms, we would posit that these rapid changes in theoretical underpinnings of critical/radical geographical research are due to the disciplinary trend, evident from the late 1960s onwards, of geographers increasingly drawing theoretical inspiration from across the social sciences (rather than natural sciences to which it had traditionally looked). Consequently, geography’s theoretic development has largely mirrored changes occurring in other disciplines (although often occurring later and in quicker succession), and this was particularly the case from the late 1980s onwards with the so-called ‘cultural turn’ (see Philo 1991; Hubbard et al. 2002). The nature of these theoretic changes meant that the preoccupation with capital as the dominant shaper of society, evident in the 1960s and 70s, was replaced with a broader focus on different forms of power from the 1980s onwards. As such, structuralist and materialist accounts were complemented or replaced by theories more sensitive to human agency, relationality, and
contingency. Further, an emphasis on studying the geographies experienced and created by the majority was supplemented with a focus on those groups on the margins of contemporary society. In both cases there has been ontological and epistemological shifts that has required new ways of thinking about methodology and praxis, foregrounding issues of positionality, reflexivity, situatedness, empowerment, and so on.

While this extremely generalised, potted history and crude explanation glosses over complex theoretical developments and debates within the discipline, it illustrates the present-day diversity of theoretic allegiances and praxis of radical and critical geographers. So what unites them? Why group them together at all? We would contend that what unites them is their ideology – a shared commitment to: expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places; challenge and change those inequalities; and bridge the divide between theorisation and praxis. In other words, radical and critical praxis, while a form of applied geography, differs from what is commonly held to be applied geography (as typified by the journal of that name) because of its ideological intent; its challenge rather than support of the status quo. As such, it stands in opposition to calls from non-radical/critical geographers for the discipline to become more ‘relevant’ and ‘applied’ by serving the interests of the state and business through consultancy (exemplified by Ron Martin 1999, or by Reg Golledge in his AAG Newsletter columns 2000-01). The differences between approaches lie in how they conceptualise the ways in which inequalities should be theorised and exposed; what kind of change is required (from liberal ideas of inclusion through to radical and fundamental societal restructuring); and how theory should be made to work. In this book we are predominately interested in the latter – the extent to which geographers are making a difference, why this may, or may not be the case, and perhaps, most crucially, illustrating ways in which geographers can make a difference beyond the academy.

These questions seem to have gained salience in recent years, particularly the former. As noted, above, there is a large literature that has focused on forms of critical praxis. This has been complemented more recently by published papers (e.g. Blomley 1994; Chouinard 1994; Castree 2000) and a number of conferences and conference sessions that have started to question the difference geographical praxis makes – the degree to which it actually changes the world. Indeed, we think it is fair to say that there are a growing number of radical/critical geographers who have become increasingly dissatisfied with the rhetorical but perceived inert nature of much radical/critical geography, and who are asking whether the ideals, and ideological aims and objectives envisaged by the pioneer radical geographers, and taken up by successive waves of radical/critical geographers, have been realised in any kind of meaningful way. Many are now asking whether radical/critical geographers have really managed to move beyond the academy to become engaged in policy debates or emancipatory praxis with everyday people in everyday places who face prejudice and oppression. Has the development of radical/critical geography all been in vain, a purely ideological, theoretical project that fails to deliver on its ideological intent?

**Radical/critical geography beyond the academy?**

Of course, the extent to which radical/critical geography fails to make a difference beyond the academy, depends on what is meant by ‘beyond the academy’, what is meant by ‘difference’, and how success is measured!
For us, engaging with pursuits ‘beyond the academy’ means engaging in academic-related activities that take place beyond the immediate confines of the university; some kind of interaction with the wider community. Of course, in these terms, nearly all research is conducted ‘beyond the academy’. As noted, what differentiates radical/critical geography is that rather than simply wishing to study, it wishes to change – to make a difference. Again, as already noted, applied geography similarly aims to affect change. However, whereas applied geography reproduces the status quo, radical/critical geography challenges it. The difference radical/critical geography aims to make, then, is to transform, in emancipatory and empowering terms, social relations. And this is where the concern over the extent to which radical/critical geography makes a difference lies – whether the difference radical/critical geographers make is through their academic praxis.

As Kitchin and Hubbard (1999) note, there is much anecdotal evidence, for example evident on the Critical Geography Forum mailing list, that many who would identify as radical or critical geographers are involved in seeking to make a difference beyond the academy through pursuits that aim to enact social, political and economic change. For example, as hunt saboteurs, anti-roads protestors, green activists, charity workers, homeless advocates, and so on. In addition, there are those that are involved in local politics as local councillors, lobbyists, community representatives, magistrates, and so on. Moreover, as Maxey (1999, this volume; see also Routledge, this volume) argues, given that our social world is produced through everyday acts and thoughts that we all engage in, and that activism is a process of reflecting and acting upon this condition (for academics informed by their work), at one level all geographers (indeed everybody) are activists. Geographers then are making a difference beyond the academy! Moreover, and as all the chapters in this volume illustrate, they are undoubtedly using their skills and knowledges as academics in undertaking these roles.

That said, there still seems to be some scholarly ‘distance’ maintained between geographers’ activism and their teaching, research and publishing activities; some boundary that stops their activism and academic roles becoming one (or at least substantially overlapping). In this sense, geographers’ radicalness still seems curtailed, set a distance, and little expressed through their academic praxis. Here, critical praxis seems to consist of little else beyond pedagogy and academic writing. Potentially it might consist of calling for changes in policy. It may consist of research praxis that aims to be more reflexive or emancipatory or empowering (changing the conditions of the research process but rarely seeking wider social change). But it rarely consists of a marriage between academic and activist roles, in which one’s private and professional attempts to change the world are not divided into distinct and separable roles and tasks.

**Threats to critical praxis**

If radical/critical geography as critical praxis has largely failed to move out of the classroom or the pages of journals and books, or beyond research strategies that aim to be more reflexive or situated, then it seems reasonable to ask why? How is it, that privately many radical/critical geographers are activists, yet there empirical research and their activities as academics is largely divorced from such a role? We feel that, alongside many other negative forces at work on a variety of scales, there are two main reasons, both structural.
On one level, shifting from academic to activist/academics arguably works to diminish the role and power of the academy. As Bourdieu (1988) has noted, the distinction between the ‘ivory tower’ and the world beyond has been an important strategy in maintaining the pedagogical authority of education, an authority that is seen to be compromised when academics attempt to bridge these two worlds. Taking academic practices and insights beyond the academy and making them available in sharable, doable ways undermines the system which provides and maintains academics’ power. It also undermines the value of academic knowledges as opposed to alternative ways of gaining understanding. Hence, while critical/radical geographers acknowledge that academic knowledge(s) are produced, situated and politicised, we would argue that they frequently seek to maintain the division between ‘gaze’ and action in an attempt to (re)assert their academic credentials (Kitchin and Hubbard 1999; Wilton, this volume). Others, for example, Don Mitchell (this volume), seek to maintain the distinction by drawing clear boundaries that demarcate the role of academics. For him, an academic’s primary role is to be an ‘academic’ – a producer of knowledge – not an activist; it is to supply the theory and observations to be used by activists in challenging the status quo, not to become an activist.

At a different level, the political economy of the education sector has been undergoing steady restructuring given the pressures of neoliberal imperatives. In general terms, there has been a corporatisation of universities, with the adoption of management practices from competitive businesses and the ethos of flexible accumulation dynamics. Universities now compete against one another for ‘customers’ (e.g. students, public and private research monies) through their ‘products’ offered (e.g. courses, skilled staff), and also seek ways to generate their own income (e.g. patents, campus companies, consultancy, endowed chairs) to fund their activities. In effect, universities are part of the growing ‘knowledge economy’. Moreover, there has been a drive to transform public universities from sites of learning per se to institutions that more directly serve the wider interests of state, industry, and the public (see Bassett 1996; Mitchell 1999; Readings 1996; Castree and Sparke 2000). Accompanying this shift has been a drive to make these institutions more ‘open’ and accountable to the public. Here, the issue of tangibility and visibility is important – to be able to demonstrate accountability in some kind of quantifiable way. Consequently there has been the introduction of discourses of corporate accountancy, where educational activities and outputs are quantified and counted around a parallel discourse of ‘excellence’ (Castree and Sparke 2000). As Demeritt (2000, 313) states:

the neoliberal discourse of public accountability has sought to make accountability synonymous with cost-effectiveness, public needs with the demands of paying customers, and public relevance with wealth generation and the research needs of policy making.

In the UK, for example, this has led to the development of a massive accounting culture/industry, including the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), peer-review of funded projects, teaching quality audits, and assessment of postgraduate programs, with rewards in the way of financial incentives to those who perform well under the designated criteria and penalties of restricted funding or exclusion from funding lines for those that perform poorly.
This drive towards a ‘free market-economy’ educational sector through increased productivity, efficiency and accountability is having a number of effects on the ways in which universities operate, work loads and work conditions, and types and amounts of outputs. For example, it is increasingly common for individual departments to become cost centres and the university to operate as an internal market, where all activities – time, output, teaching, administration and so on – are quantified and balanced, and costs paid for lighting, heating, room space and so on. In addition, it is common for staff to be set levels of ‘approved’ productivity: targets on the number of articles and in which journals, or targets for research monies and from what sources. Moreover, in some cases, institutions are pressuring staff to adopt certain kinds of research profiles, namely that which is seen to be more applied, instrumental, practical, socially ‘relevant’ (e.g. relates to policy), and marketable to government and business, devaluing ‘pure’, basic, and, more crucially, in relation to arguments set out above, activist research.

Furthermore, it is evident that the university labour market is going through some profound changes. In particular, there has been a marked increase in the employment of contract staff and informal employment of postgraduates. In the UK, it is estimated that forty percent of all academic posts are contract positions on fixed term, short term or rolling, renewable contracts, and 82 per cent of all new posts are on a contract basis (Shelton et al. 2001). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reports that in the US, non-tenure track faculty now account for approximately 50 per cent of all appointments in the university sector, and about 38 per cent of all faculty appointments are part-time posts (cited in Yates 2000). These contract posts are often poorly paid, insecure, with few rights and benefits; they are often undervalued, marginalised and exploited within institutions despite their central role in the delivery of teaching and completion of research projects (Shelton et al. 2001). This uncertain environment, we would contend, breeds conformist and ‘safe’ research.

Against this background, and somewhat ironically, arguments have been made concerning the lack of critical geographies focusing on the university and academy itself (see Castree 2002). For example, there has been little analysis of how the university disciplines the disciplines (and the academic actors within) through webs of power. There has been little analysis of what might be termed the performative and politicised ‘dance of the academic’, wherein academics can be perceived as being caught in a series of different ‘dances’ (teacher, supervisor, mentor, administrator, committee member, chairperson, researcher, writer, editor, reviewer, adviser, examiner, manager, conference organiser, activist), set to different ‘tunes’ (university, students, colleagues, collaborators, contributors, publishers, committees, academic bodies, research and funding agencies, research participants) (see Kitchin 2004). Finally, there has been little analysis of how the modern academic has been coerced into unquestioningly self-disciplining and exploiting their own labour for gain, what these ‘gains’ might be, or perhaps more importantly, who ultimately benefits.

These two structural constraints, the desire to maintain the power of the academy in knowledge production and the desire to shape the education system for the purposes of the status quo, work to delimit and limit the work of radical/critical geographers. They pressure academics to produce certain kinds of knowledge and to undertake particular kinds of praxis. As noted, this pressure is enforced through the application of penalties. These range from constrained promotion (see Sibley, this volume) and failure to secure
tenure, to unofficial censorship (through papers being rejected), and so on. In other words, as Cloke (this volume) discusses, being an activist/academic can be an uncomfortable position, it is a role that can be constraining, it is a role that can position one awkwardly within a department/discipline that values some kinds of research more than others, and it is a role that can limit or curtail a career. That said, for many people it is increasingly a role that is seen as worthwhile and imperative – the outcomes override the limitations. Moreover, and again as many of the chapters herein illustrate vividly, they are finding interesting and creative ways to make their efforts ‘count’ inside the academy as well as outside, through, for example, commodifying their activism into academic products, securing research funding for their activist projects, or finding ways to balance different roles.

**The conference, the book**

It is within the context outlined above that the ‘Beyond the Academy? Critical Geographies in Action’ conference was convened at Northumbria University in September 2001. Through paper presentations and workshops delegates explored issues surrounding the potential for, and pitfalls of, putting critical geography into action, and the politics, ethics and practicalities critical geographers face in feeding into policy, engaging in activism, undertaking consultancy work, contributing to local/national debates/politics, and in striving to engender change in local communities. Inspired by this conference, and including a number of contributions by its participants, plus other commissioned chapters, this e-book brings together a number of academics who have (1) been involved in contemporary debates over how successful radical/critical geographers have been in providing ideologically-grounded, engaged praxis, (2) started to think through how a more ‘relevant’ set of geographies can be enacted, and (3) sought to make a difference through their own critical praxis beyond the academy. Authors were invited to write about their own work beyond the academy, and to reflect on three issues in particular: the notion of what it means to be a radical/critical geographer (in the context of ideological and epistemological positions and the constraints of societal and institutional changes); concerns, tensions, contradictions and pitfalls of working beyond the academy; and the ways in which re-radicalised radical/critical geographies can (and do) make differences in the world at large. The following chapters, then, provide a series of discursive interventions into the nature and practice of radical/critical geographies, questioning how it might develop in productive ways that fulfil its ideological intent.

It is fair to say that this book has been subject to some of the structural constraints we outline above. As editors, our initial impulse was to seek a publishing contract with a major publisher – to capitalise on the academic value of the conference papers by commodifying the knowledge expressed within a book that would be valued by university administrators (as a recognisable, ‘legitimate’ product). Yes, we got carried away in the ‘academic moment’. To that end, we identified the papers and the authors that we thought would hold currency (and which fitted together to provide a coherent text) – itself a deeply political exercise – and approached prospective authors and wrote a book proposal. Rather than simply approach a publisher, however, and after some reflection, we decided to consider a variety of different outlets and proposed these to the prospective authors to let them help decide how the book would be published. The vast majority favoured publication in the *Antipode* book series (with RAE and tenure issues being a predominant
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factor in a number of potential contributors minds). The other options were a Praxis (e)Press book, or a special issue of various journals. The response, not from the Antipode book series editor, but from Blackwell was indicative of trends in the publishing sector. The publisher felt that while interesting and worthy, it was not prepared to test its commercial viability through publication – a ‘radical’ book series that needed to be mainstream! Fortuitously, the rejection by Blackwell eased our growing unease at publishing the papers in a fashion that reproduced the structures that many of the papers critiqued. Indeed, we were increasingly uncomfortable with the paradox concerning the relationship between the subject matter, themes, rationale and spirit of the original conference, and how these ideas would be disseminated – it was, very much, a ‘wake-up call’. The favoured second choice had been a Praxis (e)Press book and we now (more comfortably) pursued this line, despite issues about ‘currency’. It is fair to note that some authors did drop out at this point and others expressed concern as to the degree to which their work would be seen to ‘count’ by those who counted. To this end a number of key issues, notably quality and focus were worked through with the supportive and enthusiastic help of Lawrence Berg and Pamela Moss.

Taken together the authors provide a quality and focused, wide-ranging engagement with the intersections of theory and praxis, academy and beyond, within the context of the ideological bases of radical/critical geographies. In the chapters that follow, the authors use their own experiences of research, activism, consultancy and teaching – their attempts to make a difference beyond the academy – to illustrate their arguments (with many, if not all of the authors taking a strongly reflexive tone, interrogating their own thoughts and practices as a vehicle for thinking through what it means to work from an overt ideological position that seeks to make a difference). As one might expect, there are many recurring themes, but there are also marked contrasts.

The chapters

In the next chapter, Don Mitchell, approaches the issue of intervening beyond the academy from a markedly different perspective than the chapters in the remainder of the book. In short, Mitchell provides a robust call for academics to contribute to social change by effectively doing (and doing effectively) what we are employed to do – ‘good and important, and committed work, within the academy’. This call is grounded in Mitchell’s ongoing critical examination (and simultaneous protestations) of the way the US Supreme Court’s ‘Public Forum Doctrine’ (which allows for restrictions to be placed on the ‘time, place, and manner’ of protest) acts as a ‘massive abridgement’ of the right to (free) speech and assembly in the United States. He reflects on his experiences of presenting often detailed and technical material concerning this abridgement to a range of audiences, arguing that their reactions have varied from intrigue (outside the US) to getting ‘mad’ (inside the US), with many American audience members noting that the material presented had enabled them to make a (previously unrecognised) link between their own experiences in conducting protest as activists, and the latent actions/strategies of seemingly cunning and oppressive local authorities. As such, and by drawing a parallel to the work of Karl Marx (whose ‘goal was to instruct and agitate’) Mitchell argues that ‘sometimes what activists and other non-academics most need is thorough academic analysis’, especially that which ‘provides a new way of seeing, a new way of understanding the social and power relations within which people live and work’. Mitchell’s desire to, essentially, do
his job (well) via what may be considered to be ‘fat empirics’ (see Martin 2001; Wilbert and Hoskyns, this volume), is strongly informed (and compelled) by recognition of ‘what has been bequeathed us’ through previous struggles inside the academy (by the likes of Bill Bunge and Jim Blaut), struggles which continue to allow academics the time and space to think and act. As he argues, ‘my power resides precisely in the time that I have to think and to read and to write – to engage in the ‘force of abstraction’ – and then to use all that, to teach, both in the classroom and through writing and lecturing’, a (non-apologetic) consequence of which, he admits, is having very little time available for more direct activism. This desire is also linked to the need to plug the gap generated by a ‘defeatist postmodernism’ that has removed ‘truth’ as a ‘goal of radical, progressive, revolutionary change’. As such, Mitchell stresses the need for revelations of truths (‘as best we can know them at this time, and in this place’) via the uncovering of any truth’s constituents, and their moulding into ‘convincing accounts of how the world works’. For Mitchell, this is radical work, getting ‘to the root or origin’, in that, ‘without radical research, the chances of radical results are diminished’.

In Chapter Three, Jessica Dempsey and James Rowe challenge Mitchell’s argument in two ways. First, while still recognising the role of academics as theory-makers, they seek to make explicit the links between radical theory and critical, activist praxis, and second by examining and advocating poststructuralist means of enacting progressive social change and politics. In essence, their chapter is a plea for a ‘collegial rethinking of theory’s role in social movements’. Far removed from being another shot fired in the so-called ‘theory wars’, Dempsey and Rowe hope to make a difference through an impassioned focus ‘on how a number of poststructural insights can help activists and movement participants in their day-to-day struggles’ through the ability of such insights to ‘enliven the left by helping academics practice theory differently’. They attempt to do this by ‘unpacking’ a poststructuralist approach (based around the work of Foucault and Deleuze) that speaks to issues of engagement and relevance through the notion of ‘theory-as-tool-kit’. Here, the key purpose of theory is ‘intensifying struggle’, which in itself accords it a ‘deep resonance with activist knowledge production’. Here, and echoing Paul Routledge’s chapter, both ‘theory-as-tool-kit’ and ‘activist knowledge production’ are guided by a necessary appreciation of the political terrain, detachment from which means that the ‘theorist loses touch with the political spaces they should be interrogating, and the constituencies they should be dealing with’. Dempsey and Rowe suggest that the ‘tool-kit’ approach also offers an important caveat to the utility of poststructuralist thought. They suggest that ‘there are times when poststructural insights are useful to movements, and times when they are not … . Left movements have different theoretical needs at different times, and thus require different theoretical tools’. As such, and while recognising that poststructuralist theory cannot provide all the necessary tools, Dempsey and Rowe seek to outline three particular problems faced by Left activists and movements in which poststructuralist insights are particularly useful: the replication of exclusions that activists and movements are seeking to counter, by the activists and movements themselves; tension between strategic and moral vision; and the essentialization of the ‘enemy’.

This focus on theory though holds potential dangers. In the chapter that follows, David Sibley poignantly and critically reflects on his career as an academic through a psychoanalytical exploration of the ‘madness of institutions’. Specifically, he strives to make sense of how his story of research and writing has entailed a shift from ethnography
and involvement with excluded minorities (Gypsies in particular) towards a (now more negatively perceived) increased concern with theory. Sibley notes that his initial contact with Gypsies appeared to him to be ‘quite distinct’ from an academic life that (at that time) ‘was devoted to obscure exercises in spatial analysis’. Moreover, any desire to fuse the two together was truncated by a belief (now adjudged as arrogance) that few academics would be motivated to get involved with such issues ‘as a result of reading anything I might have written’. Despite this, reservations were (nervously) cast aside, and with one eye at least on the need for what he terms, ‘academic legitimacy’, Sibley embarked on the process of striving to inform his experiences through drawing on ‘good enough’ theory. The problem, as the remainder of the chapter highlights, is that ‘there is no such thing as ‘good enough’ theory when theories have to be continually produced’ as a necessary element in the academic accumulation process; the pressures to enter into the theory production process, and the various ‘rewards’ received as a result, meant that Sibley found himself ‘unable to resist a move from practical involvement to theoretical elaboration’, shifting ‘from people to texts’. Looking back, Sibley interprets this ‘tendency’ as being inescapably intertwined with changes in the university system and its increasing deference to market forces. Here he draws upon psychoanalysis to expose ‘the madness of taken-for-granted everyday practices’ within universities, and the processes of institutional change that have lead to the formation of ‘strong boundaries and hierarchies as a defence against environmental uncertainty – disorder and chaos’ – put crudely, the wrong type of ‘research’. Through these processes of change, Sibley argues that universities are increasingly characterised by the vertical organisation of activity, with power controlled at the top, and with a myriad of systems of surveillance, accountability and control being employed to ‘keep a check on deviance and resistance’. As a result, long term involvement with communities has become increasingly discouraged, penalised, offered lip-service, or just made plain near impossible as a result of what Sibley describes as ‘a kind of psychosis which accompanies the increasing insulation of academic institutions as they focus increasingly on production and the creation of value, narrowly defined by the state and the market.’ As Sibley concludes, ‘Geography, like other increasingly insulated disciplines, becomes part of the problem and the case for resistance becomes more compelling’.

Similarly, in Chapter Four, Chris Wilbert and Teresa Hoskyns reflect upon the recent invocations of yet another apparent ‘crisis’ in social and cultural geography, and human geography more generally, a crisis borne out of the very real threat to the ‘houses of knowledge’ enacted by university restructuring programmes. They suggest that crisis may be compounded by a perceived lack of contact between the inhabitants of these houses and the ‘real world’, but that, in particular, it may be seen to relate to the perceived irrelevance of human geography to policy needs/wants at all scales, and the lack of, or nervousness surrounding ‘critique’ in such work. Here they contend that, despite suggestions that there has perhaps never been a more potentially fruitful time for geographers to get involved in policy work, such work lacks a political cutting edge. For Wilbert and Hoskyns, this lack of cutting edge relates to ‘a disavowal that critique can be, indeed should be, a central aspect of engaging in policy, or indeed any other work’. What follows, by way of Adorno and his work on legitimacy and critique, is a stinging attack on the limits of current ‘relevant’ geographical enquiry. They argue that the conjoining of theory and practice is all to often ‘accidentally’ lost, that critique is all too often constrained/dismissed in the face of the perceived need for it to be acceptable, constructive
and responsible (read cuddly, not too radical/dangerous, and neoliberalist-embracing), and that ‘relevant’ work is all too often equated with being ‘legitimate’, where legitimate dictates ‘who is legitimately seen to be able to engage seriously in critique, as well as what kinds of things can be legitimately critiqued and how’. It would be all too easy (and ironic) for such views to be dismissed as yet another attack on the call for more ‘relevant’ public policy work, but the authors are clear that they ‘are not against policy focused geography per se’. What they do object to, however, is the way much policy work seemingly accepts the status quo in return for RAE ratings and research income, how supposedly ‘participatory’ initiatives are all too often undermined from their very beginning, and how radical alternatives become mired within notions of ‘relevance’ that ‘seem narrow, exclusionary and morally judgmental without being reflexive about the situatedness of such judgments’.

The following chapters describe the ways in which their authors have sought to be ‘relevant’ without necessarily succumbing to the neoliberal agendas rife in contemporary university settings. In noting the desire of many academics to make some kind of difference beyond the academy whilst remaining rooted within it, Keith Halfacree identifies two main forms of approach than can facilitate exploration of the pitfalls, problematics and potentials of such an undertaking. These are to reflect personally on our own practices (as a number of authors elsewhere in this collection have chosen to do), and/or to undertake ‘sympathetic critique of the trials and tribulations of high profile radical academics’. It is the latter that forms the basis for his chapter, where he outlines, and reflects upon, the experiences of the ‘two Georges’, McKay and Monbiot, who have researched and commented on ‘DiY culture’ in a range of media. Halfacree notes how, in spite of good connections to the groups they engage with, reception of their work ‘has often been quite hostile’. Reflection on the hostility directed towards the work of George McKay leads Halfacree to compare attempts by ‘committed’ academics to balance academic and activist identities (essentially by seeking to remove the dualistic/binary of academic and activist, becoming both, and thereby opening up space for ‘meaningful critical engagement’). He reflects upon the reception such attempts can receive from critics, who ‘operate within a more absolutist and dualistic framework’, where one can be either activist or academic, not both. This leads Halfacree to suggest that George McKay’s work is seen as largely academic and attacked either for being inappropriate due to its academic nature or, conversely, for not being academic enough. Similarly, interpretations of the work and experiences of George Monbiot leads Halfacree to draw upon Bauman’s distinction between academics as ‘legislators’ or ‘interpretors’. Halfacree uses this work to identify that the critical hostility afforded to George Monbiot emanated from his perceived, and negatively viewed, shift from ‘interpretor’ (as a journalist) to a position as internal ‘legislator’ to a DiY movement that prides itself on its non-hierarchical nature. Ultimately, Halfacree’s analysis illustrates that different strategies and tactics for the balancing of academic research and activism all hold certain difficulties. However, he suggests that reflection on our roles and identities, and how they may be interpreted can help to identify and ward off more obvious pitfalls.

The remaining chapters, to varying degrees, all take Halfacree’s first path and seek to reflect critically on the nature of developing and nurturing radical theory and engaging with critical praxis. Set against the recent calls (Castree 2002) for increased scrutiny of what happens inside the academy, and in supporting the suggestion of a ‘mental border’ that perhaps delimits geographers from ‘thinking differently about the possibilities and
limits of the university-based experience’, Paul Routledge’s chapter focuses on possible strategies that geographers might draw upon in ‘being political’. Noting his own attempts to conduct critical collaborative research that simultaneously encompasses a politics of representation (deconstructing state/elite discourses and practices) and a politics of material engagement (via involvement in networks beyond the academy), Routledge begins by drawing upon Sun Tzu’s strategies of ‘terrain’ and ‘knowing others’. The first strategy directs Routledge (through the work of Bauman and Bourdieu concerning the role and position of academics) to explore meaningful interventions both within and beyond the terrain of the (post)modern academy, whilst the latter leads him to reflect on issues of ethics and power within collaborative activist-oriented academia (or indeed, academic-oriented activism) through what he terms a ‘relational ethics of struggle’. Here, Routledge suggests that such a relational ethics is ‘attentive to the social context of the research and the researchers situatedness with respect to that context … [and is] about an intimate and critical knowledge of one’s (institutional, personal) terrain, the (cultural, political, economic) terrain of others … knowing other with whom we collaborate as well as we can, [and is] enacted in a material, embodied way’. In so doing Routledge espouses a critical geography that necessitates (simultaneous and complimentary) interventions across multiple ‘terrains’, that is flexible to changing environments, states of affairs, and events, and which is ‘strengthened through a politics of affinity born out of knowing others across academic and activist borders’.

Paul Cloke’s chapter develops these ideas further and reflects on the author’s participation in a longstanding social action project in a South African township, addressing the dilemma of how easy it is to talk and write about human geographies of ethics and justice compared to the difficulties of living out those geographies in our everyday practices. In so doing, Cloke begins by stressing that boundaries between, academy/non-academy, professional/personal, research/everyday life are essentially fluid and dynamic, leading him to question where ‘beyond the academy’ is! However, rather than focusing on these binary divisions, Cloke seeks to explore the processes of moving into ‘contact spaces’, spaces that can just as equally be formed through everyday life as through research projects or a committed focus on undertaking ‘applied work’. Indeed, the discussion that follows concerns his own involvement in a project that started out as ‘definitely non-research, and was never intended as fodder for conference talks or even book chapters!’ As such, the chapter revolves around two ‘essentially intermingled contexts’ – the development of a post-colonial partnership between a church community in Bristol and groups from the Khayelitsha township in the edge of Cape Town, South Africa, and an academic concern with dealing with otherness. After describing, and reflecting upon the development of the partnership, Cloke explores Auge’s concepts of ‘sense of the other’ and ‘sense for the other’, suggesting that development of the latter within human geography is (and has been) constrained by issues of academic professionalism which mediate against long-term, longitudinal, action-based research. Despite this, however, Cloke asserts that the contexts of academia and commitments beyond are impossible to disentangle for any ethically responsible and grounded academic. Crucially, and as Cloke passionately explores in the remainder of his contribution, it is this inability to disentangle that potentially affords hope for the development of an appropriate sense for the other, with Cloke envisioning a human geography in which living ethically and acting politically can be essentially intertwined with a sense for the other in a sensitive, committed and active approach to the subject.
Likewise, Pamela Moss’ chapter engages with recent discussions concerning the importance of reflexivity with regard to how critical geographers might contribute to effecting change within radical social movements. In so doing she lucidly documents her own experiences as an activist striving to effect change (which ‘is not about ‘out there’, wherever ‘out there’ is; it’s about right here, right now, wherever here and now are’) through her participation within the Women’s Housing Group (WHG). In so doing, Moss identifies three ‘tensions’ (structural, institutional, and personal) that have arisen through the interactions of the group. Reflection on these tensions, and the ‘politics of local politics’, Moss argues, has facilitated a more nuanced account of the claim, ‘the personal is political’, a closer critical scrutiny of the process through which change can be effected, a deeper and more productive understanding of how local politics work, and better consideration of how ‘praxis effects change in places that matter…the here and the now that must be traversed before enacting the liberatory capacity of a feminist (or critical) politics’.

Continuing the reflexive theme, Rob Wilton then explores the role and ethics of research and the researcher, with a reflexive focus on issues surrounding collaborative research. Wilton uses his own collaboration with a psychiatric consumer/survivor group in Hamilton, Ontario, to reflect on recent debates within the field of disability studies concerning the merits (or otherwise) of research by non-disabled actors on/with disabled people, alongside an engagement with Pierre Bourdieu’s call for a reflexive and politically engaged social science. In doing so, he raises key questions (informed by the shared thrust of these literatures) concerning the need for a social science that is simultaneously committed to effecting social change, whilst also being ‘mindful of the need for a critical distance between researcher and the group with whom (s)he works’ so as to maximise ‘scientific legitimacy’ and the positive impressions this can herald amongst some recipients of research work. In essence, Wilton explores the tricky question of ‘going academic’ (as opposed to going native – see Fuller 1999), and the benefits or otherwise that it can offer when working in collaboration with traditionally researched communities. In discussing his experiences Wilton argues that the balancing of such political engagement and scientific autonomy is a risky business, epitomised by the necessary process of ‘translation’ from experience(s) into scientific discourse (with reflexivity being necessary in order to ‘ensure that the limits of the logic of theory are made explicit’), but also often exposed via the danger of reproducing the privileged position of academic discourse. However, with certain audiences, and in certain circumstances, Wilton argues that such distancing can have positive outcomes, and may be a positive strategy that can effect change beyond what maybe would have been achieved through overt and publicly recognized collaboration.

In her chapter, Perla Zusman views Anglo-American debates on academy and activism from a distance. Drawing on her reading of these debates, her activism as a member of madeinbarcelona, and her role as an academic in Spain and Latin America, she reflects on what it means to be an academic/activist. While, she notes, critical geography grew rapidly in Latin America in the 1980s in response to democratic transitions occurring at that time, since then critical analyses have concentrated on neoliberal policy, often from limited epistemological positions. As a result, activism and the academy are viewed as separate enterprises. That said, for her, the division between activism and academia is a false one. Rather than activism being a deliberate and strategic choice, often arising from fieldwork, which then has to worked into an academic agenda, she suggests that activism
should ‘evolve out of a commitment to question political, social, and economic conditions’. The problem of activism arising from fieldwork or being taken back into the academy is that the central focus of any analysis tends to be the academic themselves rather than the activist movement. For her, activism cannot be seen as a sole, academic pursuit as it is built collectively as a horizontal process. As such, drawing boundaries around its enactment is a fruitless exercise – any actions are collective, as are any knowledges produced. To bring activism into the academy and to frame (and exploit) it in individual terms is therefore to do an injustice to its collective production. She illustrates the collective nature of activism by detailing resistance to urban transformation in the city of Barcelona where local residents and professionals, including academics, have come together to challenge the authorities’ plans. Within this collective action academic activity was seen as one (collective) tool amongst many.

Melissa Gilbert and Michele Masucci’s chapter details their work with poor communities in North Philadelphia in striving to develop and sustain service learning courses underpinned by community information technology needs. From an initial goal of community engagement via course interaction, Gilbert and Masucci detail the evolution of a ‘program of integrated research, instruction and community outreach that [has] worked to support community, student and faculty empowerment, whilst balancing community and student needs in the long term’. Their work draws on critical pedagogy and seeks to rethink and revision the role of the university with regard to promoting social change in the local community. Here Gilbert and Masucci argue that such critical pedagogy necessitates ‘moving beyond mere intellectual understanding of social inequality towards adopting an active role in mitigating social inequality’ – in short, praxis is key. As such, Gilbert and Masucci document how their university’s resources have been opened up in order to address community resource issues. They contend that for the students involved, more meaningful educational experiences have been forthcoming, facilitating (and encouraging) a more active role in their research, whilst for the faculty, research, teaching and community involvement have been elided around a set of research questions focused on issues of gender workload and resource equity. As the authors argue, these developments, through the critical pedagogic approach, have illustrated ‘a viable alternative to a more isolated environment’; however, they conclude by arguing for ‘community outcomes’ to take their place alongside more traditional criteria for educational outcomes as until this happens outreach will be considered as less worthy than other academic pursuits.

Finally, examining how critical geographers can enact and engage in political movements, Larch Juckes Maxey forwards the notion of reflexive activism. Drawing on the Gandhian notion of Satyagraha and critical work on reflexivity, Maxey defines reflexive activism in inclusive terms as everyday reflection and practice through which we try to change the world in positive ways. This encompasses anything from direct action to simple individual actions. For Maxey, seeing activism in heroic terms closes off participation and creates situations of win or lose. Moreover, it creates tensions and splits within activist movements that act in negative, rather than positive, ways. Instead he argues we need to recognise the different energies and commitments that people can contribute. Within this framework, the boundary between activism and academia becomes blurred – they are both aspects of being and acting in the world, of seeking to make a difference (through protest or teaching or writing, etc.). That said, Maxey notes that activism is often seen to be a pursuit that is at odds with the current agenda of universities.
and their sponsors. To him, however, reflexive activism allows neoliberal agendas to be resisted and challenged and creates a means by which academics can negotiate the tensions in their work and contribute in diverse ways to activist movements. In the latter half of the chapter he illustrates his arguments with respect to his involvement in three grassroots groups.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have sought to outline a historical context and provide a broad picture of contemporary debates concerning the development and trajectory of radical/critical theory and praxis within geography. In particular we have concentrated on examining the extent to which radical/critical geographies ideological intent is presently being realised – whether radical/critical geographies do make a difference beyond the academy – and detailing the structural threats to different forms of critical praxis. While we would acknowledge that many academics do contribute to wider society in all kinds of ways, we would contend that it is often in roles divorced from their research and praxis. While ideological rhetoric often eludes to academia seeking social, political, environmental change, the mechanisms through which this change is to occur are often conservative in nature, limited to teaching, writing academic articles, and occasionally policy work (that often reinforces the status quo rather than challenging it). It is change sought through a traditional academic role, which in itself reproduces notions of what it means to be an academic. Within this context, the marriage of academic and activist often seems alien. The academic theorises and suggests, but the move ‘onto the streets’ or ‘into the community’ as an academic/activist is limited. This is not to suggest that no such forays occur, with perhaps the most sustained critical praxis beyond the academy enacted by feminist geographers. But it is to suggest that the ideological intent of much radical/critical geography is stifled, its potential unfilled and limited to the classroom and the pages of journals (not that these are not worthy pursuits – they are – but that they are only two out of many possible courses of action). The chapters that follow all engage with this theme – how radical/critical geography can realise its ideological potential; how radical theory can be translated into critical praxis in ways beyond teaching and writing. Taken together they provide many useful insights into the role of radical/critical geographers both within the academy and beyond, the different ways in which academics can seek to make a difference, and provide lessons based on their own forays at realising the ideological intent of radical/critical geographies.

To end this chapter we would like to extend an invite and a challenge. The invite is to join with the contributors in exploring the ways in which radical/critical geographers can make a difference. The challenge is to help develop inclusive and, what we might call, ‘active radical/critical geographies’; geographies that move beyond the academy in a multitude of ways – ways that challenge and redefine what academics are and do.

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Radical Scholarship: A Polemic on Making a Difference Outside the Academy

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Introduction

Over the past year or so I have been working on a paper that explores how the United States Supreme Court’s ‘Public Forum Doctrine’ allows for a spatial policing of protest that effectively silences dissident voices in America. It does so by assuring that restrictions are placed on the ‘time, place, and manner’ of protest in such a way as to make it simply impossible for protesters to have the effect they aim at (Mitchell 2003). I argue that the Court has developed this doctrine over the course of the twentieth century in the name of a significant liberalization of speech rights. The Court has made it clear that it is no longer acceptable to ban even revolutionary speech – as was the practice for most of America’s history. Instead, the time, place, and manner of speech and assembly can be restricted – on ‘content neutral’ grounds only – so that speech is always ‘exercised in subordination to the general comfort and convenience, and in consonance with peace and good order’.2

In that paper, I make this argument first historically, by tracing the roots of Public Forum Doctrine to a set of repressive decisions by the Supreme Court during World War I (where a liberal language of free speech first began to be developed), and by looking at how the Court was eventually forced to recognize the speech and assembly rights of radical workers and others during the Depression. I then examine three case studies. One concerns the privatization of public space in shopping malls and struggles by various

2 Hague v. CIO 307 U.S. 496 (1939) at 515.
groups to open up publicly-accessible private property to political activity, and then looks in close detail at a controversy concerning the downtown Horton Plaza Shopping Center in San Diego, California. The second looks at an intriguing strike at Denver International Airport in Colorado where striking baggage handlers were forced to establish their picket line in an un-used parking lot some three miles from the terminal where they worked. In this case a judge ruled that banishing strikers in this manner constituted a reasonable time, place and manner restriction because allowing strikers to picket at the terminal or at employee parking lots would disrupt the general comfort and convenience of travelers – to say nothing of the effect it would have on the bottom line of the struck companies. The third case explores the development of ‘public space zoning’ at major national and international political events – like the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in 1999, the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2000, the World Bank/IMF meetings that same year, the Presidential Inauguration in 2001, and the World Economic Forum in New York in 2002. Here protesting is allowed in some public spaces but not others: rights are spatially zoned such that what is perfectly permissible on one sidewalk or street is against the law on a neighboring one.

My argument is straightforward: though the First Amendment to the United States Constitution specifically says that the right to speech and assembly shall not be ‘abridged’, Public Forum Doctrine and the various policing strategies that it sanctions nonetheless act as a massive ‘abridgement’. Though Americans may have an expansive ‘paper right’ to speech and assembly, their de facto rights are incredibly shrunken – and that the only way they will ever be expanded is to defy the sorts of time, place, and manner restrictions the Court thinks are reasonable.

As I have been working on that paper, I have presented the ideas contained in it in a variety of forums ranging from a humanities symposium in Ontario, Canada, to the Institute of Social Justice in Oslo, Norway, as well as in a number of geography department colloquia series in the US, Scandinavia, and Scotland. The response has been intriguing. My analysis is fairly technical and it relies on a close reading of American constitutional case law. I make an academic argument and I use academic conventions and academic language to make it. I trade in details that I expected many non-Americans would find irrelevant or peculiar to the American system, and that many Americans – especially activists – would find diversionary from the ‘real’ struggles on the streets.

In fact, audiences seem to have been quite intrigued by the detail, by the specific evidence of how law and geography intersect to create opportunities for only certain kinds of political interventions and not others. They have been intrigued by the details because through the details they can see the specific operation of power in everyday life. Europeans and Canadians have been able to use my argument to reflect on power, law and geography as they relate to their own national contexts, and, as importantly, to see how American legal regimes have had profound influences on the policing of protest at international events like the Quebec City Free Trade of the Americas Agreement meeting.

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3 For a general discussion of these issues see Soley (2002), chapter 6.
4 In an epilogue I argue also that the stakes of such defiance have recently been raised all out of proportion. The USA PATRIOT Act passed in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington contains provisions that conceivably define civil disobedience as an act of terrorism. See Chang (2002).
or the European Union meeting in Gothenburg. And in the US, many audience members (especially but not exclusively students just beginning to develop their own political orientations) get mad. They get mad because they take rights seriously. They fully believe they have the right to speech and assembly and they get angry that such rights are so easily usurped in the name of ‘comfort’, ‘convenience’, or ‘order’. My argument, in all its details, connects with something that is deeply rooted in Americans’ conceptions of themselves and it shows how what they have always believed to be true about their rights is in many ways false.

At a number of the talks there has been a significant contingent of activists (student and otherwise) in attendance. On three separate occasions audience members have come up to me after the talk to relate their experiences in various protests in Washington, DC, where policing of ‘time, place, and manner’ has been particularly heavy-handed in recent years. Each of these audience members has said that my argument has helped them make a particular link, a link that was the same for each. Activists who have participated in DC protests over the past two or three years have been frustrated by the fact that they spend much of their time parading through largely poor, mostly African American neighborhoods (while shouting slogans about American-sponsored global capitalism and imperialism). The residents of these neighborhoods seem alienated from and resentful of the protests. While there is certainly much for anti-capitalist globalization activists to reflect on concerning strategy and how really to link their global concerns to the local concerns of Washington’s poor, the activists I talked with also told me that my talk allowed them to see, for the first time, that their parading through the specific areas was as much a function of the policing strategies the local and federal police engaged in and of the ways that permits for specific parade routes were approved, as they were of activist insensitivity to local needs and desires. That is, the activists I spoke with on each of these occasions began to wonder just how accidental it was that their protests were not allowed to occur where they would have access to those they were really protesting against and instead forced into already highly-stressed neighborhoods.

It may or may not be the case that police in DC have engaged in a spatial strategy designed to sow dissension into the center of a growing protest movement. That is a question that needs investigation – as does the related one of whether dissension is merely a byproduct of policing really aiming towards other (legitimate or objectionable) ends. But what I want to suggest by telling this story is that there is a lesson here for radical geographers who want to align their work with activists and ‘make a difference beyond the academy’. This lesson is simple: sometimes the best thing we can do as radical scholars is radical scholarship – that sometimes what activists and other non-academics most need is thorough academic analysis. To make a difference beyond the academy it is necessary to do good and important, and committed work, within the academy. That is the lesson I will develop in the rest of this chapter.

**Radical scholarship**

Karl Marx was instrumental in founding the Workers’ Association, and various Communist Leagues. His was an orator of some demand. He taught workers’ classes. He served as a correspondent for various newspapers and journals in Europe and America. He was hounded out of several continental cities for his agitation. He wrote pamphlets bristling with insight and calling for revolution. But his greatest impact came from sitting,
hour after hour, day after day, in a library pouring over statistics and philosophical treatises, over histories and theoretical accounts (in a half dozen languages). He read abstruse political economy. He studied the great ideologues of British imperialism and industrial development. And he wrote. He wrote difficult, demanding works that – however unrealistically – he wanted working people and political organizers to read, to understand, and to use as a guide for their own struggles. He didn’t worry much about whether he was speaking ‘for’ working people instead of ‘with’ them. His goal was to instruct and to agitate, not just to ‘give voice’ to the oppressed people of the world. He saw his job as one of theory and philosophy – not just bearing witness – and therefore in and of itself useful to working people. The ‘relevance’ of his work – its ability to ‘make a difference’ – consisted in the fact of its existence. Writing *Capital* – engaging in the hard, all-consuming work of laying out a major new materialist theory of political economy – was, to use a philosophical word, propaedeutic to radical activism and eventually revolution.

*Capital* is radical. But what makes it radical is neither its form nor its style. It is, after all, a thick, sometimes difficult (though occasionally bitterly funny) tome. What makes it radical is its political orientation and the commitment that drove Marx’s scholarship. This orientation and commitment was expressed in a number of ways. In the first place, Marx’s version of materialist dialectics requires understanding of how processes, flows, and relationships constitute and bound the ‘things’ – or ‘permanences’ (Whitehead 1925; Harvey 1996, 50) – that give shape to life. That is, all analysis must begin not from ideas and philosophies, but from social relations, from the ‘physical organisation of … individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature’ and society (Marx and Engels 1970, 20). In the second place, these relations can only be understood from specific, grounded, perspectives. Capital appears a very different thing from the perspective of working people subject to exploitation by the relations of production, than it does from the bourgeoisie who benefit from exploitation. Examining capital from specific perspectives is like looking at a room through different windows (Ollman 1991): it affords a different, if still partial view of the totality. By moving from window to window, by looking from different perspectives, the totality can be grasped and explained. And third, materialist dialectics required a commitment to a particular (revolutionary) project. There is no such thing as non-normative theory. Marx was committed to a revolutionary project and his scholarship, while always rigorous, was driven by that project. That is what gives Marx’s voice its pitch and his writing its bite. It is also what has made his work relevant to so many millions of non-scholars over the past century and a half (and what still rankles his critics: *Economist* 2000).

Marx’s relevance to the world is precisely his scholarly work, precisely his willingness to sit all those long, uncomfortable hours in the reading room of the British Museum struggling to learn, and then to explain, exactly how capital worked – and how it had historically developed and changed. There were dozens – hundreds – of radical pamphleteers and revolutionary political activists working, and doing important work, during Marx’s life; yet most of these are forgotten to history (as important as they may have been in their own spheres). But Marx’s explanations, contested as they may be,

5 See the Engels’s Preface to the Fourth German edition of *Capital* (republished as pp. 35-40 in 1987 and later editions by International Publishers), for a discussion of specific controversies surrounding Marx’s scholarly practices.
together with his mode of reasoning, live on. They have been germinal rather than terminal, promoting whole social movements, political struggle, and shelf after shelf of further scholarship, polemic, and analysis.

‘There is no royal road to science’, Marx once wrote and he could have said the same about activism and the production of knowledge that is useful to activists. There is huge value in politically committed scholarship, even including scholarship that aims at nothing more than applying ‘the force of abstraction’ (Marx 1987, 19) to both the immediate problems and the historical-geographical contexts within which activists work and that which they seek to overthrow. How one’s scholarship is picked up, and by whom – how it is used and abused – is another (if not entirely unrelated) matter. Marx was often appalled by some of those who operated in his name. But the point is that scholarship cannot be used at all unless it is written in the first place.

While Marx was able to undertake his work because of the generosity of friends like Engels (who continually supplemented the small income Marx made from his journalism), in the contemporary division of labor and in the contemporary academy, there is in fact a great deal of room for radical scholars to work within, and be rewarded by, the academy itself. Doing radical scholarship has perhaps never been easier (at least in the Western world); radical scholars do themselves, and the myriad activists they wish to connect with, a great disservice when they forget that, and instead spend their time fretting about whether they really ought to be on the front lines instead of in the library, whether they are truly giving voice to those with whom they are in solidarity, or whether, because of their privileged position in the division of labor, they really have the ‘right’ to tell people what to think (cf. Routledge 1997). Worries of this sort do not substitute for the hard work of theoretical and empirical research. Nor do they really raise very interesting questions: of course we should speak both to and for others. That is what our learning, our time available for research, our teaching require us to do. To shirk that responsibility is the height of irresponsibility, especially for radical, progressive, and critical scholars. The only real question is how best to do it.

Many of us who do radical scholarship are highly protected. We have permanent or tenured jobs. We get rewarded for pursuing our political agendas. As Castree (2000) has argued, the ‘professionalization’ of the radical academy, though it has entailed certain costs, has also brought with it some rather large benefits. Chief among these, even if it is an on-going political struggle and one that is always in danger of being lost, is the job security that allows many of us to pursue in-depth research and to push our arguments both in print and in the classroom. This is a large benefit because, as Castree (2000, 959-
notes, ‘Leftist research can itself be ‘active’ – rather than simply academic – when it discloses hitherto unknown things or makes concrete recommendations for change on the basis of new evidence’. More generally, it can be ‘active’ when it provides a new way of seeing, a new way of understanding the social and power relations within which people live and work. That is perhaps the main value of my critical analysis of the Public Forum Doctrine: it shows that when understood geographically, the First Amendment, which Americans, including American radicals, take very seriously, can be as repressive as it is liberatory. Perhaps even more, it suggests targets for on-going agitation.

The sort of job security that I take for granted has not always been the case for radical scholars: it had to be won. It was won by the generation of radical geographers who (in the US case) were radicalized by the Civil Rights Movement, anti-Vietnam war activism, the women’s movement, and the general rise of student radicalism that marked the 1960s. Operating in a context still defined by the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s (and their related academic loyalty oaths), by the spying and provocations of the FBI, the CIA, and local police forces that often targeted radical students and professors, and by an entrenched, conservative professoriate in a backwards, still largely irrelevant discipline, early radical geographers often paid a heavy price for pushing against the boundaries of the field and the mores of scholarship more generally. The path to my job security is littered with radical forbearers forced out of the academy or into marginal positions for their views and their activism (such as Bill Bunge, Clark Akatiff, or Jim Blaut). But one also thinks of those geographers who fought to make the academy a place for radicals: who persevered in their tenure and other struggles (like Dick Walker). If there was a rawness to the early radicalism in geography, if there was an immediacy to it that sometimes seems lacking now (Hague 2002), it was in part because people’s lives and livelihoods depended on the outcomes of their struggles in ways that ours rarely do. And their victories have very much been to our benefit.

The lesson I take from this is that I have an obligation to take advantage of what has been bequeathed us. To not take advantage of my position of security (and responsibility within my university) to orient my research towards progressive, radical transformation would be a bloody waste. And to not orient my teaching towards the normative goals that I am so heavily supported to explore and develop is even more of a waste. Part of what I do best is to sit in the library or my study and think, read, and uncover or develop evidence to put together arguments, to make what I hope will be convincing arguments about how (some part of) the world is, and therefore why it must be changed. My power resides precisely in the time that I have to think and to read and to write – to engage in the ‘force of abstraction’ – and then to use all that to teach, both in the classroom and through writing and lecturing.9

8 And so it always also has to be protected: it can all too easily be lost again.

9 None of this should be taken to imply that direct activist engagement by geographers or other radical scholars is unimportant. It is vitally important: but it is only one front upon which we can have an impact.

scholarship: while emphasis on research ‘excellence’ rarely debars scholars on clear political grounds (see Reading 1996), the emphasis on rapid, short, only peer-reviewed or academic press publications militates against the sort of in-depth research that might actually make a difference.
Radical commitments

Castree (2000, 959) has argued that ‘the Left has become bifurcated’ with the non-academic left losing influence in the public and private spheres even as the academic left ‘has apparently grown’. To some extent he is right. But his argument leaves out at least as much as it includes. There can be little doubt that progressive movements suffered large defeats in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Two points indicate the limits to his argument. First, these movements have been slowly regrouping and the growing vibrancy of global anti-capitalist struggles at the turn of the millennium (and the development of the Social Forum movement in particular), along with widespread and highly diverse grassroots movements of the poorly housed, squatters, small farmers, welfare-rights activists, race, gender, and sexuality activists, health activists, and so forth, suggests that retrenchment, redevelopment, and recommitment to radical, and sometimes revolutionary, politics is beginning to pay dividends – if as yet small ones, and ones not unified in a clear ideology or necessarily institutionalized in the state. Second, while it is true that the academic left in humanities and social sciences has grown, it has done so often not by learning lessons from the left’s defeat and then building upon those lessons, as the non-academic left to some extent has, but rather by incorporating that defeat into its heart and constructing an ideology not in opposition to corporate power, empire building, regressive social movements, and so forth, but very much in consonance with them.

‘Almost every central feature of postmodern theory’, Eagleton (1997, 23) correctly remarks, ‘can be deduced, read off as it were, from the assumption of major political defeat’. Not only can postmodernism’s general rightist orientation be so deduced, but so can its assumption that an unbreachable center means that faith must be invested in ‘margins’, which are to be celebrated entirely because of their marginality (there can no longer be an effective, centered, mass action; the mass itself is to be distrusted, replaced with some undefined and entirely idealist ‘multitude’ [Hardt and Negri 2001]). ‘Minorities’ must invariably be supported even, it seems, if that minority turns out to be the global capitalist elite (Hardt 2002). And since it was ‘the system’ that won, then ‘it is not hard to generalize from this to the vaguely anarchistic belief that system is oppressive as such’, abandoning the idea that any system ‘is internally contradictory – which has that installed at its heart which can potentially undo it’, and abandoning a politics of internal struggle for a politics that ‘thinks in rigid oppositions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, where to be on the inside is to be complicit and to be on the outside is to be impotent’ (Eagleton 1987, 18-19). Further, even thinking systematically can come to be seen as a capitulation to ‘the system’, and hence the radical defeat has led to a massive recoil from understanding social life as a complex totality (cf. Williams 1977), celebrating instead

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10 I wrote this as the Bush Administration mobilized 150,000 soldiers to invade Iraq and attempted to take its next step towards the construction of a violent, might-based, empire. At that time the majority of the people in my conservative city opposed Bush’s plans and even the city council had passed a resolution against war plans. A huge amount of long-term ground work went into the development of this seeming spontaneous opposition to Bush’s empire, and the success that this opposition represents should not be discounted. The invasion was not stopped; but it is certainly the case that the invasion will not have anything like the domestic effects the Bush Administration hopes it will. It is equally certain that this act will help spawn global opposition to the sort of empire the US is trying to build. As my Scottish Tory father-in-law says, the next world war will be against America.
moments of ambiguity or (presumed) indeterminacy, and reveling not in cause and effect, but meaning and interpretation. Coupling indeterminacy with (presumptively) radical decenteredness yields a faith in and promotion of the ‘schizoid’ subject – ‘a subject who might well not be “together” enough to topple a bottle off a wall, let alone bring down the state’ (Eagleton 1997, 20). In the wake of the defeat ‘the subject as producer (coherent, disciplined, self-determining) … yielded to the subject as consumer (mobile, ephemeral, constituted by insatiable desire)’ (Eagleton 1997, 21), that is a subject not of politics but of psychoanalysis – and of the probing, prodding ministrations of marketing experts. ‘Difference, “hybridity”, heterogeneity, restless mobility’ and, of course, marginality, all the things that are so central not only to postmodernism, but also to poststructuralism, ‘are native to the capitalist mode of production and thus by no means inherently radical phenomena’ (Eagleton 1997, 21). Postmodernism, Eagleton (1997, 23) concludes, ‘has many sources…. But whatever else it is, it is the child of a political rebuff’ and for whatever is important in it (and there is perhaps a fair amount), it is also heavily complicit with capitalist domination simply because it neither has the tools, nor the interest in confronting it. The bifurcation that Castree notes can’t all be accounted for by leftist academics’ professionalization (as he would have it), or even just the political defeat that the non-academic left suffered. Rather, at least some large degree of the separation must be accounted for by the fact that the development of a defeatist postmodernism simply made it impossible for leftist, postmodern scholars to make a commitment to the sort of radical, progressive, revolutionary change that activists struggle for.

That is because a commitment to radical scholarship requires making a commitment to something postmodernism simply cannot make a commitment to: truth. There are most certainly truths, as best we can know them at this time and in this place, and as conditioned as they may be by our limited ways of knowing and vantage points. And it is only by revealing these truths – of exploitation and oppression, or more accurately of systemic exploitation and oppression, of inequity and the unfair workings of power – and showing why they matter to people that a real commitment to radical, progressive, and revolutionary change can be made. This means making a commitment to real, live human beings, not to ‘subjects’, not just to ‘bodies’, not to radically decentered psyches, but to people, with thoughts and feelings, loves, needs, desires, and dreams, and (maybe) with jobs and mortgages and trouble meeting their monthly bills, staving off the sexual advances of a supervisor or coworker, or getting their child a decent education despite deeply racist, regressive school-funding systems.

A commitment to the truth requires uncovering the constituents of that truth – the facts and realities of the systems we live within, the historical moments that have gone past and that we are a part of, the geographical contexts that give shape to social life, and the components of social relations and the struggles that define them. It requires research into the materialist exigencies of life, into the practices and ideologies of institutions, and into the residue that power, past and present, always leaves of its operation. It requires

11 As if indeterminacy itself is not always socially determined.
12 Celebrating the schizoid subject amounts to celebrating a massively debilitating disease as a social good – which is fine if you do not have the disease.
13 Unless you include the sort of discursive hocus-pocus Gibson-Graham (1996) engage in as a confrontation, rather than a total capitulation, to capitalism.
both a historical-materialist sensibility, and a historical-materialist research program. It requires a commitment to defending the truth of the statements we make, not only through theoretical development (which is essential in defining what is truthful in the here and now), but on the basis of evidence. We must have evidence and we must defend it as evidence. And it requires taking those constituents of the truth and molding them into convincing accounts of how the world works. This is just what Marx did.

All these accounts will be partial, of that there can be no doubt, and all these truths will be provisional and conditioned. I’ll follow postmodernism at least that far (especially since Marx was already there 150 years earlier). But I won’t follow it much farther: for the partiality of truth is not something to be celebrated (there is no need to make a virtue of necessity), but something always to be struggled against, so these truths are always becoming less partial, more complete, less provisional, and more a basis for action and for change. This then, in its most fundamental form, is what constitutes a radical commitment, for ‘radical’ means to get to the origin of a thing; a radical analysis is one that goes ‘to the root or origin’, that pertains to or affects ‘what is fundamental;’ while at the same time, to be a radical means to struggle for a ‘departure from tradition’ and seek ‘progressive’ change.  

A decent radical commitment thus requires something more. It requires a progressive commitment to continued emancipation, to the dream of a better human future for more and more people. Perhaps the biggest cost of the academic leftist retrenchment in the face of the 1970s and 1980s, has been the giving up of all belief in the possibility of alternatives, and far, far better alternatives at hand to the world we now inhabit – and that these alternatives can be struggled for and built. We call ourselves progressive, but how many of us, in the wake of the postmodernist and poststructuralist retrenchments, really are? To be progressive requires, at minimum, a commitment to and a faith in, progress. A political progressive supports social progress, social advancement. Calling oneself a progressive, demands at the very minimum a commitment to struggling towards universal human emancipation. To struggle for, or orient one’s scholarship towards, anything else (which by definition would be either the emancipation of only some humans in some places at some times, or no emancipation at all) is not only self-defeating, but also about as deeply regressive as politics can get.  

To put it bluntly, ‘post-humanism’, which is the leftist-academy’s term for its loss of faith in the possibility of universal emancipation, 15 is a political orientation that must be resisted at every turn: it is the orientation of nationalists and fascists and racists and empire builders. By definition.

And radical scholarship requires a final commitment. It requires a commitment to what is right. By this I mean it requires a provisional commitment on our part to being right, to assuring that our facts and analyses are as right as they can be, even as we know that we might very well be wrong. Being right is only possible to the degree that one is open to being wrong; and being open to being wrong necessarily requires a commitment to

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14 Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: radical (1; 2b; 2d).
15 And yet the hallmark of post-defeat leftist academic scholarship is precisely a rejection of universal human emancipation as a goal.
16 A loss of faith occasioned in part by the acceptance of the shibboleth that a ‘centered’ human being is just a fiction, which is perhaps true until that moment you are in front of the firing squad and they pull their triggers, extinguishing exactly the centered human being you never were.
being as right as you can be. But I also mean something even more, and that is that radical scholarship requires a commitment to what is Right – that is, what is just, what is best, what is libatory, and it requires aligning your scholarship towards exploring what that Right is (even as it may always be changing, always evolving, always developing, always struggled over).

Making a difference beyond the academy

When I give talks – and write long law review essays – about how the First Amendment is continually abridged in practice, and how this abridgement serves specific powerful classes and forces in America – I do so as an expression of just the sorts of commitments laid out above. I am convinced that through social struggle better worlds can be built. I am convinced that as people come to understand how social struggle is shaped, conditioned, and undermined through the banal workings of laws meant presumably to uphold the right to struggle, they will take law itself, and its iniquitous workings, as a primary focus for struggle, and in doing so will help to bring out a more progressive, perhaps even radical First Amendment.

When I write and talk in my classes about how the cheap fruit and vegetables that we eat are the result of a remarkably violent agricultural political economy (and its landscape), I do so precisely to show that our relative wealth and welfare is predicated on the destruction of real, living people. These people are not ‘subjects’ in the way we have learned to use that term in the past twenty years. They are flesh-and-blood people, and quite often that flesh is rendered, and that blood spilled, only to fertilize our own unjust and increasingly violent economy. My commitment in spending long hours in archives and pouring over news accounts and reports, is to show exactly how this violent economy and landscape work, at least as best I can, in the hope that it can spur action: or if not that it can change the minds of my students and my readers. I want to change their minds as to the content of a just society, and as to the real commitment of the nation-state they live in to ‘liberty and justice for all’ (just as my mind has so often been changed by those who have, and continue, to teach me). When I write about anti-homeless laws and what I see as a growing tendency towards near-genocidal forms of public space zoning in contemporary cities, I do so out of the commitment that such tendencies can and ought to be reversed, and that as people learn about the implications of such laws and practices, they might indeed struggle to see that they are reversed – both because it would be right and because human liberation depends on it.

When I go into the classroom, or give public lectures, I try to bring to bear all the ‘force of abstraction’, and all the research, that I can in hopes of changing people’s minds. To me, that is the true radical commitment. The irony of it, of course, is that making that commitment often requires not making better links to activists or others ‘outside the academy’ but, at least for a time, severing those links. Solidarity – and doing the sort of research that might just prove beneficial – sometimes requires becoming solitary. For without all that time spent in the library, at home in my study thinking, reading, and writing, I could bring no ‘force of abstraction’ to the struggle, and no convincing facts.

So the main point bears repeating: sometimes the best way a radical scholar can ‘make a difference beyond the academy’, is precisely by making a commitment to doing good, radical, progressive, research in the academy. For without radical research, the chances of radical results are diminished: that is the real lesson of Marx’s long hours in the
British Museum, and that is the opportunity that the radical scholars who came before us have bequeathed us. This lesson, and this opportunity, should not be squandered.

References


3

Why Poststructuralism is a Live Wire for the Left

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Introduction

Our title has two meanings. It references both our main argument – that left movements (directed at racial, gendered, ecological, and class inequities) can benefit from more contact with poststructural insights – and the lively debate over poststructuralism’s value as radical theory that has divided the academic left for the past decade. This debate – or the ‘theory wars’ – necessarily conditions the terms of our intervention; it also continues conditioning the positions of a number of the more doubtful academics and activists who are our target audience (see Duggan 1998).

The ‘theory wars’ were fought, put generally, between leftists worried about poststructural theory’s implications for progressive politics, and leftists worried about the future of a progressive politics uninformed by poststructuralism’s best insights. While good intentioned, the debate was often framed in unconstructive terms:

social science versus the humanities, accessible populist scholarship versus jargonistic elitist obscurantism, or naive empiricism versus sophisticated cultural analysis. But the most distorted framings appeared as Politics versus Theory from one point of view and anti-intellectual posturing versus engaged cultural critique from another (Duggan 1998, 10).

4 Our focus is limited to how these debates played out in North America.
It is of note that Duggan’s account is written in the past tense. The debate lives on, but is less pitched. Our claim is that the conditions impelling the debate (a floundering North American left – discussed below) have changed. What we find particularly noteworthy is that recent left resurgence (particularly the ‘anti-globalization’ movement), has occurred despite factious academic debate over radical theory; it has gained little from the respective positions of embattled academics. Left resurgence has lessened the tendency for radical academics to look within their ranks for the conservatism stifling movement, while questioning the role of the ranks themselves. Can developments in radical academic theory claim much responsibility for recent resurgences? The argument we develop below is no. This is cause for pause for both sides of the ‘theory wars’. Our sense then, is that this period of relative calm on the academic left is occasion for a collegial rethinking of theory’s role in social movement.

While we are avowed supporters of most poststructural thinking, this essay is not another volley in the ‘theory wars’. We are not interested in making a case for why poststructuralism should displace other theoretical orientations on the left. Indeed, as good poststructuralists, we are doubtful a unified poststructuralism that can be accepted or rejected exists in the first place. Instead this essay is an interrogation of academic theory production in general, and the effects it has, doesn’t have, and can have on left movements.

Our sense is that currents within poststructural thought can help soften the predicament academic theory and theorists currently find themselves in – largely unread and irrelevant to the left activists, journalists, and intellectuals they should be in closer dialogue with. Thus, while our primary focus is on how a number of poststructural insights can help activists in their day-to-day struggles, our prior claim is that poststructural insights can enliven the left by helping academics practice theory differently.

We begin our essay by unpacking a poststructural (Foucauldian and Deleuzean) approach to theory – one emphasizing engagement and relevance. To contextualize our argument, we then outline and historicize the positions of poststructuralism’s critics – positions that still hold sway on the left and make acceptance of poststructural insights difficult. Our primary interlocutor in this regard is Barbara Epstein’s (1995) ‘Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought’. Our historicization of Epstein’s position, and the general debate, suggests that the antagonistic more than agonistic tenor can be attributed to shared despair over the left’s failings through the 1990s – failings that are now less pronounced. It is within this context of left resurgence that we situate our argument. We conclude our essay by demonstrating how poststructural insights into theory and practice can further intensify left struggles.

Theory as tool-kit

Poststructuralist theory is often accused of being inaccessible and irrelevant to on-the-ground struggles. These accusations are not without grounding, and will be discussed below. There are, however, currents within the poststructural ‘tradition’ emphasizing engagement and relevance. We are thinking primarily of works by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

For Foucault and Deleuze, theories should be conceptualized as tool-kits. The tool-kit metaphor suggests that elements of theories are useful some of the time, and sometimes
not. It also suggests that bodies of theory, like ‘poststructuralism’, are not essentially bound. If the tool-kit, what holds the tools, can be thought of as a tool itself, then it too will not always be useful. Tools may need to be dissembled and reassembled in new and contingent tool-kits depending on what the times call for. For Foucault:

the notion of theory as a tool-kit means (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations (1977, 145).

For Foucault and Deleuze, the important point is that all theory exist for a purpose, the purpose of intensifying struggle; it is ‘an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power’ (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 208). ‘It must be useful’, writes Deleuze, ‘It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate’ (208).

What we find particularly interesting about Foucault and Deleuze’s account of theory, is its deep resonance with activist knowledge production. For political theorist Karena Shaw, characteristics of activist knowledge are its:

very current, mobile, contingent and creative qualities. In order for activist campaigns to be successful, they must be built on some understanding of issues at stake that is persuasive to their intended audiences, which of course can be very diverse. This requires that activists have access to up to date research and are able to adapt that research to relevant audiences and contexts…In order to plan effective campaigns, activists require a complex mapping of the political terrain they face, beginning from where they perceive themselves to be in relation to the issue or problem they seek to address, and moving on to an analysis of how this terrain can be shaped or manipulated (2004).

Theory-as-tool-kit and activist knowledge production are both guided by an appreciation, implicit or not, of the resolutely contingent nature of the political terrain –what Wendy Brown (2001, 27) terms ‘that complex domain of unintended consequences that follow the unpredictable collisions of human, historical, and natural forces…’. This is not to say the spaces of politics theorists and activists interrogate are absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, for Foucault (1977, 114), they are ‘intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail – but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies, and tactics. Neither the Dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts’.

The activist working on a living-wage campaign, for example, cannot expect the contradictions of capitalism to always play out in her favor, the local working class and poorer populations to be inherently supportive of the ordinance, the local elite and corporate media to be unified in their opposition, or the righteousness of the coalition members to guarantee anything in the struggle – more just causes have failed. The living-wage activist must be resolutely specific and strategic in her thinking and practice. The same, for Foucault and Deleuze, should apply to theorists.
Radical academics can remove themselves from the immediacy of struggle to complete their work – not a bad thing. But to work from too much distance, one misses, for political theorist William Chaloupka (2003, 73), the ‘specificity, contingency, conditions, and aims of political intervention’. Simply put, the theorist loses touch with the political spaces they should be interrogating, and the constituencies they should be conversing with. It is of note that Black Panther texts were one of Foucault’s sources for his understanding of the political terrain, and his emphasis on strategic thinking: ‘when he read the texts of the Black Panthers in 1968 he discovered that they develop a strategic analysis of society freed of the Marxist theory of society’ (Defert cited in Chaloupka, 2003, 74).

Drawing on her experiences with struggles to protect old growth rainforest on Vancouver Island, Karena Shaw (2004) suggests that the ‘strategic knowledge of activists [can be] a model for what it might mean to think politically today, or how the practice of the intellectual might need to change under contemporary circumstances’. Chaloupka (2003, 74) elaborates this point: ‘If Foucault is right, as I believe he is, the relegation of social theory to the role of values articulation and moralist complaint could and should be altered. The role of the intellectual must incorporate strategies as well as normative concerns’. But if Foucault and Deleuze, along with a younger generation of thinkers like Shaw and Chaloupka, have rethought the practice of the theorist in-line with activist knowledge production, then beyond more engaged intellectuals, what can poststructuralism offer activists?

The tool-kit approach clarifies the ways poststructural insights can and do relate to left movements. Put simply, there are times when poststructural insights are useful to movements, and times when they are not – a point applying to other theoretical persuasions as well. Left movements have different theoretical needs at different times, and thus require different theoretical tools. Poststructural theorizing can provide some, not all, of these tools. Thus instead of arguing for poststructuralism’s value in general, our aim is to outline three particular problems left activists and movements consistently face, and which poststructural insights/agitations are particularly good at softening. This list is not exhaustive. Movements have many more problems, some larger and smaller, that poststructural insights may be helpful for. These are simply the problems we have encountered most in our academic and activist work – they are necessarily partial:

1. The tendency for activists and movements to replicate the very exclusions they are working to allay. This tendency is not only an affront to the principles that compel left activists, but is also politically dangerous; it always threatens to frustrate already contingent solidarities.

2. The tension between moral and strategic vision – how the righteousness that motivates movement, and attracts others to its cause, can work to stymie the hard-nosed political strategizing generally required for movement success.

3. The tendency for activists and movements to essentialize their ‘enemy’ – to afford their targets more strength and coherence than they actually possess. This tendency can stoke disempowerment and unsound strategy.

Poststructuralism does not hold the deed on the articulation of, or insights into these three problems. But these are problems, as outlined here, that have been historically
raised by poststructuralists as critiques of other leftists ‘drinking from the springs of the Enlightenment’ – critiques that within the context of the theory wars were not always tactfully launched, or well received (Raulet cited in Foucault, 1998, 455).

Poststructuralist insights into what can be perceived as poststructural problems, will be met with understandable reservation. Thus before outlining poststructuralism’s contribution to activist practice, we’d like to better account for why this body of theory has been so contentious for the academic, and larger left. Our contention is that understanding the contours and roots of the debate is an important precondition to working through the current ‘crisis in the realm of theories of social change’ (Epstein 1995, 87).

**Dead ends and live wires**

As noted, we’ve chosen social movement scholar Barbara Epstein as our exemplary critic of poststructuralism. Not only is her *Socialist Review* article – ‘Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought’ – one of the few interventions, from either side of the debate, to explicitly reference the needs and concerns of left movements, it is also one of the most sustained and circulated critiques of poststructural thought available.

Epstein’s basic argument is that theorizing with an emphasis on the discursive is irrelevant to progressive politics, and must be ‘rejected as part of the project of developing something better’ (1995, 116). The basic tenets of poststructural theory – anti-essentialism, the celebration of difference, ‘the rejection of metanarratives, the insistence that everything must be understood as socially constructed, the rejection of any claims of truth or value’ – make it, for Epstein, a dangerous intellectual framework upon which to build analysis and movement aimed at the present’s many injustices (1995, 84). ‘Movements that need to make positive assertions about how society could be better organized and that need to incorporate difference within a collective unity for social change’ will only be enervated by a body of theory ambivalent about clear assertions of right/wrong and suspicious of bids for unity (1995, 85). Being students of poststructural ambivalence, we couldn’t agree and disagree more!

While we think some of Epstein’s claims are stretched, based on faulty premises and wonder whether there really is a coherent ‘poststructuralism’ out there to be rejected in the first place, she raises the right questions.

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5 For Epstein ‘we will never have a comprehension of reality that is absolutely true in the sense of being unmediated by categories of perception, but that does not mean that perception is entirely shaped by these categories and has nothing to do with the reality that is being perceived’ (1995, 95). This criticism suggests, that for poststructuralists, perception is completely unmoored from the objective world. If anyone, poststructuralist or not, has ever made this claim, we’d agree it was hubris. When Derrida proclaimed ‘Il n’ya pas d’hors-texte,’ he meant that our experience is always mediated (not completely determined) by interpretative devices. The implications of Derrida’s aphorism are much closer to Epstein’s claim that ‘we will never have a comprehension of reality that is absolutely true in the sense of being unmediated by categories of perception,’ than her criticism.

6 ‘Throughout the humanities and in areas of the social sciences, the word theory, unmodified by any adjective, is likely to mean poststructuralist theory’ (1995, 83). We can understand how teaching at UC Santa Cruz might create this impression, but think Epstein is affording poststructural theorizing more sway than it enjoys in the North American academy. Poststructural
Epstein is right to note that poststructural theorizing, while making a certain claim to radicalism, rarely addresses activist struggles directly:

On the one hand, by describing themselves as radical, writers in this genre associate themselves with radical social movements. But within this genre the concept of radicalism does not refer to the social goals of these movements, or for that matter any particular critique of the existing social order or any concept of what would be better. Instead it is taken to refer to the degree to which a concept or piece of writing breaks with accepted paradigms – its ability to unsettle or shock its audience (1995, 93).

Keeping with the polemical quality of her article, this claim is overdrawn, but it does speak to the fact that radicals doing poststructural theory have not been successful at communicating the radical potential of their work to left movements. The lack of communication between left activists and left theorists (or poststructuralists in Epstein’s terms) has opened poststructural theory to criticisms of pretend radicalism or plain pretentiousness. For Michael Albert (2003, unpaginated), editor of Z Magazine Online, and a key voice on the North American Left:

Perhaps ‘irreducible materiality’ and ‘pure systematicity’ are exactly the concepts needed to ‘theorize’ Madonna. But if so, it still ought to be possible for literary theorists to describe, popularize, and generally make understandable what their results are so the rest of us can know there is something real going on behind all the obscure terminology?

To avoid dismissals like Epstein’s and Albert’s, more work could be done to bring poststructuralist theory to bear on left movements and their struggles.

What makes this project difficult, however, is that as Epstein articulates, a number of key poststructural insights are irritating to the immediate interests and values of left movements. Our project is not to root these insights out, or to steer a path around them. We think that where poststructural theory ‘fails’ left movements, where it agitates progressive values most, can be sites of real productivity. There is neither the time or space to prove the value of the agitative elements of poststructural theorizing frustrating thinkers like Epstein – anti-essentialism, the celebration of difference, the rejection of metanarratives, etc. Neither would this project be efficacious. There are times when some of these elements will be more useful for activists than others, times when none will prove effective, and times when some will actually hinder effective struggle. Our emphasis is on the former, Epstein’s on the latter. We don’t expect this disagreement to disappear, but

theory enjoys some popularity within the marginalized theoretical subdisciplines of the marginalized divisions of social sciences and humanities within US universities. It is unclear how much institutional power poststructural theorizing, or theorizing in general, currently has to help or hinder progressive politics.

While we think it possible to speak of ‘poststructural theory’ as such, there is enough differentiation within this category to make its invocation deceiving. ‘Genealogy,’ ‘deconstruction,’ and ‘cultural studies,’ – often corralled under the ‘poststructuralism’ big top – are all different intellectual practices with distinctive histories. Epstein’s unifying narrative does a disservice to the distinct and often conflicting elements of ‘poststructural theory.’ Does Epstein want to forget Foucault, and Forget Foucault (Baudrillard, 1987)? Foucault and Baudrillard have distinct takes on power and resistance. Are both unsalvageable?
think that calls for outright rejection – which obviously leave little room for exchange – had an intelligibility in the mid-nineties they now lack.

**Truth is the first casualty of war**

Epstein’s essay was published in the wake of two major failures on the American left. The first was a failed opposition to the 1991 Gulf War. For Epstein (1992, 116), this failure was symptomatic of the general decline and disarray of the American left:

The Gulf War came at a moment when the Left, or progressive forces, were extremely weak in the U.S. The fact that it is no longer clear what this sector should be called is an indication of the depth of its crisis. It was also a symptom of the crisis of the Left as a whole that it was possible for sectarian organizations, discredited in the eyes of most left activists, to dominate the structures that gave direction to the movement on a national level.

Weak national structures enabled control by a sectarian few who further enervated national organizing capacity. Organizing against the war was thus largely left to local and regional groups. Where organizing did flourish – particularly California’s Bay Area (East Bay, Berkeley, San Francisco, Santa Cruz) – the movement was propelled by groups organized around identity. For Epstein (1992, 128) ‘the politics of identity worked better for some people than for others: it drew upon communities defined by their oppression or marginalization in terms of sexual orientation or race. It was not nearly as helpful in fostering the development of other kinds of communities. … For those who did not fit into any of the identity-based groups, or who did not understand their opposition to the war in those terms, there was often no place to go’. Epstein (1992, 132) continues: ‘The danger of identity politics is that it can become reduced to a politics of the self, which in the extreme can mean an interest-group politics in which there is little basis for groups working together and little connection to a progressive vision of overarching social change’.

Both the weakness of national left organizations and the turn to identity politics were, for Epstein, symptoms of a larger failure on the left to articulate a project able to unify diverse constituencies. Universities, historic providers of strategic vision, were not helping. Commenting on student organizing efforts on her own campus, Epstein (1992, 132) notes that:

Santa Cruz is a relatively progressive campus; it is also a center for the poststructuralist/postmodernist intellectual currents that promote particularity and renounce conceptions of universal value. These two influences intersect to encourage a conception of radicalism centered on the defense of particular, marginalized, or oppressed identities.

These currents of thought whose influence were spreading across US campus’ in the early nineties, were for Epstein, impediments to developing a ‘progressive vision of overarching social change’, and more particularly, for effectively mobilizing against the war.

The second, but related leftist failure preconditioning Epstein’s intervention, was the Clinton administration. The Democratic party’s social policies were gentler than the New Right’s, but their fiscal policies were largely indistinguishable, leading satirist Michael Moore to ask in 1996: ‘Democrat? Republican? Can You Tell the Difference?’
Why Poststructuralism is a Live Wire for the Left

(1996, 32). The nineties were a decade of Democratic rule, and the further entrenchment of Reaganomics (tax cuts, debt servicing, privatization, slashing of social programs).

With the putative left pursuing the right’s economic policies in the White House, and no clear alternatives brewing in civil society (evidenced by the failure of the anti-war movement), the mid-nineties was a time of despair and disarray for progressives. This was also the time when poststructural theory was becoming more entrenched in US universities. The left continued failing while poststructuralism continued making modest gains. It is in this context that poststructural theory, and its claims to radicalism, became a target. How radical and effective can poststructural theory be if the left continues to decline while it ascends? More accurately, what is ‘radical’ poststructural theory doing for the scattered left, and is its increasing popularity endangering an effective rebuilding of a radical bloc?

The answers, for literary critic Terry Eagleton, are ‘nothing’ and ‘yes’. In his article ‘Where Do Postmodernists Come From?’ (1995) Eagleton argues that poststructuralism is largely the product of leftists who have failed to avow and deal with their failed aspirations. Paraphrasing Eagleton, Epstein writes in a 1997 update of her Socialist Review piece:

left intellectuals in the U.S. have adopted postmodernism out of a sense of having been badly defeated, a belief that the left as a political tendency has little future. Culturalism, he argues, involves an extreme subjectivism, a view of the intellect as all-powerful, a mindset that might be described as taking the May ‘68 slogan ‘all power to the imagination’ literally, combined with a deep pessimism, a sense that it isn’t worth the effort to learn about the world, to analyze social systems, for instance, because they can’t be changed anyway (1997,141).

For academics on the other side of the debate, the connection between the left’s failure and poststructuralism’s relative ascension within the US academy, was spurious. If anything, poststructuralism was seen as a potential antidote for the left’s failings. ‘Marxism’, for political theorist Wendy Brown, ‘proved unable to address critical issues of need, desire, and identity formation in late modernity, and Marxist projects [in the East and West] failed by almost all economic, political, and eudaemonistic measures. In short, in the second half of the twentieth century, liberalism and capitalism have been quietly consolidating their gains less because they were intrinsically successful than because their alternatives collapsed’ (2001, 19). Brown’s recent work Politics Out of History (2001) is an attempt to redirect and rebuild leftist thinking along more poststructural lines. Her sense of the ‘theory wars’ is that leftist dismissals of ‘anti-foundationalism’ mark a:

nostalgic desire for something imagined to be lost: for a unified social movement instead of the fractious nature of identity politics and new social movements; for historical materialism instead of discourse analysis; for a clearer account of accountability and human agency instead of the complexities and indecipherabilities of the postmodern subject; and a desire to have real working class heroes instead of the deeply ambiguous and flawed heroes we have now (paraphrased in Wray 1998, unpaginated).

Leftists on both sides of the ‘theory wars’ agreed that the left was failing, and read each other’s positions as symptoms of this larger failure. The unmourned loss of viable
alternatives to liberalism and capitalism through the nineties made accusation the primary mode of argumentation for both sides of the divide. Brown’s comments were made at a conference whose handbill accused the likes of Katha Pollit, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Epstein of Left Conservatism: ‘A specter is haunting U.S. intellectual life: the specter of Left Conservatism ... that is, an attack by ‘real’ leftists on those portrayed as theory-mongering, hyper-professional, obscurantist pseudo-leftists’ (Center For Cultural Studies 1998). This accusation simply reverses the implicit claim in polemics like Epstein’s – ‘left conservatives’ (instead of poststructuralists) are not true radicals. This knee-jerk response can be partly explained by a deeply felt vulnerability. Epstein’s and other polemics were launched at already fragile spheres of US universities – the theoretical subdisciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

If the American left’s general failure is not enough to bring epistemologically divergent leftists together, the state of the social sciences and humanities, especially its theoretical subdisciplines, in the New (now flailing) Economy, should. Writing in the aftermath of the ‘Left Conservatism’ conference, then graduate student Matt Wray notes that missing from the debate is ‘a fuller analysis of the ways these intellectual fault lines within the Left are contributing to the ascendancy of the Right and the continued rise of market forces in university life. … There is a missing institutional context here which is, in large part, going to determine the outcome of these debates over the next decade and into the next millennium’ (1998, unpaginated). If academic theory (poststructuralist or not) is going to be of any import to the left in the years to come, more attention needs to be paid to the fraught place of its production in the new economy.

What is more important to note for our immediate purposes, however, is that the ‘theory wars’ did not, in any significant way, continue into the next millennium. Why? ‘Seattle 99’ is the easy answer. Writing after the tear gas had cleared, Epstein noted that ‘since the end of the war in Vietnam the division between progressive groups and labor, and for that matter among progressive groups, have weakened the left and allowed the right to dominate public discourse. The mobilization in Seattle holds out the hope, for the first time in decades, of a broad and potentially powerful coalition for a more egalitarian social order’ (Epstein 2002, 55). With the recent upsurge in North American left activism, most clearly marked by Seattle, but also evident in subsequent anti-globalization mobilizations and massive anti-war demonstrations, as well as the growing movement against the prison-industrial complex, there is less need for radical academics to look within their ranks for the conservatism stifling movement.

But how can we best account for this resurgence? More to the point, what role has radical theory played in the resurgence of left activisms, particularly those of the anti-globalization movement? Given the claim that the ascendancy of poststructuralism is correlated to the left’s failings, can the recent ascendancy of left activism be correlated to poststructural innovations? Does the resurgence on the left itself discredit Epstein et al’s condemnation of poststructuralism?

Poststructuralists for post-capitalism

Seattle 99 and subsequent anti-globalization demos were decentralized (affinity groups, blocs...) and diverse (green–labour–feminist–anti-racist–anarchist–socialist–nationalist...) in organization and execution, giving them a particularly postmodern feel. The anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical principles of large
components of the movement (especially the direct-action elements) have a strong resonance with the thinking of figures like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed, Foucault’s (1983, xiv) preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* reads like a hand-bill that might be circulated at a Reclaim the Streets dance party, or anarchist conference:

How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? … This art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending, carries with it a certain number of essential principles:

- Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia
- Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization… .
- Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
- Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality … that possesses revolutionary force.

While anti-globalization activists have undoubtedly read poststructural theorizing, it would be wrong to claim that Foucault and Deleuze, or other thinkers in the poststructural vein, have offered the primary (or secondary …) theoretical support for the movement.

If one had to name the primary theoretical framework informing anti-globalizers, one’s best bet would be anarchism (Graeber 2003), but an anarchism that is decidedly unacademic. Epstein (2001, 1), in a recent article on ‘Anarchism and the Anti-Globalization Movement’, notes that ‘the intellectual/philosophical perspective that holds sway in these circles might be better described as an anarchist sensibility than as anarchism per se. Unlike the Marxist radicals of the sixties, who devoured the writings of Lenin and Mao, today’s anarchist activists are unlikely to pore over the works of Bakunin’.

Primary theoretical support for anti-globalizers is provided by an array of thinkers not necessarily affiliated with universities or taught in academic settings, including Hakim Bey’s *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991), which has offered central intellectual support to autonomist movements in North America (Starr and Adams, 2003, 36), draws heavily on the likes of Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille, Foucault, and Lyotard.

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8 Some recent examples: D.J. Spooky, a hip-hop artist and anti-corporate media activist, recently noted after a performance at UC Santa Cruz (April, 2003) that he was more of ‘Deleuze and Guattari than Marxist kinda guy.’ Spooky’s performance, *A Situation*, was a showing of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* accompanied by a remixed hip-hop soundtrack. Also, Eddie Yuen, in the introduction to *The Battle of Seattle*, suggests that ‘this book, like the movement it describes, is perhaps best read as a network or rhizome rather than as a linear train of information.’ This note suggests a reading and appreciation of Deleuze and Guattari’s work on rhizome theory in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1988). Finally, Hakim Bey’s *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991), which has offered central intellectual support to autonomist movements in North America (Starr and Adams, 2003, 36), draws heavily on the likes of Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille, Foucault, and Lyotard.
Bey, Bob Black, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Subcomandante Marcos, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Starhawk, John Zerzan. The anti-globalization movement is also marked by a plethora of D.I.Y. theorizing. The Internet has provided the conditions for wider circulation of more decentralized activist-generated theory (Bevington and Dixon 2003).

While poststructural theorizing is just as poised to contribute to the sensibility and strategy of anti-globalization activists, as is the reconstructed Marxism informing Epstein’s analysis, progressive thought in general (in its academic forms) has not been especially relevant to the new movement. This is to say that this new and invigorating movement has developed despite the factious disagreements among radical academics. If anti-globalization activists are not generally frequenting texts by Wendy Brown or Judith Butler, neither have they been reading much Terry Eagleton, or David Harvey. Academic progressive thought’s general irrelevance to the anti-globalization movement, the most vital force on the left in recent years, is cause for pause for both sides of the ‘theory wars’.

The journal Critical Inquiry recently hosted a public symposium on the future of theory that is worth mentioning in this regard. The symposium included such luminaries as Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stanley Fish, and Fredric Jameson. Perhaps it was a slow news day, but the event was significant enough for New York Times coverage. In her article ‘The Latest Theory Is that Theory Doesn’t Matter’ (April 19, 2003), Emily Eakin reports on a general consensus amongst a diverse group of leading theorists that theory no longer matters: “…the only panelist to venture a defense of theory … was Mr. Bhabha. ‘There are a number of people around the table here and a number of people in the audience, in fact most of you here are evidence that intellectual work has its place and its uses’” (Eakin 2003, 9). But as Eakin continues, ‘no one spoke up to endorse this claim. In fact, for a conference officially devoted to theory, theory itself got little airtime. For more than an hour, the panelists bemoaned the war in Iraq, the Bush administration, the ascendancy of the right-wing press and the impotence of the left’ (9). While Eakin apparently overstated the anti-theory consensus, we still find this development worth noting. It suggests that divisiveness amongst divergent theorists has been replaced with a more collective concern for theory’s relevance. While we think it bizarre that this concern manifest itself as anti-theory, we agree that the relevance question needs to become more central to academic theory production.

We have already outlined an approach to theory we find helpful in this regard. What we’ve yet to do, is demonstrate how poststructural insights can function in activist tool-kits. We conclude our essay by returning to the three problems outlined above, and demonstrating the ameliorative effect of poststructural tools.

Poststructural power tools

**Problem 1:** The tendency for activists and movements to replicate the very exclusions they are working to allay. This tendency is not only an affront to

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9 One exception to this rule, on the poststructural end, is the school of thought forming around ‘postanarchism.’ Thinkers in this vein include former Black Panther/BLA prisoner Ashanti Alston who is developing a postmodernist anarchist analysis of the Black Panther Party (Brecht Forum, 2003). See www.spooncollective.org for a clearing house of postanarchist thought.

10 Reported by a friend in attendance.
Michel Foucault’s theorization of power is particularly useful for understanding why oppressions are replicated in activist circles. Foucault’s basic point is that power, as it is commonly known: ‘a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state, a mode of subjugation, a general system of domination exerted by one group over another’ (Foucault 1990, 92), is inadequate for explaining how oppressions are maintained. Rather, oppressions are sustained through ‘techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions’ (92). Power is not only ‘out there’ or waiting to be imposed or captured, but is a complex network and relation that extends into the most intimate of relationships. Foucault (1980, 187) elaborates:

Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of family, between a master and his pupil, between every one who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign’s great power over the individual.

This insight removes the possibility of existing outside the workings of power. Activist circles or organizations, even if they are self-consciously created as anti-oppressive spaces, still: (1) exist within societies shot through with micro (parents and children) and macro (Corporation and employees) relations of power; (2) are composed of individuals who have inevitably been conditioned by these relations of power; and (3) are instances of resistance that suggest the continued presence of power. This last point requires more explanation.

‘Where there is power’, writes Foucault, ‘there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (1990, 95). Resistance to power occurs in activist circles because power (for the above two reasons) is always present. The crucial point, however, is that this resistance is never the purging of power, the creation of a pure and power-free environment. Instead, resistance is always a harnessing of power itself, an act of power. Oppression may no longer be present, but power always is. And so is the potential for its misuse.

Deleuze helps us explain this potential. For Deleuze ‘the thrust of Marxism was to define the problem [oppression] essentially in terms of interests (power is held by a ruling class defined by its interests). The question immediately arises: how is it that people whose interests are not being served can strictly support the existing power structure by demanding a piece of the action?’ (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 214). Deleuze is asking why a policeman, for instance, who is still an exploited worker, might be more eager to actively comply with the state and its repression than revolt. ‘Perhaps, this is because in terms of investments, whether economic or unconscious, interest is not the final answer; there are investments of desire that function in a more profound and diffuse manner than our interests dictate. … There are investments of desire that mold and distribute power, that make it the property of the policeman as much as of the prime minister’ (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 215). Deleuze’s basic point is that desire for power, (the thrill of being empowered, of being deferred to, of having power over, however minor that power might be) can often trump the material interests of the individual, organization, or class: ‘The
nature of these investments of desire in a social group explains why political parties or unions, which might have or should have revolutionary investments in the name of class interests, are so often reform oriented or absolutely reactionary on the level of desire’ (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 215). The power that complying with the social order provides is a constant temptation for constituencies who can access it.

On the level of the individual, Deleuze’s policeman example can be extended to a male anti-poverty activist who is sexist. The activist’s sexism will not bring him any immediate material gains (it is doubtful he is counting on his sexism to reinforce a patriarchal system that probably does benefit him materially), and may even endanger the success of his activism or organization, but still persists. For Deleuze, the activist has an investment in oppression, in the thrill of power afforded him by a system of patriarchal social relations. The potential desire for this thrill (and the mostly immaterial benefits it generates), even in the hearts and minds of oppressed or activist groups themselves, makes power’s misuse a constant concern.

The positive spin on this desire – a spin we are invested in – is that of course oppressed and disempowered people want power, to be recognized, to feel important. The problem is that under current conditions, most people cannot imagine what being truly empowered, truly free resembles. On the left there remains a lack of emphasis on enacting productive outlets for our yearnings for power, for revolutionary empowerment. The present lack of revolutionary political space creates the conditions for power’s misuse, for the short-term gain of oppression that itself compromises the possibility of real revolutionary gain.

By ‘revolutionary political space’ we mean what Hakim Bey (1991, 101) terms ‘Temporary Autonomous Zones’ (TAZ) – fugitive liberations ‘of land, of time, of imagination’ from commodification, exploitation, domination, and formal political control (squats, reclaimed streets etc). By ‘real revolutionary gain’ we refer to the more sustained liberations that can follow from the multiplication of revolutionary experience. We resist reducing fugitive liberations, or the TAZ, to mere training grounds for the distant revolutionary moment – the whole point is that freedom (‘an intensification, a surplus, an excess, a potlatch, life spending itself in living rather than merely surviving’) is available right now’ (Bey 1991, 112). But we can’t help desiring more sustained becomings of autonomous political space. Bey gives us our out: ‘Must we wait until the entire world is freed from political control before even one of us can claim to know freedom? Logic and emotion unite to condemn such a supposition. Reason demands that one cannot struggle for what one does not know…’ (Bey 1991, 98; our emphasis). Knowing freedom ephemerally is a precondition to nurturing its more sustained becomings.

But while spaces of fugitive freedom can potentially forestall the desire for oppressive power (clarified below), the TAZ is not a power-free environment; it is an act of power. Foucault’s (1983, xiv) question remains: ‘How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?

Two obvious activist answers/strategies flow from the above insights. The first are teach-ins on privilege and the misuse of power, directed specifically at activists themselves. An anti-sexism workshop recently run for anti-war activists in the Bay Area is a good example: ‘This workshop’, according to the brochure, ‘is designed for gender privileged men and is being organized by a group of men committed to challenging
patriarchy and promoting feminist politics within the anti-war movement in general and the Direct Action to Stop the War organizing in particular’ (Kivel, Lewis, Callender and Crass 2003).

But this strategy is not enough on its own. Our sense is that left movements must work to simultaneously confront internally reproduced subordinations and the inconceivability of revolutionary empowerment. We wager that power’s misuse is a problem in activist circles, and amongst the disempowered more generally, because control and autonomy are desired and sought, but the means for truly living them are few. Without productive outlets for our yearnings for power, desire turns implosively inward – the dangers of settling for the short-term gains of oppression multiply.

Fighting alongside fellow workers for a new or improved contract can be, for example, an empowering experience. But while a contract can positively alter the conditions of the employee/employer hierarchy, it never fundamentally challenges it. Indeed the contract, the pinnacle of an organizing effort, enshrines the fundamental inequity of the employee/employer relationship. We worry about the deep psychological impact of fighting tooth and nail for an affirmation, hopefully on better terms, of one’s fundamental subordination.

We sense that minus glimpses of a world without their subordination, workers and labour activists become more prone to playing the boss internally (abusing one’s place on a union hierarchy, being homophobic, racist, sexist...), which in turn weakens worker solidarity and makes more sustained bids for worlds beyond the employee/employer hierarchy increasingly dreamy. Workers will keep fighting for better contracts, as they should, but creating spaces and times of fugitive but intense freedom – without bosses, without contracts – should become a priority for labour activists.

Speaking generally, the left needs to take practices of freedom – ‘successful raids on consensus reality, breakthroughs into more intense and abundant life’ – more seriously as strategy (Bey 1991, 115). From reclaimed streets to employee-run enterprises, we need more spaces of at least temporary empowerment, spaces that concretely (even for an hour) envision a world where our potentials can flourish – spaces that materialize a liberatory future-present. The wager is that these glimpses of freedom, inter alia, can forestall the desire for oppressive power and the sundered solidarities that follow.

**Problem 2:** The tension between moral and strategic vision – how the righteousness that motivates movement, and attracts others to its cause, can work to stymie the hard-nosed political strategizing generally required for movement success.

A theoretical framework for social change also needs an ethics, a moral basis for the critique of existing society and a moral framework for projecting a vision of a better society (Epstein 1995).

As Epstein articulates, an ethical basis is integral to theories and movements for social change. Strategically, ethical vision is necessary to attract constituencies whose interests do not obviously resonate with movement aims (middle-class college students for instance), clarifying movement goals, and inspiring their pursuit. But ethical vision cannot simply be reduced to ‘strategic ethicism’; its residence beyond the merely strategic (read cynical or self-interested) is central to its attractiveness. The danger, however, is that
reliance on principle or righteousness as a ground for politics can lead more to complacency than to effective activism. The danger of a putatively pure and righteous politics is, for Wendy Brown (2001, 27), its ‘naïveté about the dynamics of power and fluidity of context in which actions motivated by the finest of intentions produce effects of incalculable tragedy and suffering … a politics of abstract principle risks missing its aim and indeed producing the opposite of the wished-for result’. William Chaloupka (2003, 69) elaborates this point: ‘Every movement based on civil disobedience (or other forms of ethical protest) must confront the gap between the moralism of protest’s justifications and the strategies such protest usually must deploy when it interacts with the political world, which is contingent and multileveled’. Our basic claim in this section is that Foucault provides a particularly enabling account of how these two sometimes contradictory impulses can better co-exist.

Foucault’s thinking on this matter is made clear in a debate with Noam Chomsky in 1974. ‘The idea of justice in itself’, insists Foucault, ‘is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power…one can’t, however regrettable it may be, put these notions forward to justify a fight which should …overthrow the very fundaments of our society’ (cited in Rabinow 1984, 6). At first glance, Foucault’s argument is antagonistic towards one of the left’s most crucial guiding principles. But Foucault continues: ‘Rather than thinking of the social struggle in terms of ‘justice’, one has to emphasize justice in terms of the social struggle’ (Foucault and Chomsky 1974). Foucault is not suggesting that justice never be invoked in struggle. Instead, he is arguing against grounding resistance in an abstract principle of justice (justice in itself) that putatively exists prior to struggle. For Foucault, we do not struggle for justice, instead we invoke justice for the struggle – struggle preconditions justice rather than the other way around.\footnote{We agree with the spirit of Foucault’s critique and its political implications (a call to re-focus on how to win, rather than why we should), but want to suggest that Foucault’s argument is itself preconditioned by an investment in the left and its struggles that is not self-explanatory. Foucault’s work suggests that more analytic work on the relationship between struggle and its rationales is required. There is a common ground that enabled the debate between Foucault and Chomsky, and the American theory wars of the 90s, that requires more analysis.}

Foucault’s basic insight is that deferrals to abstract principle (Justice in itself, the Good, the True…) are always power-ridden. This is not to say they are cynical, but to suggest that abstract principle is always immanent; it is always produced on this earth, and under particular historical circumstances. Principle never comes equipped with guarantees; its meaning and authority must constantly be secured by those who invoke it. The political implication of this insight, appropriate to this discussion, is that radical analysis and action should not be about alignment with ethical essence (what is forever Right), but must instead seek to develop ethical vision fitting of the struggle or situation. If ethical vision is always made instead of found, then its invocation is always a political and strategic as much as ethical affair. This realization should not belittle the vision invoked in struggle, but it should always remind of its contingent quality, that it alone guarantees nothing.

Ethical vision is meaningful and powerful because activists make it so, not because of higher origins. For example, writing about efforts to protect old-growth rainforest in
Clayoquot Sound, William Chaloupka (2003, 86) notes how activists framed their battle as the defense of a sacred and ancient forest, one they routinely compared to a cathedral. But like a cathedral, the ancient forest was ‘built’. ‘As concern about logging in the U.S. Pacific Northwest increased’, writes Chaloupka (2003, 86) ‘scientists and activists defined old growth as a political issue, eventually discovering not only that the scientific arguments were convincing, but also that the term ancient forests appealed to a broad potential constituency’. Clayoquot may very well be sacred, but this is the determination of activists, not the forest itself. ‘Knowing this’, writes Chaloupka (2003, 86) ‘should not diminish the importance of the forest, nor should it undermine green commitment to forest preservation. But, politically, activists might better understand their struggle if they appreciate that the process develops the terms of moral contestation, and is not simply driven by those terms. This should not be a matter of embarrassment or reluctance; it is at the core of what politics now does’.

If Foucault’s insight into the immanence of ethical vision is taken seriously – so the wager goes – the danger of principles overcoming politics can be allayed. The hope is that this insight (that principles themselves are always political) can engender greater acceptance and appreciation of the strategic vision that is already at the core of activist work. ‘The passage out of a morally superior but politically marginal position’, writes Chaloupka (2003, 86), ‘requires more adroit thinking about strategic relations to power than many protest movements have ordinarily produced’.

**Problem 3:** The tendency for activists and movements to essentialize their ‘enemy’ – to afford their targets more strength and coherence than they actually possess. This tendency can stoke disempowerment and unsound strategy.

Geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, x) – in her feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory reading of political economy – perfectly captures the dangers associated with this tendency:

When theorists [or activists] depict patriarchy, or racism, or compulsory heterosexuality, or capitalist hegemony they are not only delineating a formation they hope to see destabilized or replaced. They are also generating a representation of the social world and endowing it with performative force. To the extent that this representation becomes influential it may contribute to the hegemony of a ‘hegemonic formation’ and it will undoubtedly influence people’s ideas about the possibilities of difference and change, including the potential for successful political interventions.

Gibson-Graham’s basic point is that how we represent the world contributes to that world’s constitution. By representing institutions (e.g. World Trade Organization) and social formations (e.g. Global Capitalism) as all-powerful, activists are always in danger of quelling resistance.

Why activists and theorists might be compelled to afford ‘Global Capitalism’ more coherence and sway than it actually possesses is a difficult question. The simple answer is that fear and foreboding are powerful motivators. To put it glibly: If a social formation is fragile and not so powerful after all, then why get worked up? The converse, of course, is that if we think the formation too powerful, the resistances generated will ultimately seem
futile. For Gibson-Graham (1996, 126), most leftist representations of globalization and capitalist hegemony have the unintentional effect of constituting non-capitalist spaces as inevitable victims, as ‘sites of potential invasion/envelopment/accumulation, sites that may be recalcitrant but are incapable of retaliation…’. As in the case of ethical vision, what motivates struggle can just as easily stymie it.

This is a tension not easily wished or thought away. But the suggestion thinkers like Gibson-Graham provide, is for activists and theorists to recognize the strategic value of emphasizing the fissures and contradictions that are constitutive of every social formation. ‘Could we see the [Multinational Corporation] in a different light’ asks Gibson-Graham, ‘perhaps as a sometimes fragile entity, spread out and potentially vulnerable?’ (1996, 127). She continues:

If we create a hegemonic globalization script with the MNC, the financial sector, the market and commodification all set up in relations of mutual reinforcement, and we then proclaim this formation as a ‘reality’, we invite particular outcomes. Certain cues and responses will be seen as ‘normal’ while others will be seen as quixotic and unrealistic. By querying globalization and queering the body of capitalism we may open up the space for many different scripts and invite many different actors to participate in the realization of different outcomes (Gibson-Graham 1996, 145).

The wager here is that emphasizing contingency in our always incomplete representations of always incomplete formations or institutions can effect more hopeful and proliferative praxis. The multiple formations we are fighting (racism, compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy, capitalist hegemony…), and their points of articulation, are powerful and abominable, but they are also replete with cracks and contradictions ripe for activist capitalization.

Not only is capitalism and its supportive institutions – Gibson-Graham’s emphasis – always open to activist intervention, but spaces of non-capitalist economic relationship already exist everywhere on earth – a reality often missed by over-emphasizing capitalism’s reach and formidability. During a recent lecture at UC Santa Cruz, Fredric Jameson provocatively suggested that it is now easier to imagine the world ending in nuclear holocaust, than to imagine the end of capitalism. This point is polyvalent, but one of its effects is to dull the prospect of building non-capitalist worlds. Gibson-Graham’s argument is that people world-wide are already concretely imagining and enacting non-capitalist worlds daily. Community gardens, employee-run community enterprises, pirate radio stations, free stores, online informational clearinghouses, volunteering, bartering, gift giving, and so on. Whether consciously or not, people are always already participating in non-capitalist living and exchange. If capitalism is everywhere, so is non-capitalism.

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12 See the Community Economies Project, of which Gibson-Graham is part, for more examples: www.communityeconomies.org (last accessed 08 March 2004). ‘The project developed’ the website reads ‘as a way of documenting the multiple ways in which people are making economies of difference and in the process building new forms of community’.
Gibson-Graham’s basic point is that when our targets are afforded more strength, reach, and coherence than they actually possess, we run the risk of downplaying the potential for resistance, and the actually existing resistances already in play. Our world exudes imagined and enacted possibility. Hopelessness can be as naïve as hope.

Concluding comment

This essay is inspired by the vision of academic theory as ‘an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power’ (Foucault 1977, 208). Poststructural theory has often been criticized for its remove, irrelevance, and even danger to progressive movements. While these criticisms are not without grounding, we have worked to indicate how particular tools from the poststructuralist tool-kit are relevant and helpful to activists. Our hope is that these, and other insights, can be better circulated in the future. Our ultimate hope is for more camaraderie amongst left theorists, but most importantly, between theorists and activists.

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References


On Being Disengaged

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Introduction

This paper is about routine oppression and neglect and my own involvement, and lack of involvement, in issues of social injustice both inside and outside the academy. My comments are self-critical, which might appear self-evidently desirable but it is a posture which could lead to self-indulgence. I also reflect on my own work in a chronological fashion so nostalgia, particularly for the seemingly unproblematic radicalism of the 1970s, might also affect my observations. Towards the end of the essay, putting my own story into context, I will try to make some generalizations about the production of knowledge in relation to both theory and practice, drawing particularly on some recent psychoanalytic work on the structure and organisation of institutions.

Practice

About eighteen months ago in Hull, I was walking past a Kwiksave supermarket, when I met a Gypsy family who I had not visited for years, since I had stopped the regular contacts which were a feature of my ‘research project’. We recognised each other from a distance and I immediately felt awkward about the encounter. I shook hands with the woman and this increased my discomfort. Somehow, I had forgotten that any form of bodily contact between adults is avoided. The woman’s husband had suffered a stroke and was in a wheelchair pushed by her daughter. He was unable to talk and, since we had once been close friends, I promised to visit them on their site within a week. On leaving the family, I had further negative thoughts. If I visited them, I would be obliged to visit most of the other families on the site, about twenty-five in total. Then, families on the other main Traveller site in the city would inevitably hear about my visit and I would have to visit them too. So, I thought that I would be letting myself in for at least two full days of

visiting and the promise of further trips to the two sites when I was busy with other things at work. I was unenthusiastic.

I need not have worried because, when I went to see disabled Jimmy and his family, I found that nearly everyone on the site who I had previously known was dead. A number of these deaths were unsurprising since some of my former contacts were old, but it seemed that far too many survived only until their forties or fifties. When I first had contact with Gypsies in east Yorkshire, in the 1970s, death was also a frequent event, but then it was primarily babies and young children dying from gastroenteritis and other illnesses associated with poor sanitation and a lack of access to doctors and medical services. Now, if I were investigating the problem of apparently higher than average mortality, I would be looking at diet, problems of immobility, obesity and a high occurrence of diabetes, and the heavily polluted nature of the local environment which has been the living space of this group of Gypsies for the last twenty five years.

The Gypsies on this site were forced into a location which the city council had deemed unfit for residential use because of the proximity of heavy industry (it was a choice of moving onto the site or facing continuing prosecution for illegal occupation of land) but their presence in the city is no longer an issue for the local press, neither their treatment as a pariah group or their deprivation. Ironically, in February, 2003, a city council free newspaper ran a feature on the woman in my story and her sister, focusing on the ornate interior of her best caravan (her ‘show trailer’) with no reference to the conditions on the site. As the object of moral panics amplified by the local newspapers, Gypsies have been replaced in the city by Afghan and Kosovan Albanian asylum seekers. The Gypsies, who have never had strong political representation in England, now have a political status comparable to that of the Hungarian Roma, who, unnoticed by most Hungarians, constitute the majority of male prisoners in Budapest prisons although Roma are only about five percent of the total population, or of Australian Aborigines who also have a low profile politically, despite their oppression.

Academic engagement

When I started working with Gypsies with my partner, who started a school for Traveller children, my involvement was primarily motivated by feelings about social injustice and directed to practical measures to deal with immediate problems, such as finding sympathetic solicitors to take on eviction cases. This work was quite distinct from my academic life which, at that point, was devoted to obscure exercises in spatial analysis. The latter seemed trivial and rather pointless but I initially felt uneasy about writing academic papers on Gypsies because academics did not seem to me to be the kind of people who would get involved as a result of reading anything I might have written. This now seems arrogant. In any case, I soon put aside my reservations and wrote a short paper for *Antipode* followed by a more scholarly piece for the *Town Planning Review* in 1978. One concern here was academic legitimacy, which I took to mean drawing on fairly solid mainstream theory to underpin my arguments about discrimination and oppression. I knew nothing of Foucault’s arguments about space, power and control but I did stumble on Basil Bernstein’s Durkheimian theses about power, hierarchies and boundaries.

Bernstein’s ideas were attractive and relevant and, in retrospect, I would consider this to have been ‘good enough’ theory. If the object of writing is to raise political consciousness and to influence practice, why bother with further theoretical elaboration?
However, this Occam’s razor view of academic writing – that it is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer, as Bertrand Russell expressed Occam’s principle – does not accord with the idea of academic knowledge as an element of the accumulation process. There is no such thing as ‘good enough’ theory when theories have to be continually ‘produced’ and I found myself being drawn quite willingly into this process of theory production. Intrigued by critical theory, particularly the possibilities of re-working spatial theory through psychoanalysis, I became more concerned with the rich literature of psychoanalysis than with the fate of marginalised minorities as I felt that ideas gleaned from psychoanalysis would deepen understanding. Apart from the intellectual challenges presented by this literature, my interest was also stimulated by the possibility of material rewards. It seemed to me that others who were engaged in more conventional research, based more on the critical reading of texts and less on involvement with other people, were getting promoted and I was not. Rethinking spatial theory from a psychoanalytical perspective provided the possibility of producing a number of reflective journal articles and book chapters which might interest critical theorists and add to my personal capital. I became more convinced about this strategy as a result of the attention I received from people in other disciplines – sociology, criminology, architecture, education, and so on. I was a sucker for flattery.

Interestingly, somewhat later, when giving a paper on fantasy/phantasy landscapes and processes of exclusion2 at a conference with a group of anthropologists, one of them argued that ‘we have done all this before’, but, in their case, using the theoretical arguments of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966). This prompted me to become quite defensive about psychoanalysis. I was now contributing quite happily to the accumulation process, building up personal capital and contributing to my department’s capital within the university. Fitting into the audit culture had its professional rewards although, as Fred Hirsch had anticipated in 1977, in his *Social Limits to Growth* (Hirsch 1977), this obsession with the accumulation of academic capital is intellectually unproductive and ultimately self-defeating. Knowledge becomes ‘obsolete’ with increasing rapidity and novelty is valued in the same way as material goods. In my own case, unable to resist a move from practical involvement to theoretical elaboration, a question of changing emphasis rather than one replacing the other, I had shifted from people to texts.

**The madness of institutions**

Having argued above that psychoanalytical theorising in cultural geography may not add much to what we already know, I now want to suggest that psychoanalysis can actually be quite helpful in exposing the madness of taken-for-granted everyday practices. In 2001, I attended a conference in London on ‘lost childhoods’, organised by the Multi-Lingual Psychoanalytical Society. I was listening to people who had experienced exile – from Hungary in 1956 after the Russian invasion, for example, or, in the case of Edith Kurzweil, the Freudian historian, from Germany in one of the kindertransporten to French-speaking Canada. Several of the speakers at this conference talked about ‘splitting’, the psychic separation of different phases of experience, particularly childhood from adulthood which, with migration, was often associated with a change of language. I would

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2 This was an application of psychoanalytical theory, particularly Kleinian object relations. ‘Phantasy’ indicates an unconscious process as distinct from the conscious process of fantasising.
suggest that my own movement from direct involvement to texts is also a kind of splitting although I have never entirely split off my earlier experience from my current interests. Ethnographic experience continues to inform my theoretical writing and my earlier empirical work was underpinned by large doses of social and anthropological theory. However, I can recognise a shift, if not actually a split or rupture, which has happened in an institutional context which encourages the formation of strong boundaries and hierarchies as a defence against environmental uncertainty – disorder and chaos. As Gordon Lawrence (2002) puts it: ‘…there is pressure on managers of institutions to bring into being organisational forms and structures which offer themselves and other role holders a feeling of certainty which, in fantasy, will withstand the environmental uncertainty and banish the psychotic anxieties’.

Akin to gated communities, universities are institutions which can provide satisfactions for people who will adhere to ritual practices which remain unquestioned within the insulating bounds of the institutional or suburban capsule, whether it is mowing the lawn, producing so many papers a year, or sitting on committees. However, the comfortable sense of routine and repetition may be threatened by individuals who eschew the usual rewards and commit themselves to ‘unproductive’ work, while conformity is encouraged by implicit and occasionally explicit penalties for working outside conventional boundaries. Thus, working with Travellers on practical problems and not publishing, or doing something which could be of practical value while living in a poor neighbourhood, would be penalised, deemed unproductive (although lip-service is now paid to such activity under the heading of ‘social reach-out’). Conversely, the unpredictable, chaotic aspects of ethnography or involvement in grassroots political movements can be avoided by producing the right sort of academic capital and staying inside the boundaries constructed by the institution. Lawrence’s argument, however, is that a retreat from the unpredictable, uncertain environment into a rule-bound but predictable environment where the rewards are clearly identified, increases psychotic anxieties and further strengthens the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Thus, in this sense, recent trends in the organisation of production in the academy do resemble the progress from CCTV to gated communities, to panic rooms. The need for security creates structures which actually increase the sense of insecurity and, hence, a need for stronger structures to provide the illusion of greater security, and so on. The corollary of this is conformity. The maintenance of strong boundaries requires consensus and predictability. Within institutions, this is achieved through the vertical organisation of activity – the concentration of power at the top and the downward transmission of decisions, coupled with increased surveillance and accountability to keep a check on deviance and resistance. In this context, non-conformity becomes more threatening, as Basil Bernstein recognised forty years ago, hence perpetuating psychotic anxieties.

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3 Psychotic anxieties are anxieties of a primitive nature which as Steiner (1987, 69-70) argues ‘threaten the immature ego and lead to a mobilisation of primitive defenses. Splitting, idealisation and projective identification operate to create rudimentary structures made up of idealised good objects from the persecutory bad ones’. The point here is that primitive anxieties surface when people become anxious about external threat or about themselves becoming transgressive within a highly structured system. Psychotic anxiety is associated with what Melanie Klein terms ‘the paranoid-schizoid position’, where individuals are unable to distinguish shades of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and have a strong sense of a threatening ‘other’.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have described the history of some of my own research projects and I would conclude that it has followed a rather predictable and depressing course which mirrors changes in academia that discourage long-term involvement with communities. The idea of the university as the source of marketable products has narrowed the range of admissible activities. The emphasis on the generation of money and the production of a specified range of literature as commodities is insulating the academy and contributing to the creation of what Lieven de Cauter (de Cauter, 2000) has described as a ‘capsular society’. The production of value in academia, narrowly defined, militates against border crossings because this would increase environmental uncertainty. In the case of research which was really ‘grassroots’, seriously involving people outside the academy, it is likely to be judged unproductive in terms defined by academic audits such as the British Research Assessment Exercise, for example. It hampers the efforts of departments to ‘succeed’, according to market criteria. Thus, the insulation or capsularisation of knowledge production, discouraging movement outside the academy (apart from cynical, short-term ‘reach-out’ projects), simultaneously encourages work on the quantifiable – texts, funded projects which generate data in the short-term, and so on. I have suggested here that this is a kind of madness, a paranoid-schizoid disturbance, which is permeating the most developed societies. The institution becomes locked into a system with strong rules determined by the state, one reflecting the needs of capital, and is less able to respond effectively to the needs of others, particularly those who are categorised as ‘other’, who are distanced from the researcher and would-be activist. Relating my own work to this kind of institutional change, I can see that the rather loose and informal organisation of the academy in the 1970s, facilitated my research – few people knew what I was doing and I did not have to account for myself at six-monthly intervals, nor generate a stipulated amount of research income. Subsequently, I was more inclined to fit in with the demands of a more strongly bounded institution, producing papers which counted in the all too frequent audits. For cultural geography, the institutional context makes pressing problems of alienation, racism and distanciation more difficult to address. Geography, like other increasingly insulated disciplines, becomes a part of the problem and the case for resistance becomes more compelling.

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‘Say Something Constructive or Say Nothing at All’: Being Relevant and Irrelevant in and Beyond the Academy Today

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Introduction

In recent years it seems that a ‘crisis’ has been invoked in social and cultural geography at fairly regular intervals. At the height of postmodern and poststructuralist influence this may, retrospectively at least, have been expected. That it continues seems somewhat surprising. Indeed, the constant naming of a crisis sometimes reminds one of us at least of the point made by Jacques Derrida in his essay ‘Economies de la crise’. Here Derrida argues that such senses of crisis are often never more than an institutional resistance to a more radical threat to a particular organisation. The ‘representation’ of crisis and the rhetoric it organises always seeks to tame it, to domesticate a more serious and formless threat (Derrida cited in Wigley 1993, 182). Now what could a more radical threat be? Perhaps this could be any one of a multitude of things that haunt our geographies. But maybe it is a threat to the very organisation of a discipline and the domestic space of its institutionalisation in the houses of knowledge that are universities? After all, some form of reflection on the organisation of the discipline, if not university work and education itself, would perhaps be one aspect of thinking and practicing ‘beyond the academy’. However, what appears to get focused upon in at least some callings of crisis seems to be more of a personal existential crisis at the perceived lack of contact with

'real world politics’ rather any particular challenge to the houses of knowledge themselves.

One current aspect of these crises, one with which we will briefly deal here, appears to be the perceived ‘irrelevance’ of social and cultural geography to transnational, national and local policy initiated by governments and institutions (Martin 2001; Peck 1999). Michael Pacione (1999, xii) has less polemically argued that as a result of the election of a Labour government in the UK since 1997 new opportunities have emerged for academics to have influence in policy and its formulation, something he implies they have patently not been doing enough of. More forthrightly, there have also been accusations that human geographers increasingly ignore social policy, poverty and social inequalities in their work (Dorling and Shaw 2002). In response to this latter accusation, Doreen Massey has argued that in nearly all of the current talk of policy in geography there is a curious absence of politics (Massey 2002). We would concur with this argument. Moreover, personally, in some recent experiences we have had working with architects and planners this has often been borne out in practice. In this work, around policies of public participation within urban regeneration, we have found other academics often unwilling, sometimes hostile, towards critical engagement with policy in ways which we have found to be severely problematic. Whereas for us public participation should provide a forum for theory to engage in spatial practice in order to form policy (as we shall argue it does in respect of new social movements such as anti-globalisation movements) public participation has tended to follow a curiously timid politics.

Drawing on this experience, and on wider debates about policy, we wish to discuss some of the tensions which have long been found in policy arenas regarding engagement by academics in policy, and a potential danger of letting critique, which may be central to teaching and other research work, slide away in the face of accepting the limitations and definitions of much policy work. This is not an attack on those who are engaging with policy. Rather it is a reflection on some old problems around ‘relevance’, and upon a tendency, which too often seems to occur in policy work. That is, a disavowal that critique can be, indeed should be, a central aspect of engaging in policy, or indeed any other work. In this we argue that critique is not something to be left behind upon engaging in work which is seen to be ‘beyond the academy’.

Relevance – a redundant concept

Ways of merging research practice and social and political actions have been gaining wider credence in the academy, though there are obvious resistances to such views. Recent research in human geography has sought to go beyond what is often set up as an academic/activist dichotomy. Much of this work has sought to deconstruct an apparent conflict between the emotional engagement of activists, where an apparent potential exists to uncritically accept the views of the group or individuals involved, and the perceived need for distance, objectivity and hence disengagement in proper academic research (Fuller 1999). The principal argument here is that our academic work is always situated, is already politically and emotionally engaged in some sense, and this can be more focused and activist oriented whether inside or outside the academy.

Beyond the academy, it can be noted that some people may still hold to a division between academic and activist. Whether these are differentiations about who is a real
activist and who is not, or in the anti-intellectual orientation of much of the British mainstream press, academics may not always be well thought of. However, in discussing this relationship we did perhaps feel that one reason activists do, at times learn to mistrust academics is because of the ways some academics do engage in, and help to formulate, policy.

All of which points to the differing ways that activism is practically and discursively produced, and how activism can at times all too easily be deemed an exclusionary practice (Maxey 1999). Moreover, such views regarding activism and ‘non-activism’ point to the differing ways that domination and resistance are often interwoven in more complex ways than is often thought (Sharp et al. 2000).

In a different, but related, vein there have recently been a number of geographical articles appealing for another sense of ‘real-world’ engagement, reflecting on a perceived need to develop a new geography of public policy (Peck 1999; Martin 2001). For example, the editorial of a special issue of the Scottish Geographical Journal recently argued that ‘the issue of relevance has lain dormant for too long’, and claimed that new possibilities are opening for socially informed ethics to underlie social policy and for research findings to influence policy (Pacione 1999). What these possibilities for relevance are is, of course, a central question, seemingly one based on current opportunities afforded by more enlightened government policy, though this seems a somewhat hollow hope even just four years on from Pacione’s plea.

At least some of these calls for ‘relevance’ seem to reflect impatience with the theoretical engagements human geography has been ensconced in. This is an unfair complaint in many cases, a complaint which has implications which seem to imply that we have theory adequately worked out, now lets get on with engagement. Yet what is missed here is the need for theory and practice to be conjoined, for practice to reflect on theory and theory to reflect on practice. Seemingly many people agree with doing this, it is almost an unspoken truism. But, it seems to us that this supposed truism is not enacted sufficiently, and indeed can too easily become ‘accidentally’ lost in the processes of policy engagement.

A second point here is that it may very well be argued that human geography is not an overly theoretical discipline. Check out geography journals and compare them to sociology journals and we think it will be seen that sociologists have much more of a focus on theory than geographers. In fact it may be argued that it is a fairly narrow band of academics who do engage overtly with theory in geography, perhaps we would want to ask why this is so, and why it is not engaged with more? Conversely, moreover, many geographers do engage in fairly detailed empirical work, despite what Ron Martin (2001, 202) (in an otherwise pertinent article) has rather insultingly termed a move towards ‘thin empirics’. So, according to this view, what seems to be missing is that this empirical work is not connecting into policy, though some also seem to be arguing that empirical work is not of sufficient depth. Regarding this second point however, we can say that to some extent empirical work has changed in its focus in recent years with the turn to more cultural approaches across human geography, but this does not mean it has necessarily become ‘thin’. Any move towards empirical work having less depth, if it is indeed occurring, might more plausibly have something to do with pressures to publish brought about by the RAE, in the UK at least, and more specifically how members of university
departments have embraced the RAE and other accompanying educational reforms which have increased competition between geography departments.

Moreover, in the hailing of crisis from some quarters in human geography, there also seems to be a constant worrying about ‘where we are’ and ‘where we are going’. This seems particularly evident in cultural geography, maybe as a result of the kinds of veiled criticisms from those calling for more policy engagement and relevance. Frankly, we cannot really understand this hand wringing. Geography seems to be in a fairly healthy state in terms of its subject matter at the moment. Certainly architects and sociologists we have discussed this with find this representation of crisis in geography perplexing. Where problems may lie may be in the ways that as a discipline it is being squeezed at school level, rationalised as a discipline in universities, and increasingly separated between school and university (Bonnett 2003). Perhaps this does have a relation to the ways politicians do not see geography as particularly relevant, or perhaps geography has become tainted in the same ways sociology was in the 1980s. But if that is what is meant by these calls for more policy engagement this should be stated openly and acted upon.

What we simply want to raise here are just a few questions about critique today, and how an admonishment can, and indeed is, creeping into current calls for relevance, especially policy-relevance, to be constructive and responsible in this critique. We would suggest that this admonishment threatens important aspects of much of the theory which has been used in the uptake of critical theory in geography, and threatens to limit the scope of critique, and especially that ‘utopian’ capacity to think beyond what is. After all ‘relevance’ of course implies ‘irrelevance’ with all the baggage and judgement that this implies. So we do not follow the Home Secretary of the UK government in his argument that either we should have ‘influence or irrelevance’ (see Massey 2000), as if that is all the choice there is in his narrow conception of the world.

As such it needs to be asked in what ways relevance is being viewed in these debates. For example, one point made by David Harvey back in 1974, in those older ‘relevancy’ debates was who is policy research relevant to, why and how? Often, (or is it increasingly?), such work may only have relevance in terms of needing to bring in research monies to safeguard jobs at a time of increasing university rationalisation and competition as well as privatisation (see Levidow 2002). After all, much of the recent concern of academics in terms of policy engagement is dictated by departmental pressures to bring in funding, in not dissimilar ways to the ways consultancies and NGOs have been moving towards where the latest funding is to be found. This, in turn, is often money and resources, which rarely find their ways to those who need them most, to the poorest who so often have been on the receiving end of policies of regeneration, and have felt few benefits of it. We need some more reflexivity here of our roles in terms of such practices of policy, and how our lived practice can be brought more into line with our theorizing about that practice (Massey 2000, 133). Relevance here becomes a more problematic notion than many acknowledge, one we frankly see as increasingly redundant.

In saying this we are not seeking to engage in what Jamie Peck has termed the ‘othering’ of policy-relevant research (indeed others, such as the fore-mentioned UK government Home Secretary seem to be arguing this). Nor are we seeking to uphold an academic bias against policy studies. Moreover, this is not a position against engagement with policy at all, it is just how this is done, for whom and why, and with what aims. Frankly, we would say by all means get involved in policy and encourage others, but don’t
admonish those who choose not to, or follow other trajectories of socially and politically engaged research.

**Adorno and critique**

Some time ago in a radio talk and subsequent essay on critique in Germany, Adorno (1998) made the point that critique was generally viewed in public opinion with hostility, and that again and again it was intoned that critique must be responsible. This public distrust of critique, he claimed, emanated from a widespread anti-intellectualism and submissiveness to officialdom, and he argued that critique was becoming departmentalized. No longer was it a right and duty of citizens to engage in critique at an everyday level. Now it had become the privilege of those who are qualified by virtue of the recognized and protected positions they occupy. Moreover, he argued that in this view it was an unstated norm that ‘whoever practices critique without having the power to carry through his opinion, and without integrating himself into the official hierarchy – should keep silent’ (Adorno 1998, 284).

But more than this, Adorno argued that in philosophy, and in academia more generally, there was also a strong view that critique should be constructive. An insinuation being that someone can only practice critique if they can propose something better than what is being criticised (Adorno 1998, 287). For Adorno this again was a wholly negative point of view, where – by making the positive a condition for it – critique was tamed from the very beginning, therefore losing its vehemence.

Putting aside Adorno’s much cited pessimism about capitalist domination of the cultural sphere there is nevertheless something pertinent in what he is trying to get at here. Namely, the perceived roles of critically engaged academics in public culture, and, secondly, the ways this injunction to engage in constructive and responsible critique moves through ‘acceptable’ critical practice, and can perhaps blunt the ability to think and act differently. Partly, this is because the possible is allowed to define the limits of what is imagined (or rather the limits of critique), when the possible is defined not by the real world but by the perceived and subjective limits of a particular public policy.

**Legitimacy and critique**

Our purpose in using Adorno here is to argue that those calling for policy relevance appear, perhaps inadvertently, to seek to determine the limits of critique through defining or authorising what is seen to be ‘relevant’ and hence legitimate. Moreover to be legitimate means entering into the territory of that which is being critiqued in order to offer something more ‘constructive’, again limiting the potential of critique. From this we would want to argue that subtle processes are at work here through notions such as ‘relevance’ regarding who is legitimately seen to be able to engage seriously in critique, as well as what kinds of things can be legitimately critiqued and how.

Moving beyond this discussion of policy relevance, there are of course other much more serious examples whereby critique is termed irrelevant and illegitimate by dominant groups in society. Many, will no doubt remember the comments from the likes of Tony Blair, describing recent May Day ‘anti-capitalist’ protests as a ‘spurious cause’. More recently, we have heard Blair and other world leaders, and heads of global institutions, attacking ‘anti-globalisation’ protesters for much the same reasons. Such groups, or
movements, have been baited for supposedly not having a coherent or constructive criticism of globalization or capitalism. Again and again we hear ‘What is their alternative?’ being asked in rather self-important ways. What is often overlooked here is that to a great extent such movements have long decided to more-or-less by-pass the mainstream media. Moreover they have set up and developed their own fora, and are actively engaged in seeking new forms of governance, with very different conceptions of policy than we currently face. It may be argued that much recent theoretical work in geography fits much better with the emerging policies of such new social movements because they are focused on developing new spatial politics, while current government policy (whether UK or not) increasingly seeks to produce suffocating spaces of private consumption.

Many national leaders have since turned to calling for constructive dialogue with protesters. In many ways these calls can be seen as attempts to co-opt the more reformist aspects of this wide ranging movement, especially those calling for a strengthening of the nation state as a bulwark to global flows (see Hardt 2002). Indeed, much research money after Seattle has seemed to be heading to academics researching how more NGOs could be brought into the policy process, which in many ways can be seen as an all too familiar strategy. Such moves imply some NGOs moving inside the prescribed house of policy, and in doing so accepting the legitimacy of that economy, that way of ordering the world, which many others do not wish to do.

Reactions since the G8 protestations in Genoa have also focused on accusing more hard-line protesters (for example those calling for cancellation of debt, rather than a reduction of debt) of being selfish westerners, who were not representing the interests of the poor, and that these self-same NGOs and protesters were no more accountable than the organizations they attacked. Indeed the general argument here is that the interests of the poor and excluded of the world are more truly represented by the World Trade Organization, the Group of 8 countries, the IMF, and indeed those private corporations who can supposedly increase trade and thus wealth-for-all (George 2001). This, of course, is another part of these institutions and politicians’ attempts to create and hold together a neoliberal, new realism consensus of accommodation to the market, not a consensus based on agreement but more on there supposedly being no alternative whether we like it or not.

In such ways, many of the critiques of globalisation (or globalism), capitalism, debt, and the many other issues which make up current cycles of struggle, are ruled illegitimate, unrealistic, and ill-thought out from the start by leaders of nation states and institutions, as well as by many in mainstream media. So too are the tactics of direct action often adopted by protesters. In this there is nothing surprising, and shows the real potential threat that politicians, corporations and institutions view in these protests.

Beyond these politicisations around legitimacy it might be argued that policy dominated notions such as social capital could lead in one way to thinking that these social movements are engaging in the very forms of activity which are seen to be necessary aspects of ‘healthy community life’ or ‘democratic societies’. Yet, notions of social capital again too often neglect any wider political engagement or critical analysis. For it is clear that only some forms of ‘participation’, which would seem to be a central aspect of social capital, and action are to be accepted as legitimate by governments or international institutions such as the World Bank that have enthusiastically embraced the concept. Indeed the limits of what are to be classed as legitimate action – as aspects of social capital
‘Say Something Constructive or Say Nothing at All’

– are seemingly becoming narrower and narrower all the time in the UK, the USA, and Europe in these post 11th September – let us call them ‘new authoritarian’ – times.

Being otherwise constructive in critique

As mentioned earlier, concurrent with developments for and against the dominating notions of ‘globalism’, many recent academic articles have called for critical geographers to engage with policy to a much greater extent, arguing that there is an intellectual bias against policy research (along with in-depth empirical work) and that the critical cultural approaches adopted in geography have little practical policy or social relevance at all (Martin 2001). In some cases this may be at least debatable. Yet, we think the attempt to discuss what relevance is here has further problems running through it. One fore-mentioned problem is around what Michael Pacione (1999, xii) argued was a new opportunity for academics to have influence in policy at a time when there is also greater possibility for a socially informed ethic to inform policy formulation. Yet, he also admits that ‘the acceptance and implementation of research findings is dependent upon the state’s ideological stance in relation to the issues under investigation’, implying this is currently more favorable to critical geographers’ influences. In the British government case, as with many others, this ideological stance has been seen to be one of promoting neoliberalism in both form and intent, though in more integrative ways than have previously been sought. We would argue such policies deserve to be thoroughly critiqued, challenged and struggled against for what they are doing and what they open on to. Such openings include the wider ways they accommodate power to the market and corporate interests, making possible not only the increasing privatization of public services (including education), but also the re-imposition of work discipline amongst many other factors.

But if there is also a temptation to be ‘positive’, and ‘constructive’ in terms of engagement with official policy, there is also the potential that we can all too easily be always drawn into trying to make such policies less bad, where we accept as legitimate the ground such policy sets out. While we would not dismiss such approaches, we feel that limiting ourselves in such ways takes us again into a realm of potential limitation of what is possible to the ‘new realism’ of neoliberalism.

Yet, there are other ways we can think of what could be constructive forms of critique, and many geographers are working to do this. One sense, refers back to the kind of work we mentioned at the beginning which seeks to surpass the activist/academic opposition. For example, this could follow the kind of ‘third space’ approach advocated so well by Routledge (1996). This is obviously strongest when there is strong sympathy with the aims of a particular group, and yet also seeks to engage in what Gunn would term a ‘rigorous conversation’ by means of immanent critique, one which lacks the constraints of methodology therefore allowing no categorical holds to be barred (Gunn 1989, 104-5). But Paul Routledge rightly points to how difficult this can be in the context of the increasing workload faced in universities amongst other factors. Other researchers have also shown how engagement can be undertaken in fieldwork and how activist experience can be used to highlight inadequacies of some theories (Halfacree 1999), as well as how practical changes can be a part of academic work. Such studies show the growing strength of critical geographies, a strength which goes beyond previous radical geographies, but also reconnects with the spirit of these.
But again in our view the many moves towards making academic work policy-relevant carry potential problems. For it seems all too easy to go from what some regard as ‘theoretical narcissism’ to a supposed relevance which leaves behind many of the strengths of some cultural approaches. This point has also been made recently by Anderson and Smith in their call for more emotional geographies, and their questioning of why policy based work is not more interested in post-rationalist ways of thinking and practicing (Anderson and Smith 2001, 7).

Moreover, we would suggest there is often a distinction to be made between a critical geography that intervenes and a policy oriented geography which is supposedly relevant. One of the problems with engaging with policy is that the very people who are the subjects of policy are all too easily simply read back into a series of pre-determined categories set by policy makers and their interpreters. In such ways we find that while researchers are mapping what Kitchin and Hubbard (1999, 195) term the ‘exclusionary landscape’, they often do so from the same situated perspectives as policy makers, failing to see how things may look ‘from below’ in its differing forms.

Here a brief example from architecture and planning of the difficulty of engaging with policy can perhaps help provide a little illustration. Public participation has been one of the key factors of the public face of the King’s Cross redevelopment in north London where the new Channel Tunnel Rail link is currently being built, and where large areas of ‘disused’ railway lands are being re-developed (see Deckha 2003 for a recent overview of redevelopment in King’s Cross). The most recent practices of public participation that have taken place here took three forms: meetings, consultation documents and workshops. Through these media it appeared that there was an opportunity to provide a forum for local people to be involved in the decision making concerning the development of the old railway lands. The reality however was that there was again a curious lack of critical politics involved in the policy and implementation of participation. Moreover, voices of resistance to the development of the area have been systematically sidelined, co-opted, or physically removed from the area. It could be argued that decisions had already been made by business and local planning authorities and that participation was about ‘manufacturing consent’. For example, recent consultation documents, which were heralded by the main developers (Argent St. George) as highly innovative took the form of framed questions in multiple choice format that looked visually impressive, but highly constrained possible responses, which in any case were to have no binding impact upon decision-making.

Parallel with the King’s Cross redevelopment, participatory workshops were run by the London based Architecture Foundation in developing new methodologies of participation with different groups of local people also in the King’s Cross area of north London. Whilst some of these approaches were genuinely innovative, we found that meetings had been set up with groups of ‘old people’, ‘black women’, ‘children under 10’, and other seemingly ‘social’ categories. On the one hand this could be seen to be ‘inclusive’, as it sought to give a voice to some groups that may be deemed to often be ‘excluded’, on the other such divisions seemed somewhat limited and contrived (see Deckha 2003, 51). We think these categories were partly drawn because they seemed to be ‘relevant’, but also because group members could easily be identified. But not only did this socially divide people according to very questionable categories (such as leisure categories being taken to represent everyday life, or by ‘ethnic’ grouping) which presupposed shared interests in such groups, but not across them, it also denied more
political subjectivities by dividing local people in such ways. One way of reading this situation would be that this could have been a deliberate attempt to deny multiple, and cross-generational, or class based senses of identities and connections. More likely, of course, it was a lack of critical thinking in approach to policy – in this case a European wide policy focused on encouraging participation in urban policy. We would argue that this lack of critical practice is symptomatic of many architectural and planning based approaches to participation and policy, perhaps a situation that many critical geographers would think they would not find themselves in, but which can all to easily be produced when working with other partners.

There are numerous other examples which we could relate here of supposed attempts at participation of local communities through policies such as Single Regeneration Budgets or New Deal for Communities, schemes which have involved academics who have failed or been unwilling to question basic policies, or even to define what participation might be, beyond some vague sense of ‘acting’, ‘involvement’ or ‘awareness’. That is, participation of local people has tended to be viewed as being about people acting as agents in urban design, regeneration or development, or else being passive, often without analysing these constructions adequately (see Turner and Michael 1996). Yet, there is another sense of course about such local people being enacted, through all kinds of processes and mediations which are often not part of the action that local people are allowed, or can get, into. These are problems that a critical sense of policy and practice need increasingly to be attuned to.

**End points**

Here we want to reiterate the point that we are not against policy focused geography per se. We do however object to continued sterile brandishing of the term relevance in ways that to us seem narrow, exclusionary and morally judgmental without being reflexive about the situatedness of such judgements. We would like to dispose of the notion of relevance, it being a fairly redundant discourse and an increasingly closed off spurious debate. We also find that, often because of increased work pressures or constraints placed on funding, policy related research can lack a critical edge. That is that the critical work of the academy can be ‘accidentally lost’ in the process of engagement with policy. Perhaps this just makes life simpler, or maybe it is just too hard a struggle working with other agencies continually limiting possibilities set against the aforementioned restrictions of academic labour. But we argue it is too easy for critique to become left out of policy work, and even to be rendered ‘illegitimate’ within policy networks.

Academics do not just have to get more involved in mainstream policy ‘relevant’ oriented work to be doing meaningful work ‘beyond the academy’ today. Geographer’s involvement in political work in social movements such as the anti-globalisation movements amongst others, show great possibilities for working beyond, within and across education sectors more generally. French geographers in particular seem to be setting an agenda here. We might want to say such engagements are equally as ‘relevant’ as other policy work, but that would kind of miss the point.
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‘I Could Only Do Wrong’: Academic Research and DiY Culture

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Our position is that of combatants between two worlds – one that we don’t acknowledge, the other that does not yet exist (Raoul Vaneigem 1981, 88).

Introduction

Notwithstanding the need to apply our critical faculties to what takes place within our own institutions (Castree 1999), the desire of many academics to rise to the challenge of making some kind of ‘difference’ beyond the academy and yet still to be rooted within it remains very strong. While this desire is broadly true for academics across the political spectrum, it is a concern that seems to tax particularly those of us from the ‘left’, as broadly defined. This group are the ‘radicals’ of this chapter.

One way into exploring the pitfalls, problematics and potentials of taking up this challenge is to examine closely the experiences of those who have tried to do so. This, to some extent, would also help to bridge Castree’s (1999) dualism between radicalism ‘out there’ (the wider world) and radicalism ‘in here’ (the academy). One could undertake a critical and reflexive evaluation of one’s own practices, a strategy apparent in a number of chapters in this volume. Alternatively, a sympathetic critique of the trials and tribulations of high profile radical academics can be undertaken, drawing also on the growing literature concerning the ‘crossing between the locations of academia and activism’ (Routledge 1996, 399). This is the approach I take in this paper. It has four main sections. First, I outline some recent experiences of two radical academics who have researched and

commentated on what has come to be known as ‘DiY culture’\(^2\) in a range of media. In spite of seemingly being well connected to the groups with whom they critically engage, their reception by them has often been quite hostile. Second, whilst interpreting the experiences of the first academic, I discuss how a number of ‘committed’ academics have sought to balance and reconcile activism with their academic work. Third, interpreting the second academic, I adopt a more theoretical perspective which shows up both legitimate reasons why even the careful balancing acts performed by those in the previous section may not be enough to assuage critics. I conclude with a call for academics both to assert a particular critical role for their ‘profession’ within society and to remain committed.

**A tale of two Georges**

George McKay is now Professor in English and American Studies at the University of Central Lancashire (McKay 2003). He has researched and written widely on ‘radical culture’. His best known publications are *Senseless Acts of Beauty – Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (1996) and the edited collection *DiY Culture – Party and Protest in Nineties Britain* (1998b). Both books are published by the respected radical publisher Verso and feature on many of our reading lists. McKay is involved with the movements he studies, too, describing himself as having been a ‘punk, anarchist activist, squatter, painter and decorator and jazz musician’ (McKay 1996, back cover) in his time. Yet, in spite of both this pedigree and the academic recognition he has received from his peers, writing a few years back in the *Times Higher* he reflected in quite negative terms:

> While we were great at sitting around talking problems through, today’s activists altogether prefer doing things. In fact, few talk of ‘demonstrations’ any more, but of ‘actions’ and ‘blockades’. ... [T]heir activism has a new name – DiY culture. ... Coming from an older generation and, worse, being seen as an ex-activist, I could only do wrong as I embarked on academic research into DiY culture (McKay 1998c, 20-1).

For the present paper, the crucial part of this quote is the last sentence, as it reflects the response to his work by many within the movement(s) he has studied. This is immediately clear from two reviews of *Senseless Acts of Beauty*. These ultimately contrast in emphasis, reflecting a divide within activism that I return to later.

The first review is anonymous and taken from *Do or Die* (Anon. 1997), the more-or-less annual collection of ‘voices from Earth First!’’. The review starts badly, the first sentence being ‘The title is offensive’ (Anon. 1997, 145), taking the expression ‘senseless acts of beauty’\(^3\) all too literally in fact. More significantly, however, the review goes on to bemoan the book’s ‘dense, laboured text’, since this represents ‘an inappropriate way to chronicle people and ideologies who shun analysis and constantly re-invent themselves

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\(^2\) DiY culture can be defined as ‘a youth-centred and -directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, [and] new musical sounds and experiences... a kind of 1990s counterculture’ (McKay 1998a: 2).

\(^3\) Anne Herbert, a writer in California for the *Whole Earth Review*, coined this expression in 1982. ‘Random kindness and senseless acts of beauty’ were surprise acts performed for others with no apparent reason but the kindness in their hearts (Perry 2003).
Keith Halfacree

ahead of the state and academia’ (145). Notwithstanding these grandiose claims for the DiY movement, the principal concern seems to be the way a ‘drab’, boring order has been imposed on DiY culture. Thus, the book is described as lacking the ‘joy, fun and creativity’ that would be present if written by, as the reviewer puts it, ‘ourselves’ (145). Thus, although sympathetic to the (partial) coverage of the author, the reviewer ultimately dismisses McKay as an outsider, the only evidence really being that he is an academic.

The second review takes a very different tone. It is taken from Aufheben, a radical Marxist based journal (McKay 1996). Again, the review is anonymous. Besides indicating a number of factual errors in the book, the principal criticism is that throughout ‘symbols appear more important than the social relations that bear them’ (Anon. 1996, unpaginated source). In other words, the (political) practices of DiY culture are neglected in favour of ideas and symbols as the material is rendered ‘fodder for the cultural studies industry’. Again, it is McKay’s position as an academic that seems to be the problem or, more pertinently, his status as a ‘cultural studies’ academic. Thus, unlike the Do or Die review, McKay’s intention of producing an academic study from within the DiY movement is not disparaged but it requires, for Aufheben, a systematic and scholarly rigour not present in this book, which is too impressionistic. Too much of the author’s own, inevitably partial, engagement with DiY culture seems to be a key perceived problem.

McKay, of course, is not the only academic who has been criticised by the very movement with whom they have considerable (critical) sympathy. Another good case is that of George Monbiot (2003). Besides being a regular media pundit and columnist for the Guardian newspaper, Monbiot is an established scholar. With a background in Zoology and Social Anthropology, he describes himself as a writer, broadcaster and academic. He is currently Visiting Professor in Environmental Science at the University of East London and Honorary Professor at the Department of Politics, Keele University. He has published three ‘investigative travel books’, plus Captive State: the Corporate Takeover of Britain (Monbiot 2000a) and is a UN Global 500 laureate.

Monbiot has been criticised from within the DiY movement on a number of occasions. However, I focus here on the reaction to his criticism of the events that took place in central London on May 1, 2000. One event in particular was of most significance. This was the ‘guerrilla gardening’ action called by the radical anti-capitalist movement Reclaim the Streets (RTS) (Reclaim the Streets 2003). The event involved people gathering in Parliament Square, which is just outside the Houses of Parliament, digging up the grass on the square and planting it with flowers and other plants. As with RTS’s actions generally, this was a symbolic action to highlight the necessity of reclaiming public space and greening the streets. Further details of this event do not concern us here except that, at around the same time as the guerrilla gardening action took place, various acts of vandalism took place in central London, notably in nearby Whitehall.

Monbiot took the opportunity in the Guardian a week later to launch an intemperate attack on RTS for their action on May 1st (Monbiot 2000b). In short, he declared that RTS had ‘lost the plot’ and become infiltrated by thugs and nutters, ‘an association of incoherent vigilantes, simultaneously frivolous and menacing’ (Monbiot 2000b, 4). He went on to suggest that planting seeds outside Parliament was a ‘futile’ action against capitalism, seemingly oblivious of the potential of Carnivalesque symbolic actions (Chesters 2000). RTS, for Monbiot, had also completely failed to explain their
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actions to the general public but had instead remained arrogantly aloof. In summary, RTS were decried as being a ‘part of the problem’ not of the solution (Monbiot 2000b, 5).

Monbiot’s assault on RTS and the guerrilla gardening action did not go down well amongst members of DiY culture. For example, he was accused by the editors of Squall magazine of taking the Guardian’s ‘thirty pieces of silver for an exaggerated kiss and tell onslaught against RTS’ (Anon. 2000, unpaginated). Similarly, in the June/July edition of Fight racism! Fight imperialism! David Yaffe (2000) described Monbiot’s ‘scurrilous and pompous’ article as ‘the most shameful attack on the event’ (Yaffe 2000, 9), worse than those of the tabloid press or right-wing commentators. Again, Yaffe links Monbiot’s stance with his press status, describing it as ‘self-serving’: it allows Monbiot to write ‘about the evils of corporate capitalism... without taking effective action to change things, and so avoid putting his own privileged position as a Guardian columnist on the line’ (9). Crucially for my later analysis, Yaffe ties Monbiot’s position in with a faith in the local state as the axis of progressive change. For Yaffe this is merely ‘political theatre, a farce of ineffective, powerless, local bourgeois politics’ (9).

Overcoming dualisms: the problem with George 1

Having outlined some of the trials and tribulations of the two Georges, the next task is to begin to understand just why they have provoked such fierce criticism. We start with George McKay.

In a paper in Area, Maxey (1999) reflects on his own position as both activist and academic (then a PhD student in Swansea), making particular reference to the way both positions have come together in the field for himself. With reflexivity, Maxey became aware of the very narrow way in which ‘activism’ has typically been constructed through a wide range of discourses, including the media, activist groups and academia. Overall, he feels that the resulting image of the activist and activism is extraordinarily exclusionary, with a stress on ‘dramatic, physical, ‘macho’ forms of activism with short-term public impacts’ (Maxey 2000, 200). Being unable to live up to this image serves to deter many like-minded people and ultimately helps to ‘perpetuate society’s dominant lines of oppression’ (200). Maxey goes on to outline a more inclusive vision of activism based on a Ghandhian Satyagraha, where one ‘holds onto truth’ over the long-term, undertaking strategic and contextualised actions (also see Maxey, this volume). He argues for greater recognition of our everyday production of the world and for an informed intervention in this production – as he says, we are ‘all activists’ and thus we can all be activists in some form or other.

Maxey’s denial of activism as some form of exclusively bounded category also reflects a concern over the simplifying and reductive tendencies contained within dualistic ways of thinking. Dualism, an either/or logic with no option between the two, plays a central role in modern Western thought (Sayer 1989). From such a perspective, activism comes to be seen as an absolute state, with no alternative position other than non-activism. Such absolutism inevitably removes the majority of the population from activism’s remit. Routledge (1996) has addressed this issue directly in a similar reflection to Maxey on his position as both academic and activist. Routledge bemoans the fact that the two states of activist and academic tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive, with the locus of the former being the ‘lived moment’ and that of the latter being the ‘distanced’ sphere of theory. Quoting Spivak, he regards this as a ‘killing opposition’ for both parties.
Keith Halfacree

Routledge (1996) tries to overcome this killing opposition by seeking to place himself in a ‘third space’ between academia and activism. This space of critical engagement allows him to cross ‘between the locations of academia and activism’ (Routledge 1996, 399) through undertaking ‘a simultaneous coming and going in a borderland zone between different modes of action’ (406). The third space argument he draws upon here is that by neither seeing himself primarily as an activist nor as an academic he can be both, whilst at the same time gaining ‘something’ more through not being reduced to either side of a binary divide. However, taking the third space is not easy. For example, Routledge outlines some of the barriers to such a position faced by the academic – not least their workplace obligations and expectations. Indeed, Castree (1999) has commented on the conceit whereby activism is placed outside of the academy when there is still very much to be done inside to challenge the ‘corporate university’. Overall, Routledge’s account, whilst recognising the rewards of entering a third space, also suggests much of the difficulty of this task, especially for those of a less assertive and confident disposition.

Returning to the critiques of George McKay, I think we are now in a better position to understand them. In short, they both reflect the sorts of absolutist and dualistic ways of thinking that have been discussed by Maxey and Routledge. Specifically, McKay seeks both to position himself within a third space between activism and the academy, and to draw upon more diffuse ideas of both activism and academic work than is normally understood. In contrast, the critiques of Senseless Acts of Beauty operate within a more absolutist and dualistic framework.

The Do or Die reviewer adheres to a very limited idea of activism and does not appreciate how producing a fairly populist academic book such as this can also be seen as part of the movement. It is a form of activism, in other words, a status which McKay (1998d) himself notes when reviewing another book about DiY culture. McKay’s study, whilst drawing out some of what I agree are the very real problems of DiY culture, is engaging and sympathetic and certainly has a role to play in countering more reactionary accounts of what is taking place. Just because he is not out on the front line, digger-diving, does not mean that he is to be dismissed. Besides his or her narrow definition of activism, the Do or Die reviewer also adheres to a very dualistic model of activism and the academy. McKay’s middle (third space?) position is dismissed conclusively in the following sentence: ‘A book claiming to chronicle and analyse our ‘cultures’ should be one of two things: a pure academic analysis, or a personal account of one person’s adventures in subculture land’ (Anon. 1997, 145, my emphasis). In short, McKay should stick to academic analysis as this is his profession.

The Aufhebben review also gets caught within the activist-academic dualism. This reviewer though is much more sympathetic to academic research and seems to have a broader notion of what merits activism. This is to be expected, given the Marxist roots of the publication. However, the reviewer still seems uneasy with the idea that a study such as Senseless Acts of Beauty does not have to be either an academic study or a study based on practice within the DiY movement.

In summary, there are certainly legitimate criticisms to be made of Senseless Acts of Beauty but I feel that there are other issues at stake in the critiques considered which do little to help bridge the divide between activism and the academy. Specifically, a dualism between academic work and activism is all too pervasive and only serves to reinforce
overly narrow understandings of what constitutes activism. George McKay has fallen victim to this restricted vision. His book is assigned to the category ‘academic’ and attacked either for being inappropriate as it is academic or for not being academic enough.

**Legislator or interpreter? The problem with George 2**

The ‘problem’ with George Monbiot – as presented here – is more of a problem of the status and role played by his own discourse than of those of his critics. This can be addressed via a consideration of the actual role played by academics in society and their possible normative role with respect to radical political agendas. I draw here on Zygmunt Bauman’s (1987, 1992) distinction between academics as ‘legislators’ or ‘interpreters’.

**The status of academics**

The rise of modernity in the post-Enlightenment is linked by Bauman with the rise of the legislative academic. The modern state was keen to impose its universalistic and rationalistic vision on all aspects of everyday life. As a consequence, we saw the development of specialist departments, the gathering of detailed statistics, accounting techniques, etc. The modern state, however, was unable to develop and deploy these controls on everyday life on its own. On the one hand, this was because of a lack of experience and expertise. On the other hand, as quite a new formation, its legitimacy was still in question. For both of these reasons the state turned to ‘men of science’, heroic cultural symbols of the new age, who worked hand-in-hand with the state to mould and shape society. This was for Bauman the age of the academic as legislator.

This authoritative equality between the state and academics was not to last, however. The consequence was that academics lost a degree of their authority and privilege. Bauman links this to the move to a postmodern society, whereby the promised future mapped out by the academics no longer appears anything like certain. Academics’ role as navigators towards the future is lost. In addition, the political technology of the state developed considerably to the extent that it no longer had such a dependence on intellectuals. Planning and social engineering were taken over by market forces. Even in the sphere of culture, the academic was bypassed: the state neither needed to control culture with a strong authoritative hand, nor would the public continue to defer to the cultural dictates of academics’ ‘good taste’. Academics were left high and dry. Whilst many embraced the new times and went with the flow, others remained within their own circumscribed worlds. A retreat from legislation also saw a retreat from activism more generally, notably from that which engaged with the world beyond the academy. After all, what was the point?

Bauman does not accept this situation and calls for a new role for academics. First, they can become ‘interpreters’ rather than legislators, which is more closely aligned to the epistemological foundations of postmodern society. As Smart (1993, 102) expresses it, postmodernity presents ‘the prospect of living without securities, guarantees and order, and with contingency and ambivalence’. Interpretation involves ‘communication between systems of knowledge enclosed within their respective stocks of knowledge and communal systems of relevance’ (Bauman 1992, 22). The intellectual ‘experts’, whose task it is to achieve this communication, are required to possess ‘a unique capacity to lift themselves above the communication networks within which respective systems are
located without losing touch with that ‘inside’ of systems where knowledge is had unproblematically and enjoys an ‘evident’ sense’ (22). Crucially, this is precisely not to promote a ‘heroic’ status for academics but to recognise their specialist skills, such as writing and other communication skills. Interpretation is necessary, not least because no one group should be regarded as having a privileged insight into its own history and existence.

Second, besides becoming ‘a translation service’ through interpretation, academics for Bauman should retain modernity’s ambition to improve society through reason. This has to be done within the constraints of a postmodern sense of continued and irreducible openness. Work by David Harvey (1996, 2000), with his attempts to negotiate between universality and particularity, and Iris Marion Young’s (1990) promotion of a unity of difference reflects this sort of reflexive modernist strategy.

Although personally agreeing with Bauman’s normative model, he is too quick to dismiss the role and status of academic legislation in today’s society. I do not consider the academic as legislator to be dead at all. The late Pierre Bourdieu made this very clear in one of his final books (Bourdieu 1998). Here, he posits neoliberalism as representing a deliberate ‘conservative revolution’ (Bourdieu 1998, 35), whereby conservative ideology has been brought back centre stage primarily by dressing it up in academic language, notably that of neo-classical economics, so as to make it appear natural and inevitable. As this description suggests, for Bourdieu, academics continue to play a key legislative role in promoting the globalised neoliberal project. They form a key part of the ‘state nobility [this very name hardly suggests a lack of authority], which derives its convictions of its legitimacy from academic qualifications and from the authority of science, especially economics’ (25). Bourdieu talks of a ‘chain of authorities’ (55) imposing neoliberalism upon the world. This chain ‘runs from the mathematician to the banker, from the banker to the philosopher-journalist, from the essayist to the journalist. ... These are people who exchange ideological services for positions of power’ (55).

Bourdieu’s idea of a chain of authorities can be extended to objects as well as people. It need also not be deliberate. There may be situations in which individual academics quite unintentionally serve specific political ends with which they are not in agreement. Using the metaphor of a chain, it is easy to imagine how this could occur (links in a chain, missing the bigger picture, etc.). Returning briefly to Bauman, he does recognise some retention of a legislative role by academics. However, this is a largely introverted affair. As he puts it, ‘if the ‘legislative’ role is retained ... it is confined to the intracommunal territory, to legislation from the ‘inside’ of a tradition’ (Bauman 1992, 19). Whilst this seems far too modest, the danger of diverting attention to such internal legislation is to neglect the role that these same players may play in the type of chain suggested by Bourdieu.

Monbiot as legislator

We can now return to George Monbiot and the furore that surrounded his critique of the guerrilla gardening action. The central question here to ask is where he is positioned as an academic in the framework just discussed. Monbiot came to be known in Britain initially through his role in establishing and being a spokesperson for The Land is Ours (see The Land is Ours 2003). Although valued by the group for his sharp and articulate character, which helped generate plenty of positive publicity for events such as the 1996
squat of derelict land on the banks of the Thames in Wandsworth, London (Halfacree 1999), his high profile also caused resentment. In short, Monbiot was attacked for adopting a leadership role within the DiY movement, a movement that prides itself (accurately or not) as being non-hierarchical (McKay 1998a). Indeed, Monbiot himself recognised problems stemming from being ‘Loud, bossy and incapable of holding my tongue’ (Monbiot 1998, 180) and he subsequently moved more into the background within The Land is Ours. He goes on to claim that this difficulty also pushed him further into journalism, which is where the recent problems are situated.

At first sight, Monbiot’s prominence and personality may be expected to detract from a position as an interpretive academic. However, looking more closely this need not be the case. As an academic, he is bringing certain powerful skills to the DiY context, especially those of communication, and deploying them effectively. Indeed, given that he has a high profile *Guardian* column that is often quite unsparing in interpreting various strands of DiY culture for the liberal *Guardian* world, he has done a very good job. He is certainly an activist at least as much as McKay is. However, Monbiot’s difficulties stem not just from his personality.

The key problem lies with Monbiot’s tendency to slip into a legislative stance, whether intended or not. This legislative stance is not primarily externally orientated. Indeed, Monbiot has been quick to undermine any extra-territorial ambitions he might have. For example, in 1999 he was appointed to the Rural Sounding Board, an informal committee, but then promptly expelled from it for attacking the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as institutionally corrupt (Chapter 7, 2000). State co-optation clearly failed here. Instead, the key problem with Monbiot’s *Guardian* article was its tendency to try to legislate internally within DiY culture. This is reflected in the style and content of a number of the points he uses to beat RTS (Monbiot 2000b):

- His assertion of a particular (and narrow) definition of non-violent direct action;
- The perceived lack of a coherent revolutionary programme;
- RTS’s failure to maintain a dialogue with the press; and
- The dismissal of the guerrilla gardening action.

Crucially, these points did not come from the democratic perspective of an interpreter with specific skills but from someone legislating over the movement.

These assertions of problems within RTS were bound to raise hackles but this was made much worse by where the article was printed. It is here that internal legislation starts to move towards external legislation. Certainly, Monbiot’s status as a *Guardian* columnist is a double-edged sword. Although promoting DiY culture most weeks in his column, such an assertive undermining of that same culture in the post May 1st article from someone who is supposedly a part of it can easily find itself located in a well armed chain of authorities dismissively critical of DiY culture. And in a supposedly sympathetic newspaper as well! This is especially the case when the discursive structure and emphases within the article focus on the same issues and priorities – the same agenda – as those of the more conservative press. There is no attempt to counter this hegemonic discursive structure. Thus, whether he likes it or not, Monbiot ultimately becomes entwined with issues of *external* legislation linked to the ideological agenda of the status quo.
In summary, Monbiot appears to have moved away in this article from a combination of critical interpretation to one of perniciously located internal and external legislation. In terms of internal legislation, as ‘Colin’ (2000) commented rather bluntly on the RTS web site: ‘His [Monbiot’s] type hate any dissent they don’t control.’ For external legislation, Ros Witcop (2000) put the critique as follows, again originally on the RTS web site: ‘George Monbiot’s condemnation of Reclaim the Streets ... was no more original than those in other newspapers. However, his claims that the May Day action was a ‘futile’ way to oppose capitalism ... does need a reply.’ Monbiot puts his faith in a political system that is explicitly rejected by RTS, and the May action should be seen explicitly in this context – hence, the reluctance of RTS to address the press, etc. Thus, we also have Yaffe’s particular rebuke of Monbiot for putting so much faith in the local political system. In addition, his article is located where it could cause maximum damage to the proselytising ambitions of DiY culture, being on one of its key margins. Hence, Monbiot’s critics’ particular dislike of his status as a Guardian contributor. Thus, I find Monbiot (2000c) himself rather naïve in a subsequent email to RTS where he berates them for telling him that he should not have made his attack in the Guardian. After all, who did that article really serve, being located in such a place and adopting the ideal structure to achieve congruence with conservative chains of authority? As the Squall editors (Anon. 2000, no pagination, my emphases) expressed it with respect to the attacks made on RTS: ‘The barrage of criticism... [was] staggering both in its complicity with mainstream political strategy and for the inanity of its pointless self-destruction.’

Conclusion: no easy choices

It does not finally matter who wrote what, but rather how a work is written and how it is read (Said 2001, 385).

The analysis presented here is orientated primarily around a limited and selective amount of output from two named academics. Yet, even with such restricted material, it should be clear that there are often no easy choices in deciding strategy and tactics for the balancing of academic research and activism. Of course, criticism is good, and should be constructive, but it can also be wounding. It can also be interpreted and this is what I have tried to do here through an academic lens. Post-structuralism has warned us how we are never fully in control of our textual and other products (see also Sibley, 1998, on the connection between knowledge and social control) but greater critical reflexivity can perhaps help us exert a little more control through recognising some of the ideological pitfalls identified here.

Finally, what of the author of this paper? Personally, I go along fully with seeing ‘activism’ as being more than just physical actions, and support searching for a third space between activism and academia. I also believe that, the division of labour in society being what it is today, ‘academics’ do have a relatively distinctive contribution to make through their ‘expertise’. With Bauman, I support the adoption of an interpretative plus critical reflexive modernist orientation in our work. Rejecting any ‘end of history’ thesis and resisting the legitimation of the present, there is still a world to be won, even if sometimes it does seem as if we can only do wrong.
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Relational Ethics of Struggle

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Academic research ... might make its deliberations more consequential for the poorer eighty per cent of the population of the world (Appadurai 2000, 3)

On a border

Cochabamba, Bolivia. Every airport constitutes a border zone for foreigners visiting a country. Even the roads leading into a city in the centre of a country (which is Cochabamba’s location in Bolivia) can be policed and transformed into a border zone to determine inclusion and exclusion. I’m a long way from my academic home and the securities and comforts (and hassles) that constitute it. Uniformed armed police pick me out of a local bus as it approaches the city’s outskirts. My passport is confiscated. My visa status is noted and an identity check is made. A nervous, uncertain time passes. Finally my documents are returned and the bus continues on its way. I reach the city, locate a hotel and check in. The next day I contact my friends who are also my research collaborators. I have travelled here to participate in, and conduct research upon, the international conference of People’s Global Action, a convergence of social movements from around the world. I’m a long way from my academic home, but critical engagement, as I interpret it, brings me to this place, to this borderland within and between academia and activism.

Border geography

In a recent article in Area, Noel Castree (2002) considers the engagement of geographers in non-academic constituencies. He argues that such practices might be considered ‘Border Geography’, entailing a mental border that, while focusing their research on activism beyond the academy, prevents geographers from thinking differently

about the possibilities and limits of the university-based experience. Castree argues that the practicalities of reaching beyond the academy are under strain due to economic restructuring, and that critical geographers need to pay serious attention to their institutional situatedness in the (embattled) university system, if they wish to make a difference ‘out there’. Developing an earlier article (see Castree 1999), Castree makes a forceful argument that a critical geography might consider beginning activism ‘at home’ (i.e. within the academy), rather than only valorising those activities that take the geographer beyond the university experience. Moreover, he argues that critical geographers, in particular, have played the rules of the academic game all too well (such as participating in the UK Research Assessment Exercise), rather than perhaps actively resisting such methods of assessment within their academic ‘homes’. Castree claims that unless critical geographers actively engage in on-campus politics – in issues that directly affect their own professional lives as well as those of their students – debates about acting beyond the academy merely comprise hot air.

I am in broad agreement with Castree’s general critique of the academy (under restructuring) and also his call for geographers to become more ‘political’ within the university system (although I noted with some irony the fact that he also played to the rules of the game by publishing his arguments in an established geographical journal). However, I was surprised that he wonders why geographers want to make a difference in the world, particularly since he provides few examples of how geographers have interacted with the ‘real world’ in their professional lives. Hence, in a spirit of solidarity, I want to respond to his question about what explains geographers’ desire to craft a ‘border geography’. In this chapter I want to pose some ideas concerning possible strategies that geographers might adopt in being political. I do not want to close off any channels of dissent here, nor privilege one site (the academy) over any others (the fields of research). Struggle within the academy is important, as is the teaching of a critical consciousness to students. I choose to conduct critical collaborative research that comprises: (i) a politics of representation which involves critical deconstruction of state/elite discourses and practices, and whose critical theories are placed in journals, conferences, classrooms, and activist writings; and (ii) a politics of material engagement which entails the participation in networks beyond those of the academy. This implies living situated theories in places beyond words so that reality becomes lived rather than merely an object of abstract study.

Clearly, there has been an intellectual concern with the politics of geographical research since the emergence of Marxist approaches to the subject in the 1970’s (e.g. Morrill 1969, 1970; Harvey 1972) that has continued to the present. Such a concern has expressed, at times, the need for an engagement between the worlds of academia and activism. For example, Feminist research has been particularly concerned with political commitment and critical and reflexive forms of engagement (for example the debates within the journals *Gender, Place and Culture* and *Antipode*). Influenced by this work, geographers have begun to address the politics of fieldwork, representational strategies, and collaborative research (see Katz 1992; Crang 1992; Keith 1992; Pile 1991; McDowell 1992a, 1992b; Sidaway 1992; Radcliffe 1994; *Professional Geographer* 1994; and Shaw 1995), and the politics of geographical research, and activism within geography (e.g. Blomley 1994; Chouinard 1994; Imrie 1996; *Area* 1999).

Much of this concern with politics beyond the academy might be due to the fact that ‘activist geographers’ are often activists first before they enter the academy, and that
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the academy is but one part of a broader political project with which their lives engage. Moreover, academic work may act as a route towards specific political goals. In this chapter I want to draw upon two strategies noted within *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. This book provides a meditation upon a range of strategies and tactics to be employed in conflict situations. Sun Tzu cites a series of aphorisms in 13 ‘books’ concerning various strategies of struggle. I find certain strategies – those of terrain and knowing others - of interest to debates concerning activism both within the academy and outside of it. While discussed separately below, these ‘ways’ are always interrelated. Taken together they provide some orientation towards a relational ethics of struggle.

**Terrain**

The importance of local knowledge, and the strategic force that comes from a grounding in one’s place of struggle permeates Sun Tzu’s text. He advocates an intimate knowledge of ‘the lay of the land’ (1988, 159) to be able to take full strategic advantage of the terrain, and to be able to maneuver resistant forces against an opponent. However, Sun Tzu cautions against being too obviously ‘in place’ during a conflict, for ‘if you cause opponents to be unaware of the place and time of battle, you can always win’ (109). The importance of deception and mobility are continually stressed: ‘in one place, appear to be in another’ (50). Geographers are well placed to operationalize this notion, being simultaneously grounded in particular places (e.g. the academy) and also very mobile (e.g. conducting fieldwork). Moreover, an understanding of the particularities of places is central to the practice of geography. Being ‘in place’ can also refer to both an understanding of the terrain of the academy (in order to conduct activism) as well as myriad other terrains of engagement beyond the university.

However, Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has argued that the role of intellectuals has changed over time from a legislative to an interpretive one, the latter role providing intellectuals with autonomy of thought and expression but little political power. The exceptions to this would be those intellectuals who work as policy advisors to governments (such as Harvard University’s Robert Reich in the first Clinton administration) or those intellectuals whose work influences the political philosophy of a government (such as Anthony Giddens influence upon the thinking of New Labour). The examples of academics directly engaged in (non-governmental) political activism are rare (although Noam Chomsky and E.P. Thompson come to mind) and represent what Konrad (1984) terms ‘anti-politics’, i.e. an assertion of permanent independence from the state whoever is in power. This articulates two interrelated forms of counter-hegemonic struggle: first, challenges to the material (economic and military) (geo)political power of states and global institutions; and second, challenges to the representations imposed by political elites upon the world and it’s different peoples, that are deployed to serve their (geo)political interests.

Bauman (1992) goes on to argue that the interpretive strategy of academia gestates an ontology within which only language is accredited with the attribute of reality. Indeed ‘reality’ itself – be it the realm of culture, politics, economics – becomes ‘an object of study, something to be mastered only cognitively, as a meaning, and not practically, as a task’ (Bauman 1992, 23). In other words, where academics are involved in political action at all, it tends to be in the representational, rather than in the material, realm. The autonomy of intellectual discourse is highly valued by academics, and according to
Bauman, staunchly defended ‘against the rebels from its own ranks who jeopardize the comforts of freedom, drawing the dusty skeleton of political commitment out of the old family cupboard’ (16). This is particularly pertinent to academics participating in activism both within and beyond the academy.

In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) argues that it is academic’s desire to preserve their privileges within society – for example their relative intellectual autonomy – that has led to the committed intellectual of yesteryear increasingly becoming an uncommitted intellectual. As holders of cultural capital, he argues, academics are one of the dominant groups in society (albeit a dominated group within the dominant). This is one of the foundations of what Bourdieu refers to as academic’s ambivalence, their lack of commitment in struggles within or without the academy (and thereby their complicit support of the established order).

There is an urgent need for geographers to address, collectively, the issues of which Castree speaks. However, an assessment of the terrain of contemporary academic life, presents several problems associated with effecting activism in the academy. Concerning the institutional terrain of academia, there are at least three problems. First, the apparatus of capture that is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK divides British geography departments and sets them in a competitive relationship with one another. Second, as a result of RAE funding there is a hierarchy of departments which favours those at five star and five levels, and which it is in the interests of those departments to maintain. Collective activism by academics might threaten this hierarchy of privileges. Third, on each campus there is competition between departments (for resources etc.) within faculties and between faculties. For example, faculties and departments compete against one another for students (and the funding which they bring with them) in what have been termed ‘FTE wars’. However, concerning a geographer’s personal location within the institutional terrain of academia, despite all of the problems with restructuring (and there are many) we still enjoy a privileged existence in comparison to many other professions. For example, as an academic I still enjoy a range of privileges that accrue to the (white, male) Western academic – for example, financial (funding) resources, the ability to travel, the time to engage in critical evaluation while others are involved in ‘making ends meet’ or resisting the deterioration of their lifeworlds (see Nast 1994). As academics we enjoy a range of mobilities, including the financial ability to move between places, the intellectual mobility to move between fields of concern and interest, and the mobility (e.g. to communicate) that communication technologies impart. In addition, we can, if we choose, move within and between the sites of academia and activism (see Routledge 1996). However, mobility and access to resources are privileges that accrue especially to both academics and to citizens of the global North. Huge inequalities of resource access (to communication technologies and to finances) exist between academics in ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ states. These influence both the institutional terrains and individual academic’s location within them, creating, perhaps, different border geographies for ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ academics. However, within Britain, the various problems noted above tend to vitiate against the development of a collective critical consciousness, and, as importantly, collective critical action amongst geographers on university campuses.

Of course, activism cannot simply be bound off from other aspects of everyday life (hooks 1994). For example, Stuart Corbridge (1993) has argued that our lives are entwined...
with the lives of others – through the legacies of colonialism, through flows of capital and commodities, through modern telecommunications etc. – which demand that academics become politically sensitive to the needs and rights of distant strangers. Acting beyond the academy comes from geographers’ feelings of responsibility to distant others, and the desire to deploy at least some of the privileges that we enjoy as critical geographers to the needs of these others.

An important interpretation of activism has been articulated by Maxey (1999, this volume), who argues that activism is discursively produced within a range of sites, including the media, grassroots organizations and academia. Frequently, this has led to a restrictive view of activism that emphasizes dramatic, physical, and ‘macho’ forms of action. However, Maxey (1999) argues that the social world is produced through everyday acts and thoughts that we all engage in. He understands activism to be the process of reflecting and acting upon this condition. Hence everybody is an activist, engaged in some way in producing the world, and reflexivity enables people to place themselves actively within this process:

> By actively and critically reflecting on the world and our place in within it, we are more able to act in creative, constructive ways that challenge oppressive power relations rather than reinforce them (Maxey 1999, 201).

Activism, for Maxey gives rise to a continual process of reflection, challenge and empowerment. Such an interpretation opens up the field of activism to everybody, and serves to entangle the worlds of academia and activism. There are no preconceptions about the forms that such an engagement might take. Nor are there any restrictions upon where such an engagement might take place, within or beyond the academy.

Knowing others

If you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles (Sun Tzu 1988, 82)

Geographers participate in a variety of academic communities, which coalesce at international and regional conferences and meetings, providing arenas for the strengthening of existing networks and the formation of new ones. In addition, geographers are involved in communities beyond the academy, in which some actively engage in political action. Knowing others provides a crucial ingredient of activism whether within or beyond the academy. Knowing others can be understood in a different way as well. It can also refer to knowing one’s opponents and adapting strategy to that knowledge with the intention of weakening the alliances ranged against one. As Sun Tzu argues (1988, 54 and 70): ‘cause division among them, … [i]f you cannot completely thwart the schemes of the enemy, you should then work on his alliances, to try to make them fall apart’. Collaborative politics, born out of knowing one’s academic and activist peers, necessarily entail a consideration of ethics and power.

Ethics

Ethical considerations are clearly important in the practice, subject matter, and research priorities of geography. Their place in the discipline raise crucial questions concerning the role played by concepts of social justice in geographical research, and the extent to which ethical conduct is desirable, definable and/or enforceable in the practice of
geography (Proctor 1998). In addition, Sun Tzu (1988, 43) stresses the importance of justice in the treatment of others, since ‘The Way means humanness and justice’.

All forms of collaborative critical engagement, within and beyond the academy, require addressing the interrelationships between the personal, the textual, and the political, dealing with issues of subjectivity, representation and power (Rose 1995). Because the personal is political, critical engagement implies a commitment to deconstruct at least some of the barriers that exist between academics and the lives of the people they profess to represent, so that scholarly work interprets and effects social change (Kobayashi 1994). However, as academics we are entangled within broader powers of association and intellectual production – with the institutions that employ us and/or fund our research, and their location within a global hierarchy that privileges the West’s economic systems, institutions (such as universities), and policy ‘experts’ at the expense of those of the rest of the world, imagining the West as ‘the transcendental pivot of all analytical reflection’ (Slater 1992, 312). Such associations grant us certain securities and advantages – for example economic, political, representational – that may not be enjoyed by those with whom we collaborate – especially if they live and work beyond the academy.

The point is not to escape our institutional or locational identities, but to subvert them, or make them work for us in political ways that attempt to effect social, environmental, and political change. This means locating and defining our lifeworlds of work and research in terms of specific political objectives that ‘ideally work toward critical and liberatory ends’ (Nast 1994, 57). The ways that this can be done, contingencies permitting, are as diverse as our imaginations.

Research, in addition to the collection of data, can be a collective experience that contributes in some tangible way to the goals, tactics and strategies of those with whom we collaborate. As McDowell (1992a) has earlier observed, conducting research into political action is to do political action through our conversational and textual relations with our research subjects. Being a critical geographer is also about conducting political action through on-campus organizing and critically participating alongside activists in their struggles.

Relations of power

Such considerations must be attentive to the problematic power relations that exist between political collaborators. Power circulates through social relations, it is ubiquitous and productive (Foucault 1978, 1980). However, power is not an absolute. Authority is always incomplete and is part of a web of discursive interpretations, imbued with different and differing meanings (Gibson-Graham 1994). We are, as researchers, situated in a webbed space across gaps in understanding, saturated with power and uncertainty (Rose 1997).

When conducting research, geographers cannot escape the power relations that exist between themselves as academics and their research subjects, even when they wish to do so (see Women and Geography Study Group 1997). As Sarah Radcliffe (1994, 28) observes ‘we are inextricably bound up with questions of authority, communication and representations, and the positions generated by such questions are inherently political’. As such it becomes crucial to theorize and negotiate both the differences in power between researcher and researched and the connections forged through collaboration. It is
important to note that these differences in power are diverse and entangled (see Sharp et al. 2000). Such differences and entanglements mean that power may not accrue solely to the researcher within a particular research context. Moreover, these entangled power relations are further complicated by the identities we perform within the research process.

The self is a performed character, rather than an organic entity that has a specific location. The performer and her/his body provide the peg onto which a ‘collaborative manufacture’ is hung for a period of time (Goffman 1956, 252-253). The performed self is subject to the contingencies and complexities of space/time and is thus dynamic, changeable and multiple, and inscribed with a variety of social meanings (Parr 1998). Performance is complex (because of the many different positionalities that we occupy at any one time – including those of gender, class, ethnicity – and their interrelations), uncertain (because our performance of our assigned identities always carry the risk of being mis-performed) and incomplete (since only by repetition are these identities sustained) (Rose 1997, 316). We are situated (as geographers) not by what we know but by what we uncertainly perform. Through the practices of our everyday lives, we conduct political acts through the adoption, negotiation, and rejection – through the performance – of a complex of identities (Madge 1993).

Such performed identities may influence both the data that we collect in the research process and our relationship with those with whom we collaborate. Our dynamic shifting identities not only reflect a view of ourselves in relation to the people with whom we are working, but may also constitute an identity given to us by these people. A recognition that self-identity (and the identity of others in relation to our identity) is unstable and ambiguous, potentially destabilizes the problematic ‘powers’ that are invested in the ‘all-knowing’ researcher. As a result, spaces may be opened for the consideration of the boundaries and interfaces of power relations and knowledge that exist between the researcher and the researched (Madge 1993).

There is a power/lessness in the collaborative research process. A differential power is at work, which privileges research collaborators unequally under different circumstances. This raises crucial questions concerning the extent to which, even in collaborative research, researcher and researched become equal co-subjects in the research process. Just as ‘we need to listen, contextualize, and admit to the power we bring to bear as multiply-positioned authors in the research process’ (Nast 1994, 59), so we also need to be attentive to the power that our collaborators bring to the research process.

Our collaborators’ local knowledge (e.g. concerning issues pertinent to the research such as research contacts etc.) provides them with a certain power over the construction of the parameters and dynamics of our collaboration. The power to participate with research projects or not, to grant interviews, to create time and space for dialogue, and to reply to communications, all accrue to our research collaborators. We are dependent upon information, research contacts, advice, and the good graces of our research collaborators, and thus they hold a certain power within the collaboration process. Such an acknowledgment entails a shift of power from the researcher to the researched, and can cast the researcher in the role of a supplicant. However, this seemingly altruistic role may submerge certain exploitative relations within the research process, such as the intentional disruption of people’s lives brought about by the researcher’s intrusion into other’s lifeworlds (see England 1994). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that activists are
fully capable of locating the activity of intellectuals into their broader strategies and agendas.

**Relational ethics**

Within this context of entangled power relations, research ethics that are deployed in collaborative methodologies need to be relational and contextual, a product of reciprocity between researchers and researched, negotiated in practice (Bailey 2001). Since no social scholarship is independent of political action (see Kobayashi 1994), concerns over the ethical nature of research practices are entangled with questions concerning whether the researcher should be attempting to effect change within societal relations (Kitchin 1999).

Recognition of what some feminist geographers have termed the spaces of ‘betweenness’ between researchers and the researched (England 1994; Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994) highlights the fact that we must always negotiate and interact with difference. In the context of fieldwork, this requires a relational ethics of research to be adopted that is sensitive to various degrees and kinds of difference (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, etc.), but also to the problematic and unequal relations of power that exists between research collaborators. In addition, such an ethics needs to be attentive to the importance of collaboration with research subjects. This necessitates working with the differences between collaborators, searching for mutual understanding. It is based on the notion of difference in relation, constituted in an intersubjective manner in the context of always/already existing configurations of self and community (Whatmore 1997).

Difference is neither denied, essentialized, nor exoticised. Rather, it is engaged with in an enabling and potentially transformative way (Katz 1992; Kitchin 1999). A relational ethics is attentive to the social context of the research and the researcher’s situatedness with respect to that context. It is about an intimate and critical knowledge of one’s (institutional, personal) terrain, the (cultural, political, economic) terrain of others, and about knowing others with whom we collaborate as well as we can. It is enacted in a material, embodied way, for example through relations of friendship, solidarity, and empathy. However, such connections are invariably enacted in an asymmetrical way, emerging as they do from the performance of multiple lived worlds, whose interactions are forged under unequal relations of power (Whatmore 1997). A relational ethics thus requires that we are sensitive to the contingency of things, and that our responsibility to others and to difference is connected to the responsibility to act (Slater 1997). Such a responsibility, within the context of political struggle, implies that researchers take sides, albeit in a critical way.

In my recent research I have consciously taken sides in the struggle against destructive tourism development in Goa, India (Routledge 2001b, 2002), and the struggle against the construction of mega-dams on the Narmada river, India (Routledge 2001a, 2003). I have attempted to be attentive to the social context of my research, and attempted to enact relations of solidarity and empathy with those with whom I collaborated. I have taken sides in these conflicts (which is also an act of constituting difference) and attempted to work with the differences between myself and my collaborators. My willingness to collaborate served to enable what Gibson-Graham (1994, 218) term a ‘partial identification’ between myself and my collaborators. What is crucial is the articulation of a temporary common ground, brought about through such collaboration.
Relational Ethics of Struggle

This common ground refers to political rather than psychological notions of self, other, and difference.

**Relational ethics of struggle**

Critical collaboration between researchers and activists can serve to be vigilant to those ‘minor’ reversals within resistance practices, such as occurs with the creation of internal hierarchies, the silencing of dissent, peer pressure and even violence; or in how various forces of hegemony are internalised, reproduced, echoed and traced within such practices. Ideally, critical engagement would be able to confront, negotiate, and enter into dialogue with the manifestations of dominating power within resistance formations from a sensitivity to the ‘feeling space’ of one’s collaborators (see Sharp et al. 2000). The extent to which this can take place is strongly influenced by the unequal relations of power that exist between collaborators – which favour different parties under different contexts. Moreover, such collaboration also raises several ethical dilemmas. First, there is the issue of criticality versus censorship. In other words, how critical can one be and still continue to support rather than undermine a particular struggle? Constructive criticism within the context of private conversation and dialogue between collaborative parties usually would not prove too problematic. However, of crucial importance here are the ethical questions raised by the practice of self-censorship by academics, when writing about a struggle whose goals they support. In addition, there is the issue of the movement wishing to censor the criticality of academics with whom they collaborate. Second, there is the related issue of criticality versus being a propagandist (or symbolic mouthpiece) for a struggle. For example, writing about resistance formations in scholarly journals needs to tread a fine line between support for a struggle and the professional and ethical requirements to be constructively critical while also not providing help to the opponents of that struggle.

Third, there is the issue of careerism versus collaboration. In other words, how do these, at times, opposing dimensions to our professional lifeworlds fit together into a meaningful assemblage when ranged against institutional responsibilities. How do we balance our personal interests and desires with those with whom we work? We need to acknowledge that we cannot see into the future to know what are the long-term implications of our research practices on research participants’ lives as well as our own (Bailey 2001). Finally, collaboration may entail an ethics of deception whereby openness and transparency may not be the most appropriate ethical choice in a particular situation. For example, when conducting collaborative research on a tourist visa; protecting the identities of certain sources when dealing with the authorities; and balancing our activism with the ethical responsibilities that accrue to being a representative of an academic institution.

These are important ethical questions that do not have easy, clear-cut answers. I have found that they must be worked through – often unsatisfactorily – within the contingencies and contexts of particular struggles, and the relationships forged between activist and academic collaborators. Cognizant of the differential power relations played out between activist and academic collaborators, I would call for the integrity of academic freedom (e.g. to be critical) to be respected by activist collaborators. However, the research that was to be published as a result of such criticality should be a product of negotiation and discussion between academic and activist collaborators within the context, and given the contingencies, of particular struggles. The ability to adapt to changing
circumstances is important here. As Sun Tzu (1988, 125) wisely advises: ‘Adaptation means not clinging to fixed methods, but changing appropriately according to events, acting as is suitable’.

Baviskar (1995) has argued that a sensitivity to power inequalities between academics and activists serves to undermine scholarly pretensions about collaboration, because, while we acknowledge the ethical dilemmas of research, we rarely resolve them. While recognizing this dilemma, she forcefully argues that we cannot let our ethical dilemmas immobilize us. Critical collaboration may certainly give rise to ethical dilemmas, such as authoring a set of protocols that may be used to censor academic’s research. However, I would suggest that, to help academics negotiate such dilemmas, an inclusive ethics might be deployed – a relational ethics of struggle and academic responsibility that is for dignity, self-determination, and empowerment that is non-dominating, and environmentally-sustainable. In so doing, we might temper the academic responsibilities to publish and further our careers, with those of finding common ground and common cause with resisting others. This would apply as much to those engaged in struggles within the academy as those who find their terrains of resistance beyond it.

**Beyond the border**

I see no value in creating binaries of engagement, for example, between being within or beyond the academy. These sites of struggle may be complimentary at times, different fronts of resistance in which we, as geographers can engage. Rather than being ‘so much hot air’ (Castree 2002, 107), the deliberations of geographers engaged in activism beyond the academy speak to our desire and responsibility to act and intervene in some way into the lives of those perceived as less fortunate than ourselves. I fully agree that critical geographers could well expend some of these ‘political’ energies within the academy. However, it might be that the lack of (general) political will on behalf of academics in general (as commented upon by Baumann and Bourdieu) serves to discourage many geographers from seeking to create coalitions of dissent within the university workplace. There is clearly much work to do on this account. I welcome the call for a more self-aware, responsible critical geography, but one that continues to work beyond the academy as well as seeking to challenge the rules of the game from within. Such a critical geography will need to work on multiple terrains – institutional, personal, political – be able to remain adaptive to changing circumstances, and be strengthened through a politics of affinity born out of knowing others across academic and activist borders.

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Relational Ethics of Struggle


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Exploring Boundaries of Professional/Personal Practice and Action: Being and Becoming in Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town

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Going … beyond … the academy: a starting point

Being modern thus entails that (now unfashionable) trait of being deeply interested; of being attached to both the present and to the form of one’s relationship to it (Probyn, 2000, 183).

Get off your arse and do something; develop your life in a useful way (Wood, 2001, public comment).

As academic social scientists, human geographers are faced with a bewilderingly wide range of professional advice about the deployment or enactment of critical praxis. Elspeth Probyn’s autoethnographic call to a deepened interest in, and attachment to, one’s relation to the present, seems rather removed from David Wood’s highly charged rallying cry to do something useful. Yet, discursively different, and theoretically far removed as these statements are, they can appear to be close bedfellows of praxis when contrasted with other arguments which would restrict the critical scope of academic work – for example, pleas for an objective unbiased geography, for an educational as opposed to a political or ethical approach, or for a division of labour which separates thinking and writing from doing. It so happens that for me, a deep interest in my relation to the present sometimes chimes strongly with the notion of getting off my arse and doing something, but that’s me, and perhaps that’s the point.

In what follows, I am keen to deconstruct what I consider to be artificial boundaries which are often used to understand my academic profession and person. For example, I am currently involved in research (with Jon May and Sarah Johnsen) which focuses on the spaces and organisation of responses to urban homelessness. I have also been a night shelter volunteer, and a reader of Big Issue. So where do I draw the line between what is and what is not academic research? The truth is, I don’t. I may be a university professional, but I am also (amongst other things) a partner, dad, son, friend, volunteer, passer by, socialist Christian, member of (what I like to think of a) a radical church community, consumer of news, academic writing and fiction, a guitarist, a player of electronic bagpipes, and an occasional visitor to a township in Cape Town. In all of this, the differentiation between, academy/non-academy, professional/personal, research/everyday life is essentially fluid and dynamic. And I don’t assert this as a smart Deleuzean comment, it’s just the way it is with me (and I suspect many others). When I’m in the university, or engaged in academic work ‘elsewhere’, I don’t find myself shutting off other aspects of me (well, perhaps the guitar and the pipes, but I often whistle tunes instead …). Equally, when I’m outside the prescribed spaces of the Academy, I don’t shut off my research fascinations, theoretical predilections or epistemological prejudices. Indeed, I find that aspects of ‘everyday life’ often inform my academic thinking rather than the other way around. I happen to subscribe to moral and ethical geographies that point to the need for action as well as talk and writing, but I couldn’t tell you whether such a view has been formed within the academy or beyond it. Perhaps both, and yet neither, especially if these are held to be discrete categories.

So, I admit to not knowing where ‘beyond the Academy’ is. Rather than engaging in an exploration of the boundary, I prefer to suggest that there are processes by which we sometimes choose to move into a contact space, or contact spaces, which enables us as academic researchers to apply, protest, resist, make relevant, influence, make a difference. This contact space may be formed in rationally chosen or passionately engaged research projects (such as our homelessness research), or perhaps even in a deliberate focus on ‘applied work’, although this notion of ‘applied’ clearly represents a wide range of approaches and contact spaces. Alternatively contact spaces may arise from other involvements which are perhaps less easily or comfortably labelled as research; academics are involved in myriad personal, even private contributions which address sites and practices of oppression yet which are rarely made known in research terms.

In this chapter I mention a personal involvement in a small, ordinary activity, which started out as definitely non-research, and was never intended as fodder for conference talks or even book chapters! Indeed, for some time I determined not to talk or write about it because I felt it was somehow separated out from ‘the academy’, and it has only been with the encouragement of academic friends that I have relaxed that determination. Even so, I find myself sensitive to self-criticism about ‘exploiting’ activities which are best just done and not talked about. Equally I am sensitive to the broader charge of self-aggrandisement which is often levelled at autoethnographic contributions. So what follows comes with a caveat. I do not see the activities mentioned here as in any way heroic, special or well executed. However, I do regard these activities as illustrating the kind of contact space involvement which can be done, and is being done by ‘academics’ in a range of different spheres and with a range of different motivations. Such involvements may throw up interesting generic implications for radical and critical
geographies, although what I describe here may be regarded as neither ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ in some orthodox senses of those concepts. It is however, one illustration of how an academic’s deep interest in relationships with the present (and the past) has involved a ‘getting your hands dirty’ in the attempt to do something useful.

The ‘contact space’ of Khayelitsha

This chapter draws on two seemingly distinct but essentially intermingled contexts. The first materialised when two close friends of mine spent some time in Cape Town, South Africa in 1996. Rachel, an orthopaedic surgeon, had elected to work for a period in one of the city’s major hospitals; Rob, a robotics engineer, had resigned from an academic post, and spent much of his time in South Africa looking after their young daughter. They went to Cape Town because they had a ‘heart’ for the country and the people, and had wanted to use the life opportunity that had been in part enabled (by the rotation system in medical training) and in part engineered (by relinquishing an academic job, and by choosing to work in Cape Town as opposed to other, possibly easier, options) to explore the possibilities of doing something about this ‘heart’ by visiting, living and working there for a few months. Using this idea of ‘heart’ clearly exposes the discursive specificities of Christian and/or charitable contexts, but conceptually it describes a process which has wider implications relating to an emotional/intellectual/ideological/perhaps unexplainable interest in, and even commitment to, particular people and issues at a distance, which prompt both a caring-at-a-distance, and more rarely an involvement which seeks to erode (however insignificantly) that distanciation.

One morning, while walking in the foothills of Table Mountain, Rob met a Black African pastor, Templeton, from Khayelitsha – a township in the Cape Flats at the edge of Cape Town which ‘houses’ more than one million people. As a result of this meeting, Rachel, Rob and their daughter responded to an invitation to visit Templeton and his church congregation in the township – a visit which was certainly unusual, and which was regarded by some local contacts as unsafe in the immediate post-Apartheid climate. This visit led to other meetings with people living in and working in Khayelitsha. Rachel and Rob’s e-mailed accounts of these events, places and people sparked off a potential for involvement in me, awakening latent fascination with South African affairs born of Anti-apartheid activism, avid reading of both ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ literatures and an unaccountable focussing of interest and care on this particular distanciated space rather than others. Interestingly this was not a fascination which had been expressed in ‘academic’ work, but Rachel and Rob’s pioneering visit had opened up the potential for a contact space in Khayelitsha.

Other visits to Khayelitsha followed, involving not only my personal ‘initiation’ into the ‘other’ space of the township but also scoping discussions with Templeton and others about how a form of partnership could be established between a church community in NW Bristol and groups of people amongst the Khayelitsha million. We were particularly concerned that any partnership should be ‘post-colonial’, although in practice that translated naively into attempts to facilitate projects decided on by our partners in Khayelitsha in ways of their choosing. This idea of ‘post-colonial’ partnership is too big to handle in this chapter, but suffice to say that an intellectual awareness of post-colonial theory was only a very partial preparation for the specific power relations encountered. Equally the fact that partnership was being attempted between church communities is
highly relevant. On the one hand, being part of a church community significantly enables
group activity – there is a propensity to link spiritual philosophy with everyday life-action,
there is a ready mechanism for group-building and fund raising, and there is an established
trust and familiarity which spans different age ranges and life-cycle circumstances. On the
other hand, churches are presumed to act with baggage – Christian caring at a distance has
been equated with missionary zeal, and thinly-veiled colonialisms of conversion to ‘our’
ways of doing and thinking. Such caring has also been assumed to focus on church-to-
church support, resulting in disinterest in beyond-church populations other than as targets
of proselytization.

The emergent partnership was founded on these enabling organisational frames,
and on these post-colonial concerns, but it has been worked out in the practice of doing
things together, as being has melded with becoming. An initial ten year commitment to
financial and temporal involvement has led to mutual visits, and support in various forms
for social action programmes involving, for example, soup kitchens, pre-school provision,
a craft market, an AIDS orphanage, as well as for wider social activity (such as street
music) and more specific church-related activity. Thus far, the impact has been low level,
often supporting existing initiatives rather than sponsoring new opportunities, although
there are dreams/plans for schemes to provide new housing and employment training.
Undoubtedly I, and others in the teams from Bristol who have worked in Khayelitsha,
have benefited personally from the engagement. Equally, each time a visit is planned we
offer instead to send the money-equivalent rather than people, and in refusing such offers
our partners express to us something of their regard for the mutuality of benefit. But there
are few illusions about what is being achieved – only a strong conviction that to do
something is better than to do nothing.

A sense for the other

The second parallel context is more recognisably academic, arising from a
personal intellectual concern about how to deal with ‘otherness’, a much debated, but
often abstracted issue within human geography. I have been challenged by the arguments
of the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1998) about the need to be sensitive to two
different strands of otherness. First, he suggests, we need a sense of the other in order to
establish what has meaning for others and a strong sense of that which they elaborate
upon. It is easy to conclude that many human geographers have been extremely active in
this respect, generating rich veins of understanding about the processes and practices (for
example) of exclusion and marginalisation. However, there have been well documented
problems in developing this sense of the other. For example, there has been a tendency to
lock ‘others’ into the thought-prison of the same (Doel 1994). Equally, there has been a
tendency to illustrate ‘otherness’ in terms of a series of archetypal socio-cultural variables
(age, gender, sexuality and so on) often without serious commitment to the people and
issues involved, and without a more wide-ranging sense of the range of ‘other’
geographies (Valentine 1999). All of this has resulted in real difficulties in moving beyond
‘others of the same’ to ‘the other of the other’ in order to reflect on what is unfamiliar,
unexplainable or even unrecognisable about otherness.

Augé argues that we also need to develop a sense for the other, an appreciation of
otherness which is emotional, connected and committed. With notable individual
exceptions (see, for example, Sibley 1995) it is less easy to detect this sense for the other
in human geography, at least in part because defining issues of academic professionalism (such as the nature of research funding, an increasingly competitive culture of individualism and the pragmatic criteria for promotion) conspire against long-term longitudinal research commitment to emotional connections with and for the other. In these circumstances it is often easier to pursue ethical thinking, writing and morality in terms of Kantian and post-Kantian (MacIntyre 1984) ideas about the experience of value, than through what Michael Shapiro (1999, 63) has termed the ‘recognition of an vulnerability to alterity’. Such vulnerability to alterity can be approached in different ways, but Shapiro argues that face-to-face encounter and the experience of the ‘other’ as a historical trace are crucial dimensions of an ethical responsibility. As I have written about elsewhere (Cloke 2002) the ability, or not, to develop a sense for the other is grounded at least in part in the individual and collective choices we make about how to ‘live ethically and act politically’ (Orlie 1997).

This second more academic context cannot for me be divorced from the first, more personal and practical context of emergent activity in Khayelitsha. Each references the other in the being and becoming of an academic researcher wishing to develop appropriate ways of living and acting. The academic and the personal perform such complex interactive manoeuvres that it is well nigh impossible to disentangle them. Personal concern about over-abstraction in academic thinking and research both prompted, and was prompted by, being and becoming in Khayelitsha (as well as equally important involvements in other contact spaces, notably those associated with homelessness). Academic writings were both interrogated for activity in Khayelitsha and interrogated by such activity. Any attempt to demarcate a boundary between the academy and beyond is doomed to frustration in such circumstances. Indeed, it is in the essential intertwining of these parallels that I find hope for the development of an appropriate sense for the other.

Such intertwining is vividly expressed in the ethical writings of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez (1986, 1988) and Zolani Ngwane (1994), who engage in the ethical debate from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and in the process exercise an epistemological privilege in ethical enquiry. Liberation theology has emerged with a two-pronged agenda of ‘denunciation and annunciation’ (Ngwane 1994, 114). It denounces the hypocrisy of the church which teaches equality, charity and love whilst demonstrating neither solidarity nor serious commitment to the cause of the oppressed. It also denounces the state whose devotion to law and order often legitimates the interests of the rich over the poor. At the same time liberation theology announces the good news of God’s work through the poor in their struggle for liberation, pointing beyond social and historical materiality to an eschatological dimension in which the poor shall inherit the earth. The academy would do well to heed carefully both the need to denunciate hypocrisy and (and this of course can be done in different ways) the need to communicate good news in action.

I increasingly recognise a sense for the ‘other’ in terms of attempting to achieve solidarity – a development that grows best with our participation and involvement in the world of the ‘other’. As Gutierrez (1988) suggests, this is not a case of a conversion of the other, of converting ‘them’ into ‘our’ world. Instead it is a commitment:

to enter and in some cases remain in the universe of the poor with a much clearer awareness, making it a place of residence and not simply of work (Gutierrez 1988, 73)
So, we might see this as a conversion for the other, even to the extent of depriving ourselves of our normal comforts in order to develop solidarity. This will not ultimately be a question of speaking for others – as if somehow we have access to, or recourse to, their experiences – but rather we can risk ourselves for others by implicating ourselves in their lives and their spaces, extending our selves to cover the place of the other. Obviously such practices of implication require us to be conscious of our own finitude, and of the limitations imposed on us by the mediation of actors such as race and gender. Nevertheless, I believe that any re-radicalised geography will be measured to some extent by the degree to which radical and critical geographers achieve a going beyond the self in order to find a sense for the other in practices of conversion for the other.

To use the term coined by Mary Louise Pratt (1991) the task that faces us is a matter of converting the contact zone; that is, the space in which geographically and historically separated peoples come into contact with each other and relate to each other, often in terms of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict. A sense for the other will involve this contact zone – a transformation which as Jennifer Robinson (1996, 220) points out:

is always open to critique, which avoids closing off the identities of participants around old stereotypes, and which is constantly interrogating both the present and the past for the contradictions and the slippages which give us hope for a better future.

**Interrogating Khayelitsha as a contact space**

I began by suggesting that academics sometimes choose to move into particular contact spaces, which enable their involvement in making a difference beyond the academy. Only a few pages later, I find that my academic search for a sense for the other has got sufficiently carried away as to suggest that the world’s contact zones can be transformed through practices of conversion for the other. Such is the power of academic rhetoric that it so often needs to be interrogated by grounded experience in order to keep it in proportion. It is therefore important to review evidence from the Khayelitsha contact space in order to be critically realistic about both the abstract and grounded spaces between involvement and transformation.

First it is important to question the motivation which lies behind academic movement into contact spaces such as Khayelitsha. A critique of motivation will vary according to the specific nature of the contact zone, but in this case involvement could be reviewed critically in terms of bleeding heart liberalism, voluntaristic self-fulfilment, naive recuperation, or a salving of conscience by do-gooders. Many of these lines of critique could well be significant in terms of the self-satisfaction gained by those people from Bristol (including myself) who have participated in the Khayelitsha partnership even though participants clearly express a ‘heart’ for the situation there. Rebecca Allahyari (2000, 4) has analysed volunteers’ pursuit of self-betterment in terms of the practices and processes of [*moral selving*] which she describes as ‘the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person’. Here she identifies a concern for the transformation of the underlying moral self through the assuming of particularly situated identities and subjectivities which can be framed by volunteering to help others. Even the riposte that Khayelitsha is a long way to go for a bit of moral selving can be counterposed by interpretations of involvement there in terms of the supposed cache of activity in far-off
(somehow exotic) places which in addition provide excellent touristic opportunities. There is no doubt that self-satisfaction, and maybe even conscience-salving play their part here, but the costs of involvement militate against easy activity for these reasons above. The partnership in Khayelitsha has involved reasonably long-term financial commitment, and takes up a substantial proportion of the annual leave entitlement of many participants. Team members often work a series of 12 hour days in the township, and return to Bristol needing a rest – the antithesis of normal touristic experience. I have repeatedly seen a going-beyond-the-self in these circumstances.

The particular circumstances of Khayelitsha have been fashioned by the spatial politics of Apartheid, and subsequently slightly refashioned by the lingering vestiges of economic and cultural apartheid. Clifton Crais (2002, 4) suggests that the evil of the political imagination of South African Apartheid represents ‘the very opposite of ubuntu, of hospitality and sharing and of those virtues that make one human and good and life worth living’. It can be argued that the involvement of white Bristolians in a township where white presence is still rare does enable a small revival of ubuntu amongst our partners. On two notable occasions – once when leading open air song-and-dance play with pre-schoolers, and also when playing an impromptu game of soccer – there have been specific and very positive comments about the importance of the sheer innocent presence of white outsiders in the township. The solidarity represented by such presence is a denunciation of the hypocrisy of racism, and may even by a symbolic annunciation of hope. However, there is a very real danger of over-expectation of the impacts to be achieved from this kind of partnership, which can easily also lead to false hope. The positive impacts achieved are materially negligible when compared to the needs of people in Khayelitsha as a whole, but I have come to believe that individual and small-scale collective ethical action is political, and the assessment of impact should be seen in the potential of the accumulation of such actions as well as in individual impacts.

Secondly, it is important to review any claim that this nascent partnership can be regarded as in any way post-colonial. The fundamental if naïve starting point here is this - most action (including church-related activity) in places like Khayelitsha has traditionally been mediated by NGOs or other organisations which are controlled and administered by white South Africans or other white foreign nationals. Control over resources and apparatus of accountability can be represented, and experienced as a cultural extension of historical Apartheid-related practices, so in establishing partnership without white South African intermediaries the idea was to provide resources (money, time, expertise) and apply them to objectives laid down by people in Khayelitsha. In practice, this idea proved to be a naïve attempt to restructure deeply entrenched power relations, an attempt which in any case has proved impossible to carry through in cases where provision of resources involved the bidding for institutional funding (usually with built-in functional and operations ties) rather than personal giving.

In any case, we immediately discovered that the most ‘successful’ social action projects in Khayelitsha were those run by organisations (such as traditional denominational churches) who often depended on local white intermediaries for resources and organisational structure. By contrast, independent church and community groups had no gatekeeper access to external resources, and by choice did not depend on external organisational structures. To such groups we quickly became pseudo-gatekeepers, and on several occasions when discussing ‘their’ needs and objectives we found we were being
told what ‘they’ thought ‘we’ wanted to hear – a continued form of colonialism by proxy. Equally, we found it difficult to establish suitable ideas about accountability and responsibility for resources, preferring to deploy (sometimes inappropriate) blind trust, and interpreting some financial practices as ‘cultural’ when perhaps they were not.

So we have lots of questions about how to practice post-colonialism! We have really enjoyed the opportunity to invite local leaders from Khayelitsha to visit us in Bristol and to advise us on our visions and practices in the city. However, in Khayelitsha it often seems as though we are being asked to have more decision-making participation than in theory we desire, and there is almost too much respect, and even deference, to us which is connected to the expectations that we raise just by being there. Some of this occurs when our position is translated into Khosa, and sometimes amplified in that translation. We are also uncomfortable with the role of providing ‘legitimacy’ as white sponsors of local community projects and events, ranging from bids to buy land, to high profile presence at funerals.

Thirdly, does this involvement in Khayelitsha contribute towards establishing a sense of or for the other, or even a conversion for the other? Immediately I should point out that the visits of our team are almost always (necessarily) only for a short period of time, and that we have not learned local languages. Anthropologically, then, this does not constitute appropriate participation or observation in epistemological terms. Our interventions are channelled through key individuals in the local community, and our resultant grasp of what has meaning in Khayelitsha, and what constitutes the ‘other of the other’ is constrained and limited. Perversely, despite the sub-ethnographic nature of our involvement, there is a deep sense of emotional connection and commitment, which will be tested over the agreed minimum period of partnership and beyond. Face-to-face encounter, even if it is intermittent, does provide something of a historical trace and a continuing ethical responsibility.

However, the idea of a conversion for the other is hardly appropriate in this case. The involvement in Khayelitsha involves little by way of self-deprivation. For reasons both of security and an unwillingness to exploit the potentially overgenerous hospitality of Khayelitsha (who would further deprive themselves to ensure that visitors from Bristol were properly fed) teams from Bristol stay in modest accommodation beyond the boundary of the township. Our ability to hire vehicles and eat well stands in marked contract to that of our partners. In relative terms there is precious little depriving of selves occurring here. Equally, in material terms, there is little apparent risk to our selves of our presence in Khayelitsha. Compared even to Rachel and Rob’s initial visit in 1996, the township has become a relatively safe place, and our sponsorship by local church leaders adds to that security, although (just as when conferencing in an American city) standard precautions are deployed. In these terms, then, partnership with Khayelitsha risks little in the implication of our selves in the lives and spaces of ‘other’ people.

In other ways, however, this limited implication of the self can be regarded as significantly ‘risky’. The challenge of Khayelitsha is to western lifestyles, politics, attitudes and action. Implication of the self with Khayelitsha has as its aim a covering of the place of the other, but as its heart lies a reverse covering by the other of our place, ourselves. Perhaps the most frequent long-term reaction of people visiting Khayelitsha is that residing briefly in the place of the other causes a mirror to be held up to ways of living, being and becoming ‘at home’. I should make it clear here that I am not referring to
some trite conversion into ‘better’ people; exposure to otherness is soon wearied, and often quickly forgotten in the re-entry to everyday life. However, what remains is a nagging refusal to settle for inaction, an insidious unease about the potential hypocrisy of talking the talk but not walking the walk, a growing kernel of belief that caring at a distance can be mutually enriched by formal implication in other lives and other spaces.

**Taking the academy beyond itself?**

For many critical geographers, the designation of appropriate contact spaces in which to apply themselves as academics to the tasks of making a difference will fall neatly into the realm of research. Some research can be portrayed as taking academic concepts, insights, resources and impetus ‘out’ beyond the Academy into spaces and lives in search both of a sense of/for the other, and of influencing material outcomes on behalf of the other. As critical geographers analyse such moves in terms of any wider re-radicalisation of their subject, they can quickly become mired by the inevitable contradictions of such ‘academic’ research. Not least, geography as a discipline is seemingly inescapably entwined in the new professional values and targets which imbue research. Thus research in contact spaces beyond the academy will inevitably be subject to the standards of this new professionalism. Does it display grant-winning prowess? Does it bring in adequate research funding, with (of course) sufficient overheads? Does it fit with the needs of (often privileged) ‘end-users’? Will it be published in top-flight journals? Will it demonstrate five-star (or now, with strangely non-ironic grade inflation, six-star) research reputation? While some critical geographers have been able to stay ‘radical’ in these circumstances, most of us have had to adapt any radicalism to prevailing circumstances. The point here is that the academy itself, through these professional mores, can serve to restrict the ‘going beyond’ by research, especially in the form of long-term, low-budget, emotionally committed research involvement with others. Re-radicalised geographies will make more of a difference to the world ‘out there’ when these kinds of involvements are re-valorised within the academy.

This view of the academy somehow shaping the way in which research ‘goes beyond’ should be set against ways in which the world beyond the academy offers particular contact spaces through the designation of contract or applied research. Here, the ‘beyond’ is actively shaping the academy, as the powerful institutions of governance and commerce seek research with inevitable strings attached. Many academics successfully use such research resources both to fulfil contracted obligations, and to go beyond the politicised restrictions imposed by sponsoring organisations. Critical geographers will want to assess here whether applied research in geography is sufficiently able to appropriate resources for the task (in Pratt’s terms) of transforming the contact zones involved.

It is my belief, however, that these contact spaces afforded by ‘research’ are only part of the story. Myriad human geographers, as part of their everyday lives, are involved in contact spaces which are less readily categorised as research yet which reflect some kind of going beyond the academy. Critical geographers will want to review such activity, particularly in terms of its motivation and impact, and clearly these involvements will not be immune from well-developed critiques of voluntarism and charity. However, while I’m sure that there are examples in which non-involvement is better than involvement, it may be that in sum these individual goings-beyond-the-self may represent an important
component of academics beyond the academy. Although the pinpricks of action may or
may not collectively constitute the acupuncture of transforming contact zones, they
demonstrate that taking the academy beyond itself requires a deconstruction of perceived
boundaries between academic/non-academic, research/non-research, professional/
personal. Radical and critical geographies will be expressed in everyday lives, whether in
the ‘academy’ or seemingly beyond, whether in professionalized research contexts or in
more private contact spaces. If radical and critical geographies are not to be found in the
totality of everyday life inside/outside the academy, what does that say about the academic
nature of our radicalism and criticality?

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Relevancy, intellectuals, reflexivity

In recent years, critical geographers have breathed new life into longstanding discussions about relevant research. Relevancy, among critical geographers, refers to actively changing the world in a progressive, anti-establishment, status quo disruption sort of way. Motives identified range from the ever increasing corporatization of the academy to having a life as an (activist) academic, from the structural to the experiential, from the political to the personal (e.g. Readings 1996; Harvey 1998; Mitchell 1999). Within these discussions, though never really developed, there is a common anguish over how geography as a discipline has limited impact beyond the discipline itself – moving into other disciplines, into policy formation, into society, into government, into law, into places that matter (see comments in Massey 2001 about policy; Harvey 1999 about radical analysis).

Rather than discussing the worth of pure and applied research, which might be the case for non-critical geographers, giving support for these discussions of relevant research for critical geographers are works interrogating the positioning of the academic as an activist in radical social movements. For example, Katz (1992) works toward a politics of engagement whereby intellectuals find common ground with the other from which to pursue change. She develops an aspect of the notion of ‘in betweenness’ to assist in negotiating the boundaries of being an intellectual interested in a postcolonial geography who intends to effect change. She encourages us to ‘position ourselves between description and analysis; between here and there; between the present, past, and future; between subject positions; between discourses; between us and them; between the exotic

and mundane; between the unique and the general’ (Katz 1992, 505). No positioning is to be advantaged; no positioning, static; no positioning, immune from deconstruction for it is only in these borders that intellectuals can be engaged in attempts at transforming multiple forms of exploitation, dominance, and oppression. Parallel in many ways to this ‘in betweenness’ is Routledge’s (1996) use of the concept ‘third space’ which he uses to make sense of his own contributions to effecting social change. In third space, subjects interact in a new, hybrid place, purged of the underlying dualisms that constitute subjects as dominant or dominated. Finding and then acting in this space permits relations to be resisted and challenged so that power itself can be reconfigured. Refreshingly, not all examples of positioning academics are about epistemological spaces. Blomley (1994) offers a more pragmatic explanation of his own activities claiming that he is drawn more toward the community than the university or the academy because in the community there are real manifestations of the issues that critical theory seeks to address.

Feminist geographers’ arguments about reflexivity in methodology, too, have informed this resurgence of positioning the academic, often times beyond the academy. Again, Katz (1994) argues for understanding the ethnographic act as one of ‘in betweenness,’ rejecting the privilege of any particular positioning, especially that of the researcher (read intellectual). England (1994, 2002), too, argues that there is no omnipotent expert (read intellectual) in control of the research process, nor is there a strict dichotomous definition of the researcher and those involved in the research process. Her point is that not only are subject positions under scrutiny (which is a basic goal of reflexivity), but so are the interactions of the people themselves. What these interactions show is that no one, not even the researcher, has a fixed, static, or easily recognizable subject position. Valentine (2002) illustrates the difficulty in positioning oneself as a researcher in interview interactions. She shows that different people find different commonalities with the researcher (read intellectual) that often shift within the context of one interview setting and that may or may not be accurate. To what extent this matters is at once integral to the ongoing interaction between the researcher and the person being interviewed (in that each person remains engaged in interaction) as well as connected to the analysis of the information gathered in the interview (in that the researcher must make sense of the interaction in the context of what was going on through the exchanges between the researcher and the person(s) being interviewed).

Making research relevant and effecting change in places that matter involve finding positions for intellectuals in radical social movements. Reflexivity helps in figuring out potential ways critical geographers might contribute. Contributors to two collections of articles, one in *Area* (1999) and one in *Antipode* (2000), pore over these issues in detail and enhance the arguments about the complexity of what issues are involved in thinking about being an activist in the academy. For example, Fuller (1999) provides a thoughtful account of how a transparent recognition of his own multiple identities and subject positions can contribute personally and professionally toward the accountability of his actions as an activist. Doyle (1999) argues that in and of themselves there are no research methods that are inherently liberatory, even reflexivity. Yet the recognition that research relations are laden with power is preferable than doing no research at all precisely because there are unequal power relations at play. Roberts (2000) reflects on three issues – teaching from a critical pedagogical standpoint, participating in the professionalization of graduate students, and recognizing the gendered nature of the
tenure clock – to show how the struggles around the immediacy of everyday life in the institutional setting of a university may be preventing academics the time and energy to consider critically their own contexts and the implications of their actions, both within and outside the academy. In these and the other contributions included in the collections, the points are poignant, having arisen from their passions for change.

These works (and similar ones outside geography, e.g. Roberts 1981; Smith 1983; Lather 1988; Stanley 1992; Wasserfall 1993; Gottfried 1996; Sandoval 2000) have spurred me to write this chapter. Instead of engaging with arguments in the literature, point for point, I want to add to these discussions – much like Roberts (2000) did – by writing about some of my own experiences of being an activist. I chose these experiences (among others) because they have shown me over and over that effecting change is not about ‘out there,’ wherever ‘out there’ is; it’s about right here, right now, wherever here and now are. And, although the issue has found a home in various sets of literatures – relevancy, intellectuals, reflexivity – I locate my discussion in terms of praxis because this is how I make sense of the world around me, the environments I move through, and the ideas that shape my thinking.

In the rest of this chapter, I define what I mean by a ‘politics of local politics’ by showing where I think praxis takes place. I first give some background about a housing group I work with/belong to/am a member of that provides housing and support services to women who have left abusive, intimate relationships. I next detail a set of three tensions arising through the interactions in this housing group. I close by reflecting on my experiential account of activism and suggest that there is room for an exchange of ideas in the literature in critical geography about feminist politics and feminist praxis.

The housing group

The Women’s Housing Group (WHG) was formed in 1986 with the intent of developing, sponsoring, and running innovative programs that would provide housing and support for women and children and, through that process, facilitate empowerment and independence from abusive (ex-)partners. WHG consists of anywhere between six and twelve board members at any given time. All decisions are made by consensus; for the group, consensus means that everyone must agree for any decision to be recorded and acted upon. This is a long, drawn out process whereby one decision can span several meetings. Very few times has consensus been blocked or has a person left the room for the group to come to consensus. The only members of WHG are the individuals on the Board of Directors, who stand for election each year. Although employees are technically members of the society, they do not vote for directors, nor are they involved in the consensus decision-making process. The board solicits input from employees as well as outside consultants and activists on most issues – personnel, programming, and projects.

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2 I am no longer a member of WHG. After a leave of absence coinciding with research leave from the university, I decided to work with a newly emerging housing group that focuses on similar issues but from a different model. The new group is trying to find a co-operative model of administration that includes women with mental illness needing housing, service providers, housing activists, and owners, landlords, and management companies.

3 This is a pseudonym, as are the program names.
When I joined, in January, 1993, the group had just completed fundraising to build six units of second stage housing. Second stage housing consists of stable housing and social support for women leaving abusive relationships who have already been through initial emergency assistance. One type of emergency assistance is transition housing that provides safe places for women leaving abusive relationships for a short period of time, usually only thirty days. Second stage housing is for a longer period of time, usually between 12 and 18 months. With on-site support in place, women are able to continue the transition toward a violent-free life with their children. As part of the program, staff assist women in moving to permanent housing at the end of the residency.

WHG opened six second stage units of housing in Fall, 1995. WHG also sponsored, administered, and ran a multi-million dollar training and construction project for an emergency shelter. Street women⁴ were trained in various construction trades who then renovated an old building on the edge of downtown. Eighteen new emergency spaces were created along with a drop-in center for women living on the streets. This shelter and its program are now part of another emergency shelter group in the city.

WHG also runs two other women’s housing programs not associated with specific housing stock: Scattered Housing for Women (SHW) and Women in Transition (WIT). The SHW employs two psychiatric nurses that assist women in finding housing after leaving the acute psychiatric care facility serving the city. WIT is a similar program, employing one psychiatric nurse, that focuses on women leaving abusive relationships (often with mental health issues) who have no access to other services, little or no income, and no housing. These programs are low-cost, $97,000 and $30,000, respectively for 2002.⁵ WHG initiated both programs as ‘scattered housing’ because the intention was not to have one specific housing complex associated with any one program. Women almost always find housing in the general rental market because social housing does not usually immediately place single women, especially with mental illness.

### A set of three tensions

As in any form of praxis, there has been conflict in the group. The conflict has not been randomly provoked by events that can be easily blamed on ‘the system’ or on ‘personality conflicts’; it has been an inevitable outcome of community organizing (Lee 1986; Adamson, Briskin and McPhail 1988; Forsey 1993). How conflict emerges and is resolved within specific activist groups varies, because, as has been demonstrated over and over again, place matters. Place matters because of the specific ways institutional, legal and ideological practices regulate and govern the local (social, cultural, economic, political) social environs through which community groups engage (radical) praxis. And place matters, too, not only in terms of the construction of the meaning of specific spaces, but also in the way power is expressed and deployed through specific sets of socio-spatial

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⁴ ‘Street women’ is the local term used to describe women living in and on the streets for any reason.

⁵ In early fall, 2003, during the SHW contract renewal process, WHG was given notice that this program needed to meet a new set of criteria. As well, the contract offered was reduced by a third of the money needed to maintain the program. WHG decided not to change the program and sought funding from a different branch of the same regional health authority – instead of Special Needs Housing, the new proposed contract request was submitted to Mental Health and Addictions. The proposal was rejected and the program closed March, 2004.
A ‘Politics of Local Politics’

relations (recent examples are included in Adams, Hoeschler and Till 2001; see especially chapters by DeLyser, Relph, Smith, and Till; see also Parr and Philo 1995 and Pulido 1997; within the academy see Houston and Pulido 2002; see also essays in Ainley 1998; see McDowell 1999 for a review of feminist works about place). For example, within spatially-grounded (emerging as place-specific) practices, activists, community workers, and women (children, and men) accessing community services are often forced to take up particular subject positions that permit active negotiation with both the provision and consumption of these services. So, in this respect, issues arising over second stage housing in Ontario have been different to those arising in British Columbia, just as issues with second stage housing projects in Victoria have been different to those in Vancouver (Hall 1998).

Just as place matters, time does, too. One of the difficulties in being an activist is the time involved in getting projects off the ground. Outside the academy, once funded, projects go at a fast pace. For the WHG, change took anywhere from one day to six years, with the longer time frames including large construction projects. But inside the academy, as Harvey (1999) notes, it takes a long time for ideas to be translated into a concrete projects. Koikari and Hippensteele (2000) illustrate this point with their efforts at trying to establish a sexual harassment office at the University of Hawai‘i. They argue that it took until 1990 for second wave feminist arguments to take hold and create a position on campus for sexual harassment. Immediately, however, the position became constraining because it was only a sexual harassment position – no other claims of discrimination were permitted to be filed. One of the advantages of being ensconced both in local activist communities and in the academy is the opportunity to speed up the translation of ideas into real projects as well as circulate innovative ideas and activities back and forth. Such an activity, however, causes its own set of tensions, some of which are explored in Atlantis (1996), a collection of papers presented at a conference devoted to feminist research within and outside the academy/community.

Knowing that place and time matter does not always make it easy to decide what to do. It does, however, make one consider how power mediated through various sets of socio-spatial relations is affecting attempts at implementing social change programs. With this in mind, identifying the tension giving rise to a disagreement, controversy, or fracas within this web of power relations is an effective way to frame and deal with conflict arising within a specific activist group. Maneuvering through power relations within and outside the group in order to make sense of both one’s own quarrelsome interaction and the place of our praxis in the wider communities we work in is what I refer to as negotiating ‘a politics of local politics’. Practically, the process includes identifying and then working with/through what can been tagged as a source of tension. The tensions I have identified in the WHG that have caused the most prominent conflict within the group since 1993 fall into one of three categories: structural, institutional, and personal.

**Structural**

The second stage housing project in many ways has challenged the extent to which feminists in the WHG can be feminist in their praxis. The board, until most recently, has been an amalgam of many types of feminists, all of whom have sought social change through working toward social justice for women. Yet the role the board had to take on as employer caused discord among the members, none of whom were really prepared for the
types of decisions that had to be made. For example, early on in my tenure with the WHG, we had to hire counselors to work on-site with the women entering the second stage program. Our initial budget did not cover the staffing we needed to run the program. The discrepancy between what was available and what was needed increased further when, after a year, we wanted to provide more benefits and higher wages. This shortfall caused a stir in our group. We spent hours bickering over how to come up with more money. The biggest issue was whether or not to apply for casino funds, the central question being ‘is it ethical for feminist activists to use gambling money to fund programs securing women’s right to safe housing?’ Other grant programs did not fund salaries. The squabbling went on until we realized that the scrutiny of our own ethics should probably be second to going to the government agency and asking for money to cover the expenses. This happened again and again. Sometimes the agencies provided it, and sometimes they didn’t. This activity of internal scrutiny, however, turned into a recurring theme – keep an activist group embroiled in an ethical quandary and/or scrambling for money to occupy its time. Such a strategy would be one used on our group by various funding agencies several times over in the ensuing years. Our requests covered the fundamentals but produced no additional money for breathing room. We applied for and received casino money, and have relied on casino money nearly every year it was available.6

During our ethical deliberations, the workers in both the second stage housing program and the shelter7 decided to unionize. The WHG wanted to support organizing and tried to make the process as smooth as possible. But we were not prepared for being on the ‘other side of the table’, as it were, and conflict arose within the group. We came to frame the conflict as inevitable given the structural position as employer was in opposition to our politics. Being forced to say no to what we were structurally positioned to see as ‘outrageous demands’, even though had we been workers we would have had to ask for, was distressing. Eventually two board members negotiated the contract for the WHG, one which we came to think as ‘fair’, for no other words could describe the contradictory position we found ourselves in as employers. Once through the negotiations, we turned to our obligations. We as a group developed day to day management skills (carried out at a distance with regular on-site meetings) that dealt with everything from choosing which coffee machine to buy and creating confidential spaces for counseling sessions, to reviewing counseling skills and reprimanding, disciplining, and firing workers. At one point, we were left again with a shortfall in funding for the second-stage housing project. As we were mulling over the few options facing us – finding more money or cutting positions – one of the workers quit. It was only through this fortuitous shift, that we were able to continue funding the one full-time position.

I realize that this discussion is not about what is usually considered praxis, that actual act of making life a better place for women marginalized by government

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6 Lottery and casino money in British Columbia is no longer available for established programs. Since 2001/2002, the money has been directed toward groups with innovative programming and new projects that will seek operating funds elsewhere.

7 Conflict arising from a different set of issues outside unionizing – arising from structural, institutional and personal tensions – strained relations between the WHG and the employees at the shelter. WHG and the shelter split unaffably, and the shelter became part of another housing association that had paid management, an executive director, and numerous other employees. There were over 20 employees at the shelter at the time of unionizing.
bureaucracies and patriarchal values, of challenging dominant and oppressive power relations that condone, reproduce, and naturalize violence in intimate relationships as an everyday occurrence, of effecting change. But this is exactly my point. In order to do any of this, we are constrained structurally. We are forced to take up a specific slot in historically constituted apparatuses, as for example, the state and the union, in order to be able to sustain our efforts at innovative change. The activity of securing funds for a new or out of the ordinary project cannot be conceived entirely within the politics of ‘within and against the state’ (as argued in London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980). Rather, in order to effect change at a scale that might shape policy and practice beyond its own immediacy (as for example, influencing policies that might shape decisions about the women who go through the second stage housing program as well as the practices that support their transition to a violent-free home life), one has to engage with and negotiate the context within which such programs exist and where deep-seated change can take place (for example, in government agencies involved in determining what constitutes income, illness, and job training as well as in legal practices that detail reporting of violence in private spaces).

**Institutional**

Members of the WHG consider the SHW its most successful effort at change. The model has drawn lots of attention provincially and has been copied and adapted for other marginalized groups of people. The program is designed to carry a large client list with minimal resources. Although originally set up to serve women leaving an acute psychiatric care facility, the program became a sensation, grew tremendously in the first few years, and expanded its referral base. Women are now referred to the program from various social and health agencies within the city.

Successful projects, however, are not immune to conflict. Initially, the program served women with situational depression and intermittent occurrences of schizophrenia. Most of the women entering the program were not familiar with the range of mental health services available to them, nor were they receiving social assistance benefits. The nurses assisted the women in finding a place to live and setting up a household, and provided emotional support over a period of up to six months with most needing only half the time. Around the mid-to-late 1990s, there was a marked shift in the base clientele. Women in the program were being treated for more severe mental health issues resulting in an lengthening of the time required for support. Among other things, an exhaustive program review, including reflections from the nurses employed in the program, revealed that social workers, nurses, and doctors in the health system were referring women with the most severe mental illness issues to the program because it was one of the few that accepted these women.

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8 This particular program is unique in that the funding for the program was in place before the program was designed. The WHG had raised over $90,000 in a bid to renovate existing housing stock to create 20 second stage housing units. The proposal was turned down (because the proposed units were ‘too nice’ for social housing) and the board members had to decide what to do with the money already raised. WHG tweaked the definition of second stage housing to include more widely women in crisis. It was no surprise to find out that many of the women leaving the acute care facility had recently experienced violence in their intimate relationships.
The continuing increase in severe diagnoses and in length of stay in the program caused some conflict within the WHG. We saw the shift in program focus as institutional pressure to transform the program from a supportive housing initiative to an outreach program for the hospital. There was even a request to include men in our mandate. Such a request was easy to reject for at the time there was a Ministry of Women’s Equality, which gave some authority to our decision. The program then was adapted for men and was run as a formal program through the hospital. But this did not cease the practice of referring women with severe mental health issues who needed intensive, longer-term support. The direction the program seemed to be moving toward concentrated individual and group support, rather than finding housing and establishing households for women needing interim support.

Unlike structural tensions, where we were familiar (at least vaguely) with the politics of the claims being made, there was no single entity toward which to direct a plea for respecting the limits of the program. The nurses working for the program tried tirelessly to maintain the focus of the program, but with women needing immediate assistance, it was difficult for them in practice to stick to program policy. All of us were, and still are, extremely resistant to focusing the program only for supporting women with severe and chronic mental health issues. I see this as the offloading of services to non-profits in order to cut costs in healthcare. I also see that singling out women with chronic mental illness and transferring responsibility for psychiatric treatment for more severe diagnoses to overworked community-based nurses is unconscionable. Yet when there is no specific policy to regulate referrals, there is little institutional recourse to rectify the practice. This particular situation brings to the fore the negative aspects of any innovative program that maneuvers through existing sets of formal and informal power relations in the rumpled creases of the institutions of social housing and health.

As an alternative to being (institutionally) forced to serve a group of women defined by the health providers making the referrals, we went back to the original purpose of the SHW – to provide support to a group of women not getting the support they need. The group thought it might be interesting to design a supportive housing program for women who are not part of the institutionalized health system (akin to those being newly released from an acute psychiatric care facility which was the novelty of the SHW). We began a new project in 2001, the WIT, that focuses on women needing housing with abuse in their life who have access to no other programs in the community. So, rather than having a set of criteria women have to meet to get into the program, the only criteria are that they can find assistance nowhere else and need housing. To date, most of the women going through the program have been diagnosed with personality disorder, a diagnosis that prevents participation in many support programs within the health system.

**Personal**

With any group there is friction among members, sometimes resulting in open conflict and ongoing hostility. Such conflict in the WHG has resulted in resignations, broken relationships, and ruined friendships. My experience has been that most of the personal conflicts have arisen because there has been a fundamental disagreement as to how to approach an issue or resolve a problem, spurred by a practical consideration but underlain by a competing feminist ethic. The most obvious point of possible conflict – competing interpretations of violence against women – is the primary political position
accounted for in the membership process. Membership in WHG is based on interviews with women who have contacted the group to join. Preference is given to those with institutional and structural interpretations of violence who pay attention to the complexity of women’s daily lives (see Harway and O’Neil 1999 for an overview of theories of violence against women). Arguments over types of programming, as for example, programs in violence prevention, transition, and children witnessing violence, have not been prominent. The women who end up being invited to join the board are the ones who are looking for innovative ways to negotiate institutional settings and maneuver through bureaucratic rules.

Thornier issues, dealing with perspectives on power and social relations, have caused more tension in the WHG. For example, three members resigned at one meeting because there was no liability insurance in place for the building of the emergency shelter and they refused to put their families in financial peril. Another spate of resignations came soon after when the workers were unionizing. The split came when the women resigning did not like the way the workers were being treated by the group and, to a lesser extent, felt split allegiances around being an employer. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the resignations were along variations in feminist politics. The less radical and more liberal feminists resigned over money issues and the feminists rooted in socialist politics resigned over labor issues. The women remaining on the board after these upheavals were the pragmatic ones; the ones who had a feminist ethic that would permit them to adopt a mixture of strategies so that the group as well as the programs survived relatively intact.

There is also the potential for style to alienate members, being lackadaisical about recording minutes can provoke tension as intense as a doctrinaire, antagonistic oration. I am on leave from the board as I write this chapter. I had already planned to be on leave from the board to coincide with my research leave at the university. We were in the midst of discussing a major overhaul of the second stage housing program. We had two independent reports to draw on, notes from two planning retreats, and research information we had done on our own. But after several tension-filled meetings resulting in too many sleepless nights, I decided to go on leave immediately, six months ahead of schedule. With my departure, consensus was rerouted: I left so as not to have to participate in consensus. By the end of 2002, a set of revisions had been implemented; the program was restructured resulting in one worker losing her job and two new women being hired – one managing counselor and one counselor.

Moving through a politics of local politics towards praxis in places that matter

Drawing on my experiences as a feminist activist employed as a faculty member in a Canadian university has been a segue into a discussion of praxis. I use these experiences as a way to be critical, critical in the sense of not only in not taking things a face value, but also in scrutinizing a statement or an act for its liberatory possibility or its possible contribution to an emancipatory practice. The experiences and events I write about are not intended to be either a claim to access a more accurate truth or a blanket statement supporting the claim that by drawing on one’s own experience is the same as showing that ‘the personal is political’. Rather than claiming a patented ‘truth,’ my rendition of working with a feminist housing group as laid out here is really a feminist critique, critique in the sense of examining ‘assumptions, ideas, statements, and theories’ in an innovative manner that in itself challenges the widely accepted way to present a critique (Schuurman and
And, instead of recklessly invoking any experience as political, I suggest that this account be read as a way to make the claim ‘the personal is political’ more nuanced, nuanced in the sense of specific, personal account of trying to work through conflict and of moving with contradictions in the day to day activities of engaging praxis.

WHG praxis was organized around the designing and running of programs that assist women in finding safe housing, setting up households, securing income from a variety of sources, and working toward an empowered life free from violence. For every suggestion brought forward and every decision made, each member brought with her her own analysis of violence, the state, human rights, bureaucracy, activism, identity, oppression, and empowerment informed by a variety of feminist theories, plucked from either books or lived through experience. I, like other members of WHG, have come to understand that dealing with power relations within, for example, local government agencies is crucial in gaining financial support for women in transition. Our negotiations of the ‘politics of local politics’ ensures that the women in the programs can cover costs for rent, transportation, security, counseling, childcare, job training, telephone installation, and house repairs so that they can focus on what they need to do in order to make it through their own transition.

Being able to identify and work through these tensions is a modest contribution to the discussion about how to be an activist and an academic, or an activist academic. Rather than appraising change by looking only at end products, as for example, a six-unit second stage housing complex with support for women leaving abusive intimate relationships or a cost-effective supportive housing program that places women with chronic mental illness in permanent housing, I think it benefits us to look at the process through which we actually effect change. I chose to demonstrate this point by discussing a set of three tensions underlying conflict within a housing group. I have tried to show that these tensions prompted a specific set of decisions the group made. And, although I don’t think that it is enough to ‘trust the process’ in order to make sound decisions, I was partially bound by the process in order to effect change, sometimes with results that I didn’t like and were antithetical to the feminist ethics I strive to live by. Nonetheless the strategy to identify the tension giving rise to conflict within an activist group can be useful in figuring out how local politics work, in that power relations outside the group are taken into account alongside the power relations within the group and among the women involved in the program. The strategy is also effective in revealing where praxis actually takes place, as for example, on-site with the women in the program, in hospital with social workers, nurses, and doctors, and even within the group.

For years, awareness-raising groups, protests, sit-ins, and boycotts have been strategies for radical change. More recently, reflexivity has emerged as a strategy that facilitates an engagement of praxis. What I am suggesting is that, at a very micro-scale of interactions within small non-profits, negotiating local power relations as part of a ‘politics of local politics’ might prove useful in understanding how praxis effects change in places that matter. This is the here and the now that must be traversed before enacting the liberatory capacity of a feminist (or critical) politics. I am not suggesting that this strategy supplant any of the others, including the ones not named; I merely offer to open up a discussion about its potential along with other strategies for praxis. I found being an activist more effective once I came to realize that knowing about theory and praxis was different than being caught up in the day to day activities that contribute to the liberation
and emancipation of everyday life. It is doing the little day to day politics locally that matters in being an activist and an academic while using a feminist politics to effect change.

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A ‘Politics of Local Politics’


Keeping Your Distance: Balancing Political Engagement and Scientific Autonomy with a Psychiatric Consumer/Survivor Group

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Introduction

A key focus of discussion and debate in critical geography has been the contention that ‘traditional’ research is often exploitative. The researcher appropriates knowledge from participants, but may offer little in exchange (Katz 1994). Particularly when projects involve people who are socially oppressed, this raises serious ethical and political questions. What unintended consequences, for example, will research have for the group in question (England 1994)? Should an academic conduct research if (s)he is unable to demonstrate the value of the research to the people involved (Katz 1994)? What constitutes ‘value’? These concerns have elicited attempts to make explicit the power of the researcher over the research process and research outcomes (England 1994). At the same time, efforts have been made to involve research ‘participants’ more fully in study design and implementation. This can help to counter misrepresentation, but also to produce research findings that are of more immediate value to the people involved. These moves have been tied to a broader politicization in which research is explicitly guided by a commitment to social change (Nast 1994; Gottfried 1996; Wilton 2000). Not surprisingly, differing opinions exist as to the appropriate role for the researcher in movements for change (e.g., Routledge 1996; Kitchin 1999). In particular, scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which researchers engaging in critical scholarship need to move between or strategically foreground the intertwined roles/identities of activist, academic, teacher and...
person, recognizing that this movement is: ‘fraught with difficulties of a personal and professional nature’ (Fuller 1999, 227; also Katz 1994).

In this chapter, I examine critically my collaboration with a psychiatric consumer/survivor group in Hamilton, Ontario in its efforts to improve the material conditions of life for people living in lodging homes. The collaboration, as well as my effort to reflect critically upon it, is informed by two bodies of literature which are outlined below. The first comprises the recent debates in disability studies concerning research on/with people with disabilities by the non-disabled. The second is Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on the contours of a reflexive and politically engaged social science. While these literatures are in some ways quite distinct, I suggest that they share a commitment to a social science that is both committed to progressive social change and mindful of the need for a critical distance between researcher and the group with whom (s)he works.

The politics of disability research

Like other oppressed populations, disabled people have come to regard academics, especially non-disabled academics, and academic research with suspicion (Oliver 1992; Shakespeare 1996). Both the burgeoning disability rights movement and psychiatric consumer/survivor organizations have critically interrogated the motivations of researchers, and with good reason given the way in which scholarship has been used to legitimate the social and spatial exclusion of people with physical and psychiatric disabilities. Activists have focused attention on a range of issues including the position of the disabled person in the research relationship, the extent to which ‘ableist’ assumptions inform what non-disabled academics view as benign research, and the way in which non-disabled academics and professionals speak for and/or on behalf of disabled study participants. Expressions like ‘Nothing about us without us’ and ‘No participation without representation’ signal a growing resistance to more traditional research relationships (Shakespeare 1996; Barnes and Mercer 1997; French and Swain 1997).

Recognition of the problematic nature of research relationships has led to a number of responses. Some activists argue that research by non-disabled academics has little or no place within the political project of the disability movement (see Oliver 1996). Others argue not for a complete exclusion of researchers, but for a clear understanding of, and effort to ameliorate, power relations that structure the relationship between researcher and participants (Germon 1996). As with other marginalized groups, there have been calls for disabled people to be brought into research, not just as well-informed subjects, but as active participants with influence over the type of research that is done, the knowledge produced and the uses to which that knowledge is put (Zarb 1992; Beresford and Wallcraft 1997). French and Swain (1997), for example, contend that three questions need to be answered before disability research can proceed. First, does the research promote disabled people’s control over the decision-making processes that shape their lives? Second, does the research address the concerns of the disabled people themselves? Third, does the

2 There is also recognition that disabled researchers, while they may be conceived as ‘organic intellectuals’ in Gramsci’s terms, are not exempt from concerns over appropriation and exploitation (Vernon 1997).
research support disabled people in their struggle against oppression and the removal of barriers to equal opportunities and a full participatory democracy for all?

In geography, Kitchin (1999) outlines two approaches to emancipatory research. On the one hand, projects can remain guided by a professional model of research, where the academic is primarily responsible for conducting the research but where participants monitor the process of research and offer feedback. On the other hand, there can be an explicit effort to move away from a professional model toward a participatory model where people are centrally involved in the entire process of research, from coming up with the research topic through the collection and analysis of data, and the preparation of the final report.

These approaches may overcome inequalities characteristic of more traditional research, but there are challenges involved in their implementation. Such challenges include obtaining funding for this kind of work, the constraints under which academics operate (the ‘publish or perish’ mantra), as well as the negotiation of relationships between participants within the project. There is also a danger of romanticizing participatory research. For example, a move toward increased participation assumes people can and want to be involved in the entire process (Sotelo 1996). Kitchin (2001), for example, found that efforts to involve people in research design and implementation were met with the response that these tasks were the responsibility of the paid researcher. The assumption that people with disabilities can volunteer in research also relies in part on a conception of them as unemployed (also Gleeson 1999). Ideally, people would be paid, but this can be difficult given funding regulations.

Moreover, people have expressed concerns about the implications of the contact between academics and marginalized groups, even where the academic may be expressly concerned with advancing the interests of the organizations with which she or he is working. Writing about the psychiatric consumer/survivor movement, Chamberlin (1978) cautions against the invasion of well-meaning professionals into consumer organizations, precisely because professionals tend to influence disproportionately the goals and objectives of the membership, often diverting energy away from a ‘liberation agenda’ (also Chamberlin 1990; Everett 2000).

**Bourdieu and symbolic action**

Questions about the relationship between science and politics, and between academics and social movements more specifically, are also a central concern of Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on reflexivity in the social sciences. His work offers an outline of a social science that is politically engaged but able to address concerns such as those raised by disability activists.

For Bourdieu, reflexivity implies that social scientists must be actively engaged in an examination of themselves as producers of knowledge, and more broadly of the conditions under which social science is made possible and undertaken (Bourdieu 1989, 1990b). While a call for critical self-reflection is not unique, Bourdieu’s conception of the three biases against which reflexivity is intended to guard raises important questions about

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3 Bourdieu’s writing on reflexivity is directed primarily at sociologists, but his argument has a broader relevance for social science and is extended here for thinking about social geography.
theory and practice in the social sciences. The first, and the most obvious, of these biases is a partiality produced by the social location of the social scientist in terms of class, race, gender and other dimensions of social inequality. The second bias concerns the social scientist’s location in the academic field, which Bourdieu (1992, 69) conceptualizes as a relatively autonomous field of cultural production. The third and, for Bourdieu, the most important bias is an ‘intellectualist’ bias which stems from the fact that social scientists necessarily retire from the world in order to study it. While the necessity of retiring from the social world is itself open to critical interrogation (Fuller 1999), Bourdieu’s point seems to be that problems arise if we fail to recognize the limitations of the scientist’s theoretical gaze. Specifically, we run the risk of conflating the logic of theory with the logic of practice – to ‘operate as if the constructions that the scientist must produce to understand practices ... were the main determinants, the actual cause of practices’ (1990a, 384; see also 1990b). Avoiding this bias requires an ongoing analysis of our research to make clear the limits of theoretical knowledge. This is not intended as a process of individual introspection, but rather an engagement with the social and intellectual ‘unconscious’ of the academic field of which one is a part.

Alongside his call for reflexivity, Bourdieu also wrote specifically about the capacity of the intellectual for political action, and on the relationship between the academic field and the field of politics. For Bourdieu, sociology, and we can argue the social sciences more generally, is inherently political because it is: ‘concerned with, and enmeshed in, strategies and mechanisms of symbolic domination’ (Wacquant 1992, 50; Bourdieu 1989). Symbolic power is intimately linked to and helps to reproduce the material structure of society (Bourdieu 1991).

To achieve symbolic power, dominant groups require a ‘sociodicy’ – a theoretical justification to explain why it is they who are privileged. In recent writing, Bourdieu (1998) focused on the sociodicy of neoliberalism – the way in which it has achieved a certain taken-for-grantedness or symbolic domination in the contemporary context. He argued that this sociodicy rests on a certain kind of language that shapes our view of the world:

We absorb it as soon as we open a newspaper, as soon as we turn on the radio, and it is largely made up of euphemisms. … To announce that a company is sacking 2,000 people, the commentator will refer to ‘Alcatel’s bold social plan’. Then there is a whole game with the connotations and associations of words like flexibility [and] deregulation, which tends to imply that the neo-liberal message is a universality message of liberation (Bourdieu 1998, 31)

The fact that neoliberalism has been pursued with theoretical sophistication, supported by the work of experts, necessitates a theoretically sophisticated response from its challengers. For Bourdieu, social scientists can contribute to this response both a certain authority and an ability to engage in symbolic action – to challenge the polished arguments of experts who: ‘dress up simply conservative thought in the guise of pure reason’ (1998, 54). Put more bluntly: ‘my goal [as a sociologist] is to contribute to

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4 This is similar to Weber’s notion of ‘theodicy’ and Marx’s conception of ideology. Sociodicies – explanations that are accepted both by the dominant and by others – contribute to the reproduction of doxa in Bourdieu’s terms.
Keeping Your Distance

preventing people from being able to utter all kinds of nonsense about the social world’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 53)

However, for Bourdieu, symbolic action does not entail an active role in social movements striving for change. Academics cannot be ‘fellow travelers’ precisely because their ability to engage effectively in symbolic action rests on their relative autonomy as ‘scientists’ (1989). Although they may appear opposed, Bourdieu argues that scientific autonomy and political engagement can be extended simultaneously; it is the unstable balance of the scientific and political that defines the role of the intellectual in social struggle (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Together, discussions emerging from the disability rights and psychiatric consumer/survivor movements about research, and the writing of Bourdieu on the nature of a reflexive and politically engaged social science offer a series of distinct, but overlapping, methodological guidelines that have relevance for critical geography. Specifically, both perspectives suggest the researcher be politically engaged, but mindful of the need to keep his/her distance. For disability activists, researchers must be responsive to the concerns of the groups with which they work, but they must keep their distance to avoid undue influence and impact on those groups. For Bourdieu, researchers can be effective politically only if they maintain a critical distance that provides science with the legitimacy needed for symbolic action. In the remainder of the paper, I detail my own experience working with a psychiatric consumer/survivor group on an anti-poverty project and the challenges involved in keeping one’s distance.

Poverty and psychiatric consumer/survivors

Psychiatric consumer/survivors face formidable ‘structural’ barriers to social inclusion, including poverty, public intolerance and social stigma, lack of affordable accommodation, and limited paid work opportunities (Capponi 1992; Carne 1998; Nelson et al. 2001). Chronic poverty, in particular, affects many people. In Canada, for example, 12 percent of non-disabled adults live in poverty, compared with almost 27 percent of adults diagnosed with psychiatric conditions (Fawcett 1996), and the figure is undoubtedly much higher for people with ‘serious psychiatric illnesses’ such as schizophrenia. While there has been considerable research on the relationship between income and mental health, much of it has dealt with the role of socioeconomic status as a causal factor in the development of mental health problems (Saraceno and Barbui 1997).

By contrast, the role of poverty in consumer/survivors’ daily lives has not received prominence in research. This is due in part to a continuing tendency to see mental health as an exclusively medical issue (Cohen 2000). This trend is all the more disconcerting as recent decades have seen a fundamental restructuring of welfare programs (Evans 2002; Handler and Hasenfeld 1997; Peck 2001). Welfare rates have often been frozen or reduced, and time limits for assistance introduced, with the justification that such

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5 Bourdieu talks about the need for a ‘division of labour’ between researchers and activists (see 1998, 52-59). The issue of autonomy is also important in terms of the relative autonomy of academia from political and economic imperatives of the larger society.
strategies provide ‘incentives’ for people to escape ‘welfare dependency.’ While people with disabilities who satisfy specific criteria are often able access additional supports, restructuring has made community survival increasingly difficult for psychiatric consumer/survivors in particular (Rosenheck 1999; also Nelson et al. 2001).

**Hamilton’s tenants committee**

In Hamilton, Ontario, the context for this project, more than seven hundred psychiatric consumer/survivors live in residential care facilities. These facilities are privately owned, and emerged as a source of accommodation in the mid-1970s with the rise of deinstitutionalization. Facilities range in size from fifteen beds up to fifty or more, and operators are paid by municipal and provincial governments to provide food and shelter, while tenants receive a Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) to pay for toiletries, clothing, shoes and other needs. The facilities provide vital affordable housing, but concerns about the quality of this accommodation are longstanding. Problems include lack of privacy (with up to four people per room), security (nowhere to securely store belongings), and inadequate nutrition.

In 1995, a housing advocacy center in the city received a small grant to establish a facility tenants’ committee. The group consists of a small number of current and former facility tenants, as well as a staff member from the housing center, Alex. While other people, such as a community organizer from a local legal clinic, sometimes attend meetings, the group is first and foremost a tenants’ group. Alex agreed initially to chair the monthly meetings because no one else would, but he was explicit about creating an environment that was in his own words ‘empowering.’ Over time, and with a commitment of ongoing support, he persuaded other members to take on leadership roles, chairing the meetings and representing the group publicly.

Alex’s approach, and the environment he and other members were able to create, is significant given ongoing concerns about the extent to which psychiatric consumer/survivors are truly represented in groups and organizations run by professionals and service providers. While these groups seek to improve consumer/survivors’ quality of life, they often reproduce a professional/ ‘patient’ opposition in meetings where views and opinions of the former dominate, while the presence of clients at the table legitimizes the work of the organization (Everett 2000). In addition, only certain types of consumer/survivors are invited to join such organizations. People who are too angry or ‘disturbing’ are considered unsuitable (Capponi 1991; Everett 2000). By contrast, the tenants’ group is intended to provide a context in which tenants can express views about housing and other issues of significance. While there have been challenges involved in sustaining the group, its size has remained steady, with eight to ten core members (both women and men), and another six occasional members.

**The ‘Personal Needs Allowance’ campaign**

The initial mandate of the group was to educate people living in facilities about their rights as tenants. However, in 1997, when the group conducted an informal survey of

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6 Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic domination has considerable utility for analyzing the contemporary language of welfare reform, composed of terms such as ‘dependency’, ‘fraud’, ‘rescue’ and ‘freedom’.
facility tenants, income emerged as a primary concern. As mentioned above, tenants receive a Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) to provide for all necessities excluding room and board. The current value of the PNA is CAN $112.00 per month or about $3.70 per day, and had not been raised since 1991.

Members of the tenants’ group decided that if they were going to ask for an increase in the PNA, they needed to determine how much of an increase was required. The group set out what they considered to be a basic shopping list for men and women living in facilities, and then priced the items at local stores. They arrived at a figure of $160.00 per month. The group then wrote to Ontario’s Minister for Community and Social Services expressing concern about people’s ability to meet basic needs, and requesting an increase in the PNA. A regional director for the Ministry replied, explaining that: ‘strategies are currently under development for meeting the needs of this client group’ but with no direct response to the group’s request. The group wrote back requesting more details. Two months later, the minister responded, explaining that next steps in the development of strategies were ‘under review.’ He reminded the group that recent changes to social assistance allowed people to receive additional income from family and friends with no benefit reduction. Frustrated by the responses, the group decided on a petition campaign to demand an increase in the PNA.

My involvement with the group began at this time. As a non-disabled academic, I was conscious of the potentially problematic nature of this research relationship but interested in conducting research that would be of utility to disabled people. New to the city, I contacted two consumer/survivor groups with the aim of discussing a possible working relationship, and was subsequently invited to attend a tenants’ group meeting. Although members of the group were welcoming, Alex questioned my motives after the meeting, making it clear that an interest in studying the group itself would not be a useful contribution.

Initially, I offered to help collect signatures for the petition, but then raised the possibility of producing a report on the PNA that could be used to highlight the issue. Members of the group thought this was a good idea. In fact, Alex had spoken to a local community-based research center about such a study, but their resources were stretched too thin. I suggested the use of qualitative research to collect ‘testimonies’ from people living on the PNA. Several group members asked if it would be possible to write something for the newspaper that would publicize the issue. From the outset, I was explicit about material for the report being reviewed by group members before anyone else.

In subsequent meetings, members discussed problems people faced in facilities. I took notes and used these to shape the questions I asked people in the study. In discussions, a number of difficult issues arose, including the extent to which people use their PNA allowance for cigarettes. Group members were conscious of the demonization of welfare recipients, and some felt stories should ‘avoid’ cigarettes, as this would hurt the campaign. Several others felt it was important to be honest. My response was to suggest that it might be more harmful to avoid the issue of cigarettes, particularly since many facility tenants smoked and ignoring this would leave the report open to criticism. We reached agreement that I would not ignore smoking, but that I would be cautious in handling the issue, a point to which I return below.
Over the space of two months, I conducted a series of interviews and a focus group with facility tenants, asking questions about their monthly income, basic needs, spending habits, things they could not afford and their daily activities. I gave the tenants’ group progress reports as the research progressed. At the same time, I engaged in a critical analysis of provincial policy documents relating to mental health care and welfare.

Interviews demonstrated that tenants’ rely on social assistance as their primary or sole source of income. All of the people interviewed lived in chronic poverty and most were unable to meet basic monthly needs. In addition, interviews revealed the manifold impacts of poverty on aspects of tenants’ lives including family relations, friendships, social activities and stigma (Wilton 2002). Critical analysis of provincial policy documents revealed that ‘adequate income support’ had, in fact, been recognized as a core element of mental health care. For example, Ontario’s Ministry of Health (1998a, 5) stated that:

Our government should recognize the importance of a holistic approach to the mental health system, one that addresses the broader determinants of health, including housing, education, jobs and income support.

However, restructuring of the provincial welfare system has led to a significant decline in the real value of income supports over the same period. Adjusting for changes in the cost of living, social assistance for a single disabled person in 2001 was worth 11.5 percent less in real terms than in 1991, while the real value of the Personal Needs Allowance fell by 16.5 percent over the same period. In addition, a key element of welfare reform has been increased emphasis on ‘informal supports’ – from individual, family and community – to supplement social assistance. Changes to Ontario’s welfare program reflect this emphasis, with greater ‘flexibility’ for people to receive money from gifts, trust funds and inheritances. By contrast, interviews showed that a significant minority of tenants were not in touch with family members while other tenants said family members were unable to provide financial help.

As the analysis progressed, the tenants’ group organized a press conference to release the report and present the petition to the government. By June 2001, the petition contained over three thousand signatures. Interviews had been analyzed and the results organized into a formal report to the tenants’ group. I wrote an editorial for the local paper containing key findings from the study, which was reviewed by the group before submission. The chair of the tenants’ group and I made a joint presentation to city council seeking their endorsement of the petition. At the press conference, the chair spoke about the petition, while I presented the results of the study. The chair’s presentation carried legitimacy because it was grounded in his experience as a facility tenant. I sought to use ‘scientific discourse’ to demonstrate the inadequacy of current income supports and the effects of poverty on tenants’ lives. Media coverage was good, with two radio stations, two television stations and several local newspapers in attendance.

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7 The decline in real value is based on National Council of Welfare figures. The actual value of social assistance for a single disabled person remained constant at $930.00 per month between 1995 and 2002. As a percentage of the poverty line, social assistance for single disabled persons fell from a high of 76 percent in 1992-94 to 62 percent in 2001.

8 This figure is based on calculations using Statistics Canada’s Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI for March 2002 was 119.5 where the 1992 CPI value is set at 100.
Following the press conference, a local opposition member of the provincial parliament presented the petition and the report to the government in the legislature and questioned the minister of health and social services repeatedly about whether he intended to address the PNA issue. The minister responded with the following statement:

I very clearly answered the question. I said that there isn’t an intention to review the [Personal Needs Allowance] issue. … This government has made support of the most vulnerable a terrific priority [but] we have had to make a difficult choice being in government.

In an immediate sense, the project was unsuccessful in bringing about an improvement in the material circumstances of tenants. However, the chances that a neo-conservative provincial government would increase the allowance on the basis of a small petition and a report were slim from the outset. Moreover, the absence of any immediate material change can be set against the political legitimacy garnered by the campaign. The very fact that the minister was forced to offer a public, albeit negative, response to a question about the allowance was an improvement on his earlier efforts to dodge the issue. In political terms, the campaign helped to raise the profile of the PNA issue. Following the press conference, the Psychiatric Patient Advocacy Office, an arm’s length agency of the government, started a province-wide campaign to increase the allowance using the figure of $160.00. Contacts made with organizations and groups across the province are also valuable. Copies of the report, and subsequent analysis of provincial mental health and welfare policies, have been circulated to other organizations, advocates and service providers. Letters received by the group from members of parliament indicate a continuing awareness of the PNA issue, and the group is continuing the campaign in the build-up to the next provincial election.

**Symbolic action and autonomy**

Thinking critically about my involvement in these events, several comments can be made. First, the university affiliation and academic credentials leant some legitimacy to the issue. When presenting the results of the study publicly, it seemed to make political sense to establish an identity as a consultant for the group, with the report standing as a document prepared for the tenants’ group – in the same way that government ministries or corporations request analyses – rather than with them. As Fuller (1999) has argued, ‘going academic’ can be seen as a problematic response to avoid unjustified charges of bias leveled against more participatory research not least because it risks reproducing myths of objectivity and neutrality. At the same time, it may be possible for the distinction between activist and academy to be used strategically, sustaining what Bourdieu conceptualizes as the unstable combination of autonomy and engagement (also Spalter-Roth and Hartmann 1996).

Second, the production of the report gave the group something tangible on which to base calls for an increase. The group’s research into cost of living for facility tenants and its efforts to collect petition signatures were important, but the findings of the report added ‘scientific weight’ to the group’s claim. In some respects, group members already knew the findings of the report because most had lived in facilities, and understood what it meant to live on $112.00 a month, but as the chair said:
The study made a difference because we had been discussing this issue forever and ever, but sometimes the academics, when people have something written, something to which they can refer it’s important. Everyone already knew, right, that we needed an increase, but sometimes we need something more than that (emphasis added).

In a closely related sense, the contribution of the report was not just to restate issues that were understood by members of the tenants’ group, but also to convey those concerns in a scientific language that carries with it a certain legitimacy. In this sense, specific problems identified by tenants were conveyed as issues relating to, for example, ‘quality of life’ or ‘social inclusion’ within the context of the report, and linked to academic literature and policy documents. This is not to suggest that group members and other tenants did not understand these issues; they simply did not talk about them in these terms. Again, it could be argued that this move reproduces the ‘cultural capital’ of scientific discourse, itself a problematic outcome. However, it is possible to suggest, following Bourdieu, that the use of scientific language is necessary to confront the sophisticated arguments advanced by ‘experts’ in the service of governments and corporations. In this case, the presentation of data on tenants’ living situations and finances, and the critical analysis of provincial policy on mental health care and welfare were used to challenge polished assertions that welfare reform, for example, was providing people with disabilities with: ‘the supports they required to participate fully in Ontario society’ (2001, 4), or offering: ‘greater flexibility in allowing for family and community support’ (2001, 23).

As Bourdieu noted, the use of scientific discourse for symbolic action necessitates caution precisely because of the distinction between the logics of practice and theory. In the context of my collaboration with the tenants’ group, the sensitive issue of smoking provides an example. Cognizant of the politics of welfare reform, group members were concerned that any mention of smoking would invalidate concerns about tenants’ ability meet basic needs. However, smoking could not be left out, not least because cigarettes consumed thirty percent or more of some tenants’ incomes. Thus, my goal was to avoid a common-sense discourse of individual morality characteristic of welfare reform while acknowledging smoking as a significant issue. This was achieved in part through an appeal to the logic of theory. More specifically, I made reference to pharmacological studies that suggest smoking, particularly for people with schizophrenia, is a form of self-medication, helping to control mental health problems (Ziedonis and George 1997; Leonard et al. 2001). Tenants’ experiences were also conceptualized using research on the smoking culture that develops in community-based facilities, and the extent to which smoking may give people a sense of control over daily life (Lawn et al. 2002). In addition, it was possible to argue that while smoking has a detrimental effect on consumer/survivors individually, the high prevalence of smoking, coupled with high rates of taxation on cigarettes, means that this population returns a significant amount of its income directly to the government, thereby contributing to the cost of its own care (Lawn 2001).
These arguments move away from a common-sense discourse centered on individual responsibilities and choices. However, each has its origins in a broadly medical/psychiatric model, a model that the consumer/survivor movement has worked hard to challenge. What were the implications of using these arguments to explain tenants’ actions here? My position was that they could be employed strategically in the report to address the issue of smoking, while recognizing the distinction between these logics of theory and tenants’ logic of practice in which cigarettes are seen as a basic part of daily life. The danger of failing to maintain this distinction is evident in other research. A recent study, for example, called for higher cigarette taxes as a smoking deterrent because psychiatric consumer/survivors constitute a low-income population (Lasser et al. 2000). This work falls into the intellectualist trap of assuming that the rational actions conceived in the logic of theory actually drive everyday practice. In reality, any increase in the cost of cigarettes will likely be passed onto expenses such as clothes and food making such a strategy punitive and ineffectual.

Keeping my distance?

Alongside contributions to the PNA project, it is possible to identify concerns that arose in the course of the collaboration. Two examples demonstrate the problem of keeping one’s distance. The first concerns the problem of undue influence over the PNA project. In the build up to the press conference and report release, several issues worked against the continued participation of many tenant members. More organizing meant the need for additional meetings to plan different aspects of the event. However, many group members lead quite structured lives in terms of having to be in specific places at specific times (to obtain meals at the facility, to attend programs at local service providers). When asked to attend meetings during the week, several people declined. While it was easy to assume that members of the group had plenty of free time as most were not engaged in paid work, Alex and I enjoyed considerably more control over our daily schedules. We were also privileged in the sense that we had access to cars, and did not have to wait for the bus to get to meetings. While Alex and I often gave people rides to and from meetings, this was not always possible. In addition, several people did not have access to a phone and it was difficult to leave messages in some facilities.

What this meant was that more of the planning was done without the participation of a majority of the tenants’ group. Although developments and decisions at these smaller meetings were relayed back to the larger group, the fact that the housing worker and academic were planning the event was in some ways antithetical to the philosophy of the tenants’ group. Alex in particular had been explicit about the group being tenant-led, but the events leading up to the press conference demonstrated the ease with which a ‘professional-client’ hierarchy can appear. As a caveat, it is important to note that not all group members necessarily wanted to attend these additional meetings.

A second issue concerns my ongoing involvement with the tenants’ group. In the course of the PNA project, I developed a good relationship with the tenants’ group and

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9 It could be argued that this move sidesteps an appeal to the rights of individual consumer/survivors. At the same time, an argument based on the right to smoke did not seem to be a politically viable approach in this context.
became a regular at the monthly meetings. To be frank, work with the group is one of the most rewarding aspects of personal and professional existence. I also continue to learn a lot about issues facing the tenant population at meetings. At the same time, I am concerned that my opinions should not have undue influence on the group’s development. This is not an easy thing to accomplish, particularly as daily life for many group members is characterized by a high degree of powerlessness and an expectation that they will/must defer to people in positions of authority (facility operator, medical professional, service provider, welfare case worker), something that may predispose them to value my opinion over their own. When I raised concerns initially about my continuing attendance, members said that it was not a problem. That said, in the course of meetings I try to ‘police’ my contributions to discussion. This is a tricky (and not always successful) balance between providing input, but not dominating or overly shaping the group’s discussion of the issues at hand. I volunteered to take the group’s minutes so that I am recording the comments of others rather than making my own, but again the balance is not easy to maintain.

However, these efforts to ‘keep my distance’ in terms of influence within the group have to be understood alongside the fact that the nature of my involvement has changed since the completion of the research. While we have had discussions at meetings about other potential topics of research, much of the group’s time (and mine) in recent months has been taken up with starting a regular newsletter for the group, and organizing a community forum on tenants’ rights following the introduction of new municipal regulations governing the operation of residential facilities. As such, my role has shifted to be more of an active participant than as a researcher. While I remain cognizant of the fact that I am neither a psychiatric consumer/survivor nor a residential care facility tenant, collaboration on the newsletter and the forum has necessitated a shift of identity, with the activist/participant now coming to the fore. I’ve also tried to use the resources of the university (for example, paper and printing for the newsletters) to supplement the limited funds available to the group.

Conclusion

Collective mobilization on the part of marginalized populations and related theoretical developments have raised difficult questions about the exploitative nature of traditional research relationships and the (in)capacity of social science researchers to contribute to progressive social change. Social geographers continue to reflect on and engage with these debates, attempting to map out the contours of a critical geographical praxis that is cognizant of, and committed to addressing, inequalities that characterize the social world and the research relationship. As a geographer working on issues of disability, I have tried in this paper to reflect on my own efforts to engage in ‘critical praxis’ in collaborative work with a psychiatric consumer/survivor group.

Two bodies of work informed the discussion presented here. On the one hand, disability rights and psychiatric consumer/survivor movements have offered important critiques of work by non-disabled researchers that took much and gave little to the populations with whom they worked. On the other hand, the writing of Bourdieu on the need for a reflexive and politically engaged social science offers a set of methodological guidelines for one form of critical praxis. Both perspectives argue for sustained political engagement on the part of the researcher, but also for a critical distance between researchers and the communities with which they work.
This scholarship appeared to offer a useful framework for one approach to critical geographical research. For the PNA study, the focus of the research was shaped in large part by the immediate concerns of the group, and in this sense was politically engaged and of some immediate value to the tenant population. The collection of qualitative data on the daily lives of residential facility tenants and analysis of provincial policy constituted a form of ‘symbolic action’ designed to counter the common-sense neoliberal discourse of the government. Adopting an identity of ‘consultant’ to present the findings of the research was done strategically to sustain a sense of ‘scientific legitimacy.’ Although the combined efforts of the group’s petition and academic research did not effect an immediate improvement in the material circumstances of tenants’ lives, the work contributed to the visibility and political legitimacy of the ongoing PNA campaign.

At the same time, an approach that tries to balance political engagement and scientific autonomy runs risks. Efforts to garner support for tenants through an appeal to the legitimacy of social science required the ‘translation’ of their experiences into a scientific discourse. As the example of tenants’ smoking habits made clear, problems arise if the logic of theory underlying the scientific discourse is confused with the logic of practice characteristic of tenants’ everyday lives. While scientific explanations help to circumvent the simple binaries characteristic of political debate, reflexivity is needed to ensure that the limits of the logic of theory are made explicit. More generally, it can be argued that scientific autonomy reproduces the privileged position of academic discourse. While this is a valid concern, one response is that the ‘privilege’ of scientific discourse makes it an important resource in efforts to challenge the theoretically sophisticated arguments of states and corporations, and that politically engaged critical geographers are well positioned to engage in such symbolic action.

From the perspective of disability activists, critical distance is important to protect against the undue influence of non-disabled academics and professionals on groups and organizations run by and for disabled people and psychiatric consumer/survivors. In the context of this collaboration, this distance was difficult to maintain because consumer/survivors face multiple constraints stemming from, for example, chronic poverty and poor housing, as well as from their psychiatric condition and the effects of medication. These constraints worked against their involvement in the planning of the PNA campaign which meant that non-disabled collaborators took more of an active role.

These experiences point to the importance of ongoing negotiation concerning the involvement of all members of this type of collaboration, so that people have opportunities to be involved to the extent that they can and wish to be. Negotiation means avoiding assumptions that people either can or cannot participate, and recognizing that people’s preferences and positions may change over time. It also means trying to counter existing barriers to participation. That said, the extent to which tenants’ lives are characterized by externally-imposed routine sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish what they want to do from what they think they must.

Lastly, sustained involvement and ongoing negotiation over the nature of that involvement leaves open the possibility that the balance between scientific autonomy and political engagement can change over time. In the context of this collaboration, an ongoing shift in my identity has been driven in recent months by a recognition that research is not the only thing I can usefully contribute to the tenants’ group, but also by the fact that sustained involvement, while necessitating continued reflexivity on my part, has lead to
the development of personally/politically significant relationships that extend beyond the confines of an academic encounter.

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Activism as a Collective Cultural Praxis: Challenging the Barcelona Urban Model

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Introduction

What place does political and epistemological analysis occupy in Latin American and Spanish geographies? Why are activist practices in those contexts not the subject of academic debate on geographical praxis in those countries? Can this differentiated conception of activism and the academy be useful for rethinking the relationship between academy and activism in Anglo-American terms? This chapter seeks to answer these questions.

In Latin American and Spanish contexts plural critical geographies started to evolve in the 1980s. However, despite engagements with critical theory, political and epistemological concerns occupy little space in geographical work currently produced in Latin America and Spain. I suspect that the lack of critical praxis, and its associated social

2 It must be pointed out that the possibility of a crossover between perspectives both theoretical and political comes from my own career. The fact that I was trained as a geographer in Argentina in the democratic transition period has aroused in certain members of my generation, affected both by the political and cultural repression and the Malvinas/Falkland War, a non-conformist attitude and a mistrust of everything given. That has led us to look for spaces for participation and an approach to critical knowledges. The critical geography that evolved in Brazil was a mirror and source of knowledge. Doing my master’s degree at the University of Sao Paolo (Brazil) enabled me, on the one hand, to go deeper into that approach. On the other, it helped me to find interpretative ideas from different contexts such as England or France and find new meanings for them in the light of the ways of looking in Argentina and Brazil. Lastly, doctorate and post-doctorate studies at the Department of Geography of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) helped me to build bridges between the knowledge acquired before and the critical geographies, postcolonial
commitment, is strongly related to a vision in which activism is seen as outside of the academic sphere.

In this chapter, I use the tension between the academy and activism in Anglo-American geography to rethink geographical praxis in Barcelona. Rather than conceive of the relationship between activist and academia as a politically-grounded form of academically-led empirical investigation, I argue that the relationship should evolve out of a commitment to question political, social and economic conditions through a recognition that the production of knowledge, and alternative political practice, is a collective, horizontal process. I illustrate this argument through a critical reading of the processes of urban transformation that can be observed in Barcelona today, highlighting that the arguments I make are not the result of any kind of empirical research work, but rather represent collective knowledge produced through the experiences of collective activism. This is not to say that this collective activism did not involve academic activity. Indeed, in some circumstances the need to enrich political practice with theoretical instruments led to engagements with academic literatures. Here, academic activity became a tool for activist practice.

To provide substance to the argument made I provide an account of my experiences of collective activism as a member of the cultural group madeinbarcelona and Ribera del Besòs Forum. Both groups question the speculative processes that are shaping the city of Barcelona and the type of representations the City Council uses to legitimise that speculation. Moreover, I demonstrate how activism is defining alternative forms of producing the city (in both material and representational terms) and of doing politics.3 Through this discussion, I will outline the role of the academy as just one source of institutional know-how and resources that are used by those taking part in social movements and as a medium through which critical knowledge produced collectively within activism can be disseminated.

Geography and activism: between Anglo-American, Latin American and Spanish realities

Since the 1990s one of the central concerns of Anglo-American human geography has been the recovery of the radical perspective developed in the 1970s, as critical geographers have become interested in the production of knowledge sensitive to the processes of social oppression and exclusion. However, such critical geographies and the relations between the production of geographical knowledge and the capacity to transform society have been central to Latin American and Spanish geography for over twenty years. Such geographies were developed in response to the democratic transition in those countries at that time. In tandem with political renovation there was a process of geographies or new Anglo-American cultural geographies which have influenced practices in this Department. Moreover, my participation in the madeinbarcelona group was an apprenticeship in the sense of understanding the role of culture in breaking the logic of current town-planning policy in Europe.

3 I subscribe to Jacques Rancière’s concept of politics. For this politologist politics is an activity with a rationality of its own: disagreement with the distribution of parts of common property. The natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who do not have a part. From that perspective, disagreement and litigation predominate over consensus (Rancière 1996).
institutional replacement of both subjects and themes within disciplinary and professional geography.

The Brazilian geographer William Vesentini (undated, 1) considers that there were two sources that spread the term critical geography in the contexts mentioned: the transfer of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to the disciplinary field and the use of that term by Yves Lacoste in his book La Géographie, ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre and in the magazine Hérodote, in both the French and Italian versions. In Spain, for example, at Barcelona University, the magazine Geocritica appeared and, at Barcelona Autonomous University, the publication Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica was produced. Those journals mainly published epistemological and empirically based texts, many of which were guided by a social, transforming perspective that broke with the Vidalian regionalist approach that had been hegemonic in the discipline in Spain until then (Garcia Ramón and Nogué 1984).

In Brazil, critical geography referred to a developing strand of work that included Marxist, phenomenological and existentialist geographers. Geographers from Brazil and Argentina held two critical geography meetings: one in Sao Paolo (1989) and another in Buenos Aires (1991). At those congresses some of the political and thematic interests of Brazilian and Argentinean geography in the 1980s were expounded (e.g. exploitation of natural resources, urban and transport revenues, critical readings of geographical thought, and poverty, among others).

As we can see, the critical geographies that evolved in Spain, Argentina and Brazil were already pluralistic in nature, though that pluralism of perspectives can be differentiated from the kind we can observe today in Anglo-American geography. In the latter, the diversity of theoretical points of view is combined with the diversity of subjects dealt with (anti-racist geographies, geographies of the disadvantaged, feminist geographies, Marxist geographies, postmodern geographies, poststructuralist geographies, postcolonial geographies and queer geographies4) to create a highly plural theoretical and empirical landscape.

Conversely, particularly in Latin America, the harshest effects of neoliberal policies are making themselves felt and this has led to the production of particular kinds of critical geography, a questioning of political and economic models, and a search for political alternatives in the face of a collapsing party system and new kinds of political demonstrations (piqueteros, human rights movements, landless movements). However, so far those political transformations have not given rise to academic analyses that focus on the mutual involvement of society and geography, of the academy and politics.

By contrast, in the Anglo-American sphere we do find discussion about the relation between geography and activism, a debate launched partly by Nicholas Blomley (1994, 1995) and Adam Tickell (1995) in the pages of Environment and Planning when they observed a gap between the academic sphere and the political sphere. Articles published in journals such as Society and Space, Antipode or Area link that separation to the effects of the transfer of the rules of the neoliberal economy to the universities. Associated with the writing of a ‘new contract’ between university and state mediated by

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4 It is Noel Castree (2000, 956) who considers that Anglo-American critical geography focuses on those subjects and perspectives today.
the participation of companies (Demerit 2000), the authors observe a process of increasing job insecurity and the establishment of market-oriented research priorities.

Blomley (1994) writes in that context that the absence of discussion about geography and activism in the universities reveals either a lack of political involvement by academics or an interest in keeping the two separate. The connection between them would raise problems of self-validation, institutional dilemmas (status as well-paid professionals in movements that are more proletarian), and political or intellectual subjectivity (what is the role of the academic supposed to be?). Following the model proposed by Cornell West, Blomley reviews different kinds of activism from the kind to be found in the academy, aimed at producing – to use Foucault’s terms – ‘regimes of truth’, to the kind that try to form critical intellectual communities. The latter would be the direction taken by proposals that pay attention to the educational sphere as a space for the construction of critical knowledges or protest against the mercantilisation of universities. Blomley also analyses hierarchical and horizontal activisms outside the university. Whilst in the first kind, the academic plays a leading part in the struggle to create meanings, or ‘to tell power the truth’, in the second, the best of intellectual life is fused with the best of the forces organised to reach a greater degree of democracy and freedom outside the academy. That would be the context for Routledge’s (1996) suggestion of creating a third space that could break down the boundaries between activism and the academy and which constantly leads us to think about our social situation, our position within the discipline, the physical location of our research and our political perspective.

However, most of the experiences on which those Anglo-American analyses are based spring, in fact, from the research processes themselves and not from any prior political commitment or engagement. In general, activism seems to emerge from fieldwork. The fieldwork often reveals social injustices, which leads the researcher to become involved in the movements under study. According to the authors, in the activist sphere the academic brings his/her experience of participation in earlier political movements or as an intellectual. He/she also acts as a catalyst, student or mediator, playing different parts at different times (Routledge 1996, 410-411).

If, as we have seen, the discussion begins with an interest in stimulating geographers’ activism, in fact it leads to the epistemological problems involved in taking the results of activist practice to the academy. Articles interested in these themes analyse the tensions that arise in terms of power/knowledge, of the relation between interviewer and interviewee, and issues of representation and displacement (Katz 1994). The central figure of the analysis is the academic, the author of those texts. The activist movement in which he/she took part usually plays a secondary role. It is difficult to recognise the collective nature of the information constructed. Moreover, the analysis bears no relation to collective political practice, sometimes presented as full of ‘energy’ and ‘excitement’, ‘not totally planned’ and ‘spontaneous’ (Routledge 1996, 406), unlike the supposedly rational and unemotional character of intellectual production.

To sum up, the activist experience itself acts as an element that allows the intellectual to increase his/her legitimacy in academic circles, an instrument of distinction within the academic sphere. In that context, activism becomes an element which, rather than serving to spread privileged information in sectors which do not possess it and contribute to their demands feeds academic production.
From that context, we might wonder why the engagement of academics in landless movements, in anti-globalisation events, in the struggles of immigrants (Segrelles 1998, 11) in Spain or Latin America do not result in publications like the ones we find in Anglo-American contexts; why Spanish and Latin American geographies do not conceptualise spaces of activism as places for fieldwork. One answer might be to consider them instead as spheres where fundamental political commitments come into play, regardless of training or academic activity, leading to the idea that making activism the starting point for our social practice might make it possible to pick out aspects of the relation between politics and the academy different from the ones that are discussed when the experience of activism is subsumed in academic activity.

**Urban transformations in Barcelona at the start of the 21st century**

When the Olympic Games were held in Barcelona in 1992 the city made its entrance onto the European and international stage. The nomination to host the sports event in 1986 was the prerequisite for enlightened managers of the city to carry out a whole set of town planning and cultural reforms that had been planned since 1980 (Moix 1994). Both the town planning reforms and the Olympic Games had the full support of a population that had been mobilised since the return of democracy to the country. That support was channelled through neighbourhood associations, who kept up a fluid dialogue with the local government, and the people of the city who offered themselves as volunteers. Among the town planning transformations associated with the preparations for the event was the conversion of water front lands from industrial activity to residential, recreational and services uses (Garcia Ramón and Albet 2000; Balibrea 2001).

From the successful conclusion of the Games, and into the late 1990s, the City Council decided to continue with the urban development operation of advancing along the seafront. The idea was to make areas of the city which had previously been on the periphery more central. However, the path taken by the mayor’s office has been to restrict its activities to smoothing the way for investments by private capital, which means that the renovation process has become one of big business.

In this new situation, a new cultural initiative has provided the justification for moving this urban transformation process ahead. This is the organisation of the Universal Forum of Cultures planned for 2004. The event was initially designed as a set of debates, congresses, thematic exhibitions and an arts festival (http://www.barcelona2004.org/esp). This old-style, universal exhibition is based on three slogans: peace, multiculturality and sustainable development. The cultural event and the slogans associated with it aim to attract international organisations (to get funding), multinational corporations (so that they commit to the urban renovation project) and the residents of Barcelona (to obtain consensus and legitimacy).

The space chosen for the installation of the material infrastructure is on the seafront in the area on the borders of the municipalities of Barcelona and Sant Adrià del

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5 The organisation of the Universal Forum of Cultures has lived through a series of institutional crises related to the scant definition of the profile of the event and the delays in the schedule for its implementation. The management has changed four times in two years. Distinguished members of the Catalan intelligentsia who were on the advisory committee have resigned from the organisation.
Besòs, known as El Besòs. In recent years, high class, American-style housing, international hotels and shopping centres have been built in the area. Recently the construction directly connected with the Universal Forum of Cultures has also begun.

Until now the Besòs area was mostly occupied by immigrants and the children of immigrants. That population from the south of Spain came to Barcelona in the 1960s to join in the industrial activities that had developed historically in the area. Between the 1960s and 1970s, to meet the residential needs of the immigrant population the local government built and promoted the building of housing units with precarious materials whose deterioration is easy to see today. The areas most affected by the deterioration are the districts known as La Mina and La Mina Nueva. To the degradation of the buildings can be added the economic and social tension of the inhabitants, who find it difficult to become part of society or find jobs in the city.

The process of urban renovation will open up a border between different social sectors: the inhabitants who are already settled in the area and the ones who will occupy the new housing units. Indeed, many of the inhabitants settled in the urban reform zone argue that those interventions will, first of all, affect the existing social tissue, since the plans take no account, for example, of the need to build housing at prices which the residents’ children can afford. Second, the urban transformations will have a direct impact on existing forms of economic production, such as industry. Third, the projects under way sideline requirements in terms of cultural amenities for the districts (language, schools, music, the arts, libraries, theatres).

In short, the process of urban renovation is following the tendencies of the global economy. In this context there is an attempt to make Barcelona a competitive city internationally. The main interlocutors of the politicians who govern the city are companies with local or multinational capital. There is little contact between the city town planning authorities and the neighbourhood associations, which aggravates the degree of conflict between the City Council and the residents (Marshall 2002).

Nevertheless, the local government uses representational policies to try and avoid such conflict and legitimise its actions. Through images, speeches and cartographies of the urban projects under way, it is trying, on the one hand, to socialise certain images of Barcelona, its inhabitants and the situation of the city on the world stage. On the other, it is aiming to legitimise the policies being carried out through the creation of imagined communities. In other words, it is trying to make subjects living in different parts of the city, differentiated from the point of view of class, gender and ethnicity, commune with the political project of Barcelona.

For example, the Besòs area continues to be the object of a number of representational projects which aim to integrate it into the centre. And so, with the start of the works to open up the area to private capital, the image of Barcelona as an unfinished...
city was spread. The opening of Avenida Diagonal7 as far as the administrative boundary of Barcelona with the Sant Adrià district was promoted with the rhetoric that ‘Diagonal reaches the sea’ (see Image 1). Likewise, virtual images on a single scale with the sets of buildings, hotels and the works connected with the Universal Forum of Cultures have been a constant in the whole urban reform process (see Image 2).


Recently a campaign has been launched which, according to the person who designed it, seeks to ‘arouse expectation when there is no more than a set of works at a barely embryonic stage’ (La Vanguardia 2002). The basis of this advertising policy are metaphors such as: ‘The cranes will be palm trees’, ‘The workers will be children’ and ‘The rubble will be beaches’. This representation policy sets out to eliminate the everyday conflicts, which sometimes surface in the local media, and, most of all, in the public debating forums of the neighbourhood associations. For example, silencing the questioning of the rhetoric of multiculturalism associated with the Universal Forum of Cultures by certain intellectuals who find a discrepancy between the proposal for dialogue between cultures promoted here and the current restrictive immigration policy (Image 3).8

For their part, the neighbourhood associations believe that the Universal Forum of Cultures is merely being used to justify property speculation, whilst also revealing the

7 A landmark avenue that crosses the whole of Barcelona, included in the Plan designed by Ildefons Cerdà for the extension to the city towards the end of the 19th century.
8 Here the declaration of the IX Anthropology Congress held in Barcelona in September 2002 is illustrative. It says: ‘In a context marked by institutional laws and practices that systematise and generalise injustice, brutality and exploitation towards immigrants, we are concerned that Barcelona is preparing a top level exaltation of cultures as a political theme and media spectacle’ (El País, 8 September 2002).
government’s lack of interest in resolving the requirements of the inhabitants of Barcelona in terms of public amenities and housing. And so a critical reading of the Barcelona urban development project reveals the fissures in an idea that seeks to use cultural strategies to cloak the drive to turn the city into an economically competitive centre, to the detriment of the quality of life of its inhabitants.

Image 2. Virtual image in the scale chosen by the local planning to socialise the representation of Barcelona’s urban transformation processes.

In search of new ways of doing politics and destabilising the model of the city: the Ribera del Besòs Forum and madeinbarcelona

The town planning and representation policy of the City Council decides who has the right to use the city. However, and crucially, having the right to use Barcelona does not mean taking part in its construction. The subjects selected can only consume what the local government offers them. In that way leadership is handed over to the middle- and upper middle-class inhabitants who live in the centre, multinational companies and tourists. Tourists are the recipients of the conversion of the buildings by the Modernist architects (Gaudí, Domènech i Montaner, among others) into theme parks.

For that reason the Federation of Barcelona Neighbourhood Associations has withdrawn its support for the event (El País, 6 and 7 November 2002).
However, there is a sector of the population that is being left out: the residents of the areas most affected by the urban transformations, whose historic memory and everyday life are being wiped from the city. The rebirth of the neighbourhood movement seeks to demand a more democratic Barcelona which takes account of the needs of its inhabitants and includes their participation in decision-making.

The Ribera del Besòs Forum was established in 1992 in a state school (Instituto del Besòs). It consists of fifty different kinds of organisations: neighbourhood associations, cultural centres, schools and parishes, among others. They are all located in the area between Ciudadela and the Besòs. From the outset, the central concerns of the Ribera del Besòs Forum were state education and town planning.

Review Barcelona informació 1, november 1998.

The Ribera del Besòs Forum has defined itself as an ‘ideas market’ which meets on the first Monday of the month at the education centre where it was launched. Those taking part in the meetings include local residents, technicians, intellectuals and artists who live in the area or other parts of the city. They report, exchange points of view or agree on plans of action, both in the district and the city as a whole (Roca and Faigenbaum 2000). There are no hierarchies in this Forum. Everyone taking part expresses their points of view from their professional, intellectual or political training and their everyday experience.

That dynamic has made it possible to pool knowledge produced horizontally, differentiated from the official discourses. For example, they have managed to socialise

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10 Until the urban reforms connected with the Olympic Games, the Ciutadella Park separated Barcelona from the suburbs. That definition would take in the Poblenou industrial renovation area and the residential zone connected with the organisation of the Universal Forum of Cultures.
the idea that the whole shoreline should be conceived of as a single zone with the process of urban transformation affecting that whole. That has made it possible to draw up an alternative plan to the changes proposed by the City Council. Among other aspects, the plan demands obligatory reinvestment of the surplus value generated by the town planning projects in the area, the construction of public amenities and social housing. Moreover it asks for the preservation of non-polluting industries as a source of work for the inhabitants of the area. It also insists on the defence of public spaces, state schools and the opening of a public debate about the Universal Forum of Cultures and its town planning impact. The plan, presented to the press in July 2000, acted as a starting point for generating support for the demands of different associations in the area for new visions, different from those proposed.

In July 2002, an event concerning the urban transformation in the Besòs area was held, sponsored by the Barcelona and Sant Adrià Councils and the organising body of the Universal Forum of Cultures, at the Instituto del Besòs. In this way, speeches and projects drafted in the political sphere reached the inhabitants of the periphery, the people who were directly affected by the town planning transformations. At first, for the politicians, that event must have been envisaged as a space for the construction of legitimisation and consensus. However, it ended up showing the social distance between the world of urban politics and the images of the city derived from it, and the everyday life of the inhabitants. They saw in the reforms that affected their districts the construction of a ‘Disney World’ style city. The possibility of negotiation was limited by distortion (Rancière 1995, 9) derived from a different understanding of reality. If the politicians and the local population used a formally common language, words like ‘quality of life’ or ‘modernity’ acquired different meanings for each of them.

At the time of writing, the Ribera del Besòs Forum is drafting a set of proposals tending towards the establishment of public cultural amenities which will break with the speculative model. For example, on a plot of land which the City Council wants to hand over for the construction of an international hotel, the construction of a media library is being promoted. The amenity is planned to be a local and metropolitan infrastructure. The space would be presented as a place for production and access to local and international information. At the same time, it would serve as a specialised documentation centre on the historic participation of the people of Barcelona (immigrants, workers, women) in the construction of the city.11

It should also be pointed out that the activism of the members of Ribera del Besòs Forum is not confined to the monthly meetings, but includes submitting allegations to the Council, drafting alternative plans for districts, residents’ meetings and even demonstrations in the streets. Many of the members also take part in the debates about the model for the city. They are usually held in universities, museums and other public and private institutions. In those participations the members of Ribera del Besòs Forum usually combine a critical political perspective which guides their own interpretations of reality with the experience and knowledge that has emerged from the meetings held at the Instituto del Besòs.

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11 Since the date of submission of this paper to the date of publication the Ribera del Besòs Forum has undertaken other campaigns. One of them was related with the conservation of industrial heritage of the area. A debate around this topic was held on 30 March 2003.
Madeinbarcelona is one of the entities that make up the Ribera del Besòs Forum. Its participation is based on the group’s interest in spreading a critical image of the Barcelona town planning project. Since its beginnings in 1998, madeinbarcelona has consisted of people linked to the world of culture (philosophers, artists, social scientists) who are critical of the hegemonic cultural practice model in force in the city and committed to the renovation of the left-wing political project. The members of madeinbarcelona (I’m one of them) have tried to open up a space for analysis, discussion and work with the aim of drafting a proposal for a new counterhegemonic cultural practice model. Within that broader context, we have mounted criticism of the official iconography generated by the Administration (madeinbarcelona, 1999).

So far, our work has followed four guidelines:

a) We have tried to document all the symbolic events that take place in Barcelona and which are structuring the image of the city. Although that image may have little to do with the physical, social and town planning reality, it is contributing to the implementation of the transformations taking place in those fields. As a result, we have decided to make explicit the mechanisms that intervene in the structuring of the ‘Barcelona image’ and prepare forms of critical assessment to that representation. The analyses put forward in Barcelona at the Start of the 21st Century are part of some of the results obtained from the task undertaken along those lines and two documents drafted by the group.12

b) We have already seen that the population of the peripheral districts is missing from the official representations created around the image of the city. Our incorporation in the Ribera del Besòs Forum has allowed us to take part in preparing the inhabitants’ own strategies of distinction as a vehicle for making them visible in the city. We have taken part in the discussion and collective editing of a leaflet to publicise the Ribera del Besòs Forum Alternative Plan through an ascetic language in tune with, but also destabilising of, the kind used by the local administration. The leaflet presents a teenage student at the Instituto del Besòs, photographed by Patrick Faigenbaum, in combination with images of housing in La Mina district. This is a way of demanding a space for the future generations in this part of the city that stretches from Ciudadela to El Besòs (Image 4).

c) At the last few meetings we have also played an active role in drafting the plan for the media library project. As we have seen, it aims to break with the speculative dynamic and is based on the conception that knowledge technology can be at the service of all the people of Barcelona. We should stress that, within Ribera del Besòs Forum, madeinbarcelona occupies a similar place to any of the other member entities, so our participation is subject to the rhythms marked by the Forum and the activities to be organised. Like other members of the Ribera del Besòs Forum, we move on other scales and in other institutions to provide and publicise critical interpretations of the way in which the process of urban renovation in the city is being carried out and publicised.

12 The last document is linked to our participation in the Arquitecturas del Discurso project held at Fundación Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, from 19 September to 11 November 2001 and directed by Ute Meta Bauer.
d) We are trying to get in touch with other groups and people who, in fields other than ours, share our concerns. In that way we seek to construct a confluence which makes the critical voices heard and to contact groups who are working to constitute alternative political options.

**Understanding the activism-academy relation from activism**

I began this chapter by arguing that in the Latin American and Spanish contexts the relation between activism and the academy in geography was a concern to be found in many texts from the 1980s. However, that interest would seem to have waned in recent years. Awareness of the emergence of social movements in those contexts led me to investigate the differences in conception of the practice of activism in the Anglo-American sphere and the kind now to be found in Spain, Argentina or Brazil. In theory it would seem...
that it is a social and political concern that leads intellectuals in those countries to take part
in grassroots movements. On the other hand, many of the works we find in the Anglo-
American sphere present the fieldwork of an investigation as a ‘rite of passage’ to the
practice of activism. This behaviour carries out important consequences both in the
academy sphere and the activist one. Theories, concepts and categories conceptualized by
academics as relevant for activism perhaps are very distant from urgencies raised by
activist practices. The idea of activism conceived in the academy is probably quite
different from the one that emerges from the practice of one’s own activism. Questions
therefore remain concerning whether postcolonial studies or new cultural geographies are
useful for the development and interventions of social movements (by the way, a category
that comes from academy)?

In contrast, taking activism in madeinbarcelona and the Ribera del Besòs Forum
as a starting point for my analysis has enabled me to suggest that the knowledge produced
about the city of Barcelona through participatory practices is not individual; on the
contrary, it is collective and horizontal in nature. All members of the Ribera del Besòs
Forum expresses their background and their everyday experience both in their and in other
parts of the city; projects and public interventions are assumed as collective practices,
collective responsibilities as it will mean collective benefit. Within this context,
inellectuals or researchers have no special knowledge, no special functions. They are
equal members as other people that take part in the Ribera del Besòs Forum.

Collective and horizontal practices can be considered to represent a kind of
empowerment that makes it possible to destabilise the knowledge generated both
materially and representationally by the City Council. It makes explicit the role of culture
in the justification of a set of speculative economic ventures and the possibility, from
activism, of proposing cultural interventions that try to make visible, and defend, the role
of the inhabitants in the construction of the city project. The production of critical urban
knowledge goes hand in hand with a political practice which is also collective. That
practice includes the drafting of alternative plans, the organisation of neighbourhood
meetings and demonstrations, negotiation with the City Council and participation in public
debates that take place in different institutional spheres. That is a way of contributing to
constructing a proposal for the city which is accessible to everyone who lives in it.

Incorporating experiences and analyses of that kind into the field of the discussion
of geography and activism seems to be a necessary focal point in the field of critical
geographies. Making activism the starting point for analysis makes it possible to
incorporate knowledge produced in different temporal and spatial contexts into the
academic sphere, in political and production of knowledge circumstances where a
different intersubjectivity from the one that usually feeds academic practice takes
precedence. Perhaps it will mean incorporating a different manner of facing both teaching
and researching urban subjects, where political praxis conceived as a collective, horizontal
way of thinking/acting in the city could be privileged over practices that reproduce the
way of understanding/learning what is going on in urban places.
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Feminist Praxis in University-Community Partnerships: Reflections on Ethical Crises and Turning Points in Temple-North Philadelphia IT Partnerships

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Introduction

Service learning is gaining attention as a means of providing university students with opportunities to participate in community organizations and settings to provide a social context for enhancing understanding of issues and dynamics introduced in the classroom. Student learning is often characterized as being accomplished through providing ‘direct’ interaction with people and places or contexts from which they can learn through doing and reflecting. Increasingly service learning courses and programs are becoming a more common university-community partnership format, gaining attention among geographers seeking to identify appropriate contexts for supporting community and grassroots efforts at social transformation. As such, service learning is considered to be a form of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy draws from a long tradition within the field of education that positions social action at the center of academic projects, placing the nexus of learning, and the measure of learning outcomes, beyond the academy.

This chapter describes and assesses a model of integrated service learning that was developed based on partnerships established through courses and programs at Temple University with community organizations located in North Philadelphia. The model developed expanded a course-by-course approach to service learning, and its development advanced critical pedagogical objectives for student participants. We argue here, however,
that merely evaluating the effectiveness of critical pedagogical projects based on student outcomes does not provide an adequate framework for our program because we also intended to advance community objectives based on collaborations established through our integrated model. We suggest that using practical ethics as a beginning point for examining the diverse perspectives involved in, and impacted by, the integrated model we implemented provides a more appropriate means of assessing the overall effects of our program to meet its critical pedagogical objectives.

**Using practical ethics to assess critical pedagogical outcomes**

In proceeding with identifying ethical issues related to the model of integrated research, teaching, and outreach we developed and proposed as an alternative to course-by-course service learning approaches, we have considered the question of how we as critical academics can actively engage in the process of rethinking and revisioning the university and its relationships with community partners to promote social change. In doing this, not only are student learning and faculty development concerns central, it is also necessary to assess the outcomes of programs in terms of community goals, participation and perspectives. Shifting university accountability from academic and research standards to accommodate community outcomes is predicated upon an adoption of a critical pedagogical framework for learning, because critical pedagogy would seemingly necessitate moving beyond mere intellectual understanding of social inequality towards adopting an active role in mitigating social inequality.

Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk (1999) provide a thorough examination of critical pedagogy by differentiating it from critical thinking. For them, critical pedagogy assumes critical thinking as an essential component of examining and challenging oppressive processes. The tradition of critical pedagogy to which they refer has as its ultimate project a challenge to institutions and political structures that are embedded within and form oppressed thinking (Freire 1970). Their view of critical thinking is that it facilitates and is essential to critical pedagogy because it produces the possibility for challenging institutions and ideologies. They argue, however, that critical pedagogy requires the learning developmental step of praxis. They further state that critical pedagogy should be viewed: ‘not as an additional act beyond the pedagogical one, but as an inseparable part of it. For Critical Thinking, at most, the development of more discerning thinkers might make them more likely to undermine discreditable institutions, to challenge misleading authorities, and so on – but this would be a separate consequence of the attainment of Critical Thinking, not part of it’ (Burbles and Berk 1999, 50).

They draw on the tradition of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1992) and Henry Giroux (1983) to describe the importance of reflexivity in examining the social justice aims of learning and to explain how teaching about social change is a necessary part of, yet differs from, doing social change. Boyce (1996, 2) takes this argument a step further by situating the need for social action as part of critical pedagogy in an examination of the ethics of instructing students to engage in the struggle against societal inequality, stating:

a politics of ethics, difference, and democracy grounds the practice of critical pedagogy. An ethic that recognizes humanity and struggles overtly against oppression and injustice is central. We are part of communities within which we are members, agents. There is no emancipation without context or accountability. We work to make context evident and to
establish and acknowledge accountability. Recognition of difference and the importance of many voices is a postmodern development in critical pedagogy. Dialogue, a long-valued element of Freire’s critical pedagogical practice, facilitates the voicing of difference and enables difference to reside openly within relations rather than be suppressed. A relentless commitment to democracy requires social critique and transformation of social, political, and organizational structures. For radical educators, this politics of ethics, difference, and democracy requires praxis. This work cannot be solely an intellectual exercise.

Feminist geographers have applied this tradition of critical pedagogy to provide an ethical basis for linking feminist social action to instruction through service learning approaches (Oberhauser 2002). Oberhauser’s perspective that critical pedagogy provides an implicit challenge to the academy, which in turn creates a space for including feminist perspectives within and outside of the academy, is shared by many feminist scholars (Oberhauser 2002; Todd 1997). Further, this argument infers the role that critical thinking must play as a basis for critical feminist pedagogy because students are provided with a structure to actively engage and critically examine the social construction of knowledge and assumptions about social inequality (Oberhauser 2002; Todd 1997). An essential component of this approach is the need to assess the level of appreciation for, and comprehension of, power relations and social inequality gained by students through critical pedagogy. Yet Todd (1997) points out that the power relations of students and instructor must not be overlooked as an essential element that affects which specific path a critical thinking or critical pedagogical exercise may take in the collective discourse of the classroom environment, highlighting the need for a reflexive process among educators.

Masucci and Renner (2001, 5) combine the concepts of critical pedagogy and critical thinking into a model of critical service learning that is comprised of four learning stages: preflection, theory, action, and reflection. Drawing on Freire, they argue that critical pedagogy must reflect on the hegemonic relationship between knowledge and ignorance that is embedded in the power differentials among partners. They comment on the illusiveness of social justice outcomes in relation to a specific critical service learning course they taught in which students worked to create a literacy library for children at Montgomery Village in Knoxville, TN through raising practical ethical questions about the relationships between the ‘server’ and the ‘served.’ (14). Their critique of service learning is that if not placed in a critical service learning framework, service learning does not necessarily result in critical pedagogy, a research framework, social action process or outcomes. Therein is a key limitation of service learning as a strategy for critical pedagogy, even though it is a widely accessed mechanism for providing students with structured opportunities to engage marginalized communities for learning purposes. Further, without embedding the experiences in a structural critical or feminist framework as Oberhauser suggests, the questions that arise are: Does the community benefit from the structured interaction? Are the students being exploited as free labor? Is there an educational benefit to the students? Are students bringing personal frameworks such as racism, classism, and sexism into the interaction unchallenged? Is there a diverse representation of faculty and student involvement with the community or does the service learning activity replicate gender and race inequalities within the academy in a community service setting? Does this impact on the resource capacity of faculty to do all aspects of
academic work (and for that matter, meeting individual and family needs) in a negative manner?

We adhere to Oberhauser’s (2002) tenant that feminist critical pedagogy must reflect an understanding of the hierarchical structure and hegemony of patriarchy as a basis for engaging and reflecting individual agency based on field experiences. We also draw on social action methodology to create a context for a form of critical service learning introduced by Masucci and Renner (2001) to provide a structure that integrates learning, research and partnerships towards working with communities on community oriented objectives. We situate our work directly in the tradition of critical pedagogy, informed by, but not the same as, critical thinking as differentiated by Burbules and Berk (1999) and addressed in Giroux and Myrsiades (2001), Giroux and Shannon (1997), and Todd (1997). Finally, our assessment approach builds on the work of Monk et al. (2003) by examining the outcomes of each institutional partner towards the determination of whether or not feminist critical pedagogical objectives were advanced.

Collaborations with community partners in North Philadelphia

Over the past five years, we have been working with poor communities in North Philadelphia to address digital divide barriers that impact on the daily lives of poor women as they seek to access educational, health, and work related services. In particular we have focused on the interrelationship among welfare reform, the increasing prevalence of information and communication technologies that individuals navigate to obtain information related to services, and barriers to technology access that impact negatively on accessing needed information and services. Our collaboration began with a service learning course that collaboratively generated an intranet depicting economic human rights testimonials with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, situated in North Philadelphia. This course evolved into the development of a Community Technology Center and associated educational programs at Harrison Plaza Public Housing Development, and now involves providing Information Technology literacy training to over 200 high school students throughout North Philadelphia in partnership with schools and community organizations. Our program initially established a means of community engagement through course interactions, but it quickly evolved into a program of integrated research, instruction, and community outreach that worked to support community, student, and faculty empowerment. This transition of purpose occurred because in trying to do our work we experienced ethical dilemmas involving the sustainability of the programs and the empowerment of participants. These ethical dilemmas had practical repercussions, such as balancing time, resources, student learning objectives, and community needs – in an environment in which workload and resource issues were limiting despite the enormous resource gap between the university and the communities in which it is located.

We developed an alternative model of university-community partnerships that built upon this more traditional service learning course approach to community involvement. This model expanded on community connections established through service learning courses to include integrative learning, research and outreach program rooted in the critical pedagogical tradition. Our goal was to improve the sustainability of university-community partnership activities that were threatened due to the lack of continuity presented by relying solely on service learning courses as the means of implementing partnership programs. Because of the tension that is presented by the differences between
community needs for sustainability and long-term involvement versus the schedule and shorter-term orientation of students enrolled in specific classes have, additional contexts for partnership were identified to better meet the needs of community participants, students, and faculty. Increasing the empowerment of each of these groups, we believed, would greatly increase the sustainability of the program.

**A model for integrating community collaboration, research and instruction**

In practice, what this model has involved is the establishment of a series of community projects focused on addressing digital divide barriers in North Philadelphia and how such barriers are interconnected to a host of other inequalities faced by poor women and their families in these communities. The core set of activities is predicated by our social action research program, which involves understanding perspectives on the role that information technology can play in further isolating, or networking women to address other conditions of inequality in their lives, such as educational inequality, health care inequality, and income inequality. Our research objective is to contribute to an expanded understanding of the digital divide through examining the different means by which low-income, racialized minority female-headed households access the Internet, and relate the information obtained to specific decision making processes. Moreover, we aim to shift the focus of digital divide research from an examination of differential access to computers connected to the Internet to an examination of the means by which Internet information resources are differently accessed due to lower levels of work and home based computer and Internet access. This research agenda involves an examination of the problem of the digital divide through:

1. Examining the barriers and incentives to attaining access to information technology and related educational programs, basic skills and literacy, technological skills, and job training among poor inner city public housing residents in the context of the new welfare reform laws that limit the amount of time one can receive assistance, links the receipt of assistance to work requirements, and reduces the ability of recipients to pursue educational goals.

2. Evaluating the patterns and processes of job skills attainment, job searches and employment outcomes between those with access to information technology and related educational programs and those without access in order to better understand the role that technology may play in helping poor women attain economic self-sufficiency, particularly in the context of welfare reform requirements.

3. Questioning how the power dynamics among partners with vastly different resources (i.e., knowledge, money, access to information technology) affects the partnerships’ ability to establish and achieve mutually desirable outcomes that will empower poor women through access to technology and related training.

In seeking to understand perspectives about the role that information technologies can play in mitigating or increasing negative impacts on poor women’s survival strategies, we have implemented a series of technology literacy programs based on needs specific communities have identified. These programs are now supported through grant funding
and work study. We have developed a series of service learning activities that can be integrated into any of the specific courses that we teach that allow students to participate in programs that have been established addressing technology literacy issues; and we have developed a service learning seminar that addresses the theoretical, ethical, and efficacy issues involved in partnership approaches to addressing community needs.

Finally, throughout these activities, there is permeability – that is to say that courses are taught in community settings, open to community members; students can participate in work study or internship opportunities while simultaneously engaging in service learning designated courses; faculty and graduate students can pursue research interests based on community partnerships; and new resources can be requested to address needs that are identified as a part of improved communication and understanding generated by situating the praxis of critical pedagogy outside the confines of the facilities of the university.

Assessing partner perspectives on collaboration outcomes

To provide a sense of impact in terms of scale, we will describe generally how we began, and the scope of our current activities, in terms of outcomes from each perspective. From a community perspective, our first service learning course placed one computer in one organization, an organization of poor and homeless people, and linked student learning to assist with the project of taking records of economic human rights violations collected by the organization and cataloguing those records through creating an Intranet that could be updated and easily accessed by organization members. This project also involved showcasing this system at a meeting of poor people’s organizations held in Philadelphia and served to assist with furthering the organizing objectives of the group.

Yet, despite the successes, there were a number of ethical dilemmas that we faced that required us to change partners as well as the nature of assistance. Firstly, there were politics within the organization that were exacerbated by the resources we brought to the table that was making it difficult for us to feel ethical in our interactions. Secondly, we did not have the time or money needed to sustain the partnership as it was organized. Thirdly, while the student’s roles were meaningful, it was impossible to coordinate the academic time line with the organizations’ needs.

The collaboration led to an additional service learning course being offered that focused on expanding this model to create a community technology center for a different community, drawing on the leadership of the first organization. The center was ultimately created as a demonstration project and four service learning courses, including two that were offered at the center and open to community members. The center, situated in a public housing development, became the nexus for establishing a series of community education courses, staffed by community service work study students, graduate student volunteers, and community members. The program served approximately 50 children and 25 adults. The key ethical dilemma we faced was ultimately our inability to assist the community with attaining a permanent facility for the CTC. Due to the lack of resources in the community, the community center had to be used for multiple purposes. This was causing tension between different constituents within the community as well as different partners operating in the facility. In addition, we were finding it difficult to attain resources for both the programs and the research. To solve these problems we moved the CTC into a neighborhood elementary school and joined with another partner who had
received a substantial grant to run similar programs. However, we were losing our ability to ensure the quality and sustainability of the educational programs at the school as well as Temple. While we no longer have a CTC with a fixed facility, the CTC served as a basis for our involvement in generating additional technology training programs reaching approximately 250 families per year in six other community settings.

From a student perspective, some involved in the first service learning course expanded their involvement with specific groups through internships and thesis research. Others became staff members or volunteers for specific groups based on the desire to maintain continuity with those entities. Others have become program managers for activities that have grown out of initial partnership activities. And others have become instructors for service learning courses that are part of the university education component of this overall approach. We began with two enrolled students in the one course. There are now five courses that can be offered with links to activities in six settings, involving between 50 – 100 students per year. Moreover, what began as a handful of active volunteers has grown into a staff of four program managers and approximately 100 undergraduate and graduate student mentors, tutors, technology trainers, and organizers supported through the America Reads work study program to provide continuity in delivering services through partnership programs established as part of this integrated program.

This has allowed students, both undergraduate and graduate, to have more meaningful educational experiences. For example, students who were interested could link their community involvement to a wider and more systematic curriculum and could have an active role in social action research. Furthermore, students with financial needs could continue to be involved through work study thereby improving the continuity of the educational experience and reducing the need for non-academic related employment.

From a faculty perspective, what began as a program on the margins of the departmental mission, though ostensibly central to the university mission, has emerged as a parallel institutional structure with strong linkages to the instructional mission of the department but separate research and outreach missions, more central to an interdisciplinary movement within the university. The student staff has been organized as its own entity – Harrison Campus Compact, funded through external support from city and state government – and new research funding has been a basis for creating a strong linkage between the outreach activities and legitimating faculty involvement through providing support for course buyout, conference participation, equipment and supplies.

As our integrated program has become more institutionalized, we personally have lost the one-on-one community involvement (our students have not) that we had previously. This has meant that we have not been able to establish the relationship and trust we built with previous partners. Yet we feel that trade-off has been an increase in the empowerment of all partners and the increasing sustainability of the programs.

By expanding the role of the university beyond the individual efforts of specific faculty and students through specific courses, more extensive resources could be drawn upon to address community resource issues. For example, we have used technical staff to provide support for community technology centers, relied upon university resources for transportation across multiple locations, and provided much needed facility options to augment community facility availability given that most of the programs are located
within a 10 block radius of Temple University’s main campus. Furthermore, we have been able to draw upon work study resources to transition between semesters through paying for staff support.

It has allowed us to have our research, instruction and community involvement linked thematically to a core set of research questions which provided us with a strategy for addressing very commonly experienced gender issues in workload and resource equity. This allowed us to demonstrate an alternative service model to the university community as a whole without falling into the trap of servitude to the university at the department, college, and university scale. Moreover, it sidestepped the service learning trap that many women faculty experience in which they are adding to an already overloaded service agenda due to empowerment politics by now having to manage the complexity of both field placement and pedagogical needs of students along side of addressing community needs and issues related to involvement. The most difficult problem from an academic merit standpoint is that typical service learning courses, when disconnected from research and other service activities, are not recognized within the mainstream channels for assigning academic merit. Our approach allowed us to participate in mainstream supported activities, including pursuing extramural funding, reducing workload through buyout, and generating publications.

Despite the vast improvement in the community’s access to resources based on needs articulated through the partnerships established by our programs, the University gains even more. One of the most important of these is that Temple gains an improved reputation for sustainability, having brought resources to long-standing needs such as delivery of after school programs (especially given that Temple has a new role in managing five area schools as part of a comprehensive restructuring of the Philadelphia School District administration).

Yet in developing and implementing this model, we recognize that it is raising a new set of ethical problems. At the core of these is the tension between critical pedagogy and social action research and institutional change within the university. In the remainder of the paper, therefore, we will draw from a developed literature on critical pedagogy to introduce a more nuanced framework for assessing the overall outcomes of the integrated model we have developed than the ethical framework we used as the basis for moving away from individual service learning courses.

Assessing empowerment issues among partners

One of the challenges we have faced is that once multiple perspectives for assessing outcomes are introduced, we must face the limitation of our own perspective for adequately assessing outcomes in terms of another perspective. We must also face the ethical dilemma that our inadequacy for understanding outcomes from multiple perspectives poses as a basis for decision making.

Our answer to this dilemma has been to use two criteria for assessing our involvement or the success of our praxis, including our decision making about the evolution of our role in partnerships, student involvement with the community, and community outcomes: empowerment and sustainability. Our view of community empowerment is that social change in the community is led by the community and that university involvement is positively viewed by the community. Our view of student
empowerment in the context of being involved in community activities driven by a pedagogical objective in the classroom is that they are provided roles that will facilitate the necessary academic project of self-reflexivity that is central to the learning that service learning opportunities provide. Our view of faculty and researcher empowerment is that involvement is contributive to the overall ability of the individual to engage in academic discourse. University empowerment can be assessed by considering whether this model of an integrated service learning program enhances its overall ability to provide meaningful educational experiences for students while also permitting faculty to be productive, contributive and empowered within its institutional setting. If faculty involvement in service learning produces positive experiences for students and the community at the expense of faculty development, this is not a sustainable model. And if community members feel that the partnerships’ activities do not produce needed outcomes, then this would not be a strong basis for future involvement. So for us, sustainability is the second criteria for examining the effectiveness of our integrated model. Our view of sustainability is that each partner must be able to identify how its interests are forwarded by partnerships that are established through the continuum of activities in the program.

**Assessing the integrated model**

Our model for an integrated model of research, education and community outreach is centered on our identity and agency as faculty in academic settings. It should be understood that along side our own model would be parallel models for other participants implied by this model. While we reflect that those other perspectives are involved in our own, we intend to illustrate the potential community impacts of moving beyond course-by-course service learning approaches to implementing critical pedagogy.

We have incorporated into an integrated model of research, education and community outreach in thematic projects, critical pedagogical praxis in the forms of creating service learning opportunities for students, supervised community research, and community collaborative research. From a research perspective, many of the thematic areas we have identified as central to critical theoretical praxis require developing original data sets in collaboration with local communities. Our main objective is to identify community goals and perspectives as a beginning place for establishing sustainable partnerships.

Because of the need for projects to develop original data sets, working on establishing long-term and sustained relationships with these communities allows us to build research agendas that are mutually beneficial to both partners. Many researchers are faced with the challenge of individually establishing credibility before they can begin to conduct such projects. Moreover, they are faced as individuals with great uncertainty about the quality of the relationship, or the ability to access resources that would permit the quality reciprocation necessary to plan and develop longer-term projects or to return to specific communities with follow up work. And, because of the difficulty in sustaining long-term relationships, new investigators face additional challenges of entering communities where previous relationships have resulted in unsustainable or unreciprocated partnerships due to the resource problem inherent in a non-integrated model.

Central to the ability of faculty to conduct high quality research that requires sustained involvement with communities is the role of graduate and undergraduate
students. It is both beneficial to faculty researchers and students that students acquire research training and experience as a cornerstone of their educational development. Many academic programs reflect this by requiring students to engage in practicums, internships, and supervised research experiences. Yet, many poor communities do not have facilities or other infrastructure to accommodate these needs.

We also believe that respectful and sustainable community outreach linked with academic programs and faculty research requires building backwards and forwards linkages between the university and the community. By working to ensure that both partners have a stake in sustaining the relationship, we aim to enhance educational and research opportunities of university students and faculty while simultaneously working with communities around community-identified needs.

There are some key barriers to student participation in this model due to resource constraints that many students face. The university can help overcome these barriers by getting funding to support research education for undergraduate and graduate students. As part of an integrated model, resources for students should enhance education through providing opportunities to work closely with faculty on research, enhance education through integrating academic and community activities, and provide alternative work opportunities that are integrated with and support academic goals.

Conclusion

We have suggested that one way to assess the integrated model that we have proposed as a solution to the dilemma of how to implement a community involvement curriculum that is consistent with a feminist critical pedagogical framework is to examine its viability from the standpoint of sustainability and empowerment. We have reviewed the relationship between ethical issues that we faced and how these served as impetus for making specific decisions about how to continue with our collaborations across all three concerns – instruction, research and outreach. Key transition points brought issues of empowerment and sustainability to the forefront of decision making about the next collaborative steps in terms of partnership and academic projects, which resulted in shifts in direction and new emphases. Throughout our involvement, issues related to unequal power relationships and politics among partners arose, and these critical junctures resulted in complete shifts in the nature of the partnerships, including the actual partners themselves. The constant actors are us as researchers, students (graduate and undergraduate), the university, and residents of the community (many of whom have been served throughout the entire evolution of both partners and nature of programs). We oriented our community-university activities to meeting community needs at the scale of the individual through development of technology access and educational programs. While this began as an effort to work through partnerships with community organizations, it has evolved in relation to the needs and interests of subsets within the local community. But as we progressed, the efforts which began as highly specific, grass roots activities eventually became embedded in more formalized arrangements, drawing upon greatly enhanced university resources used on behalf of both university and student needs.

Our work in North Philadelphia addressing digital divide barriers through an integrated program of social action research, community outreach, and service learning illustrates the need to continually assess the dynamics of university-community partnerships. Our partnership began with sharp differences in resources, access to decision
making power, facilities and technology resources. As the university has expanded its academic mission to improve student and faculty access to Information Technologies, ostensibly to decrease the gap between its resources and community resources, the technology gap has only widened despite not only ours but many other university efforts to address IT access issues at the community level. However, had the partnerships never materialized at all, the expanded gap would be still larger.

Our impact has been to provide an integrative service on behalf of and in collaboration with the community as an alternative to individual service learning courses. We do not envision that the university and community will ever be equally empowered, but we need to ask about how choices made impact upon each group. In our case, community activities and university activities would have gone on in parallel directions, but the question becomes does integration improve outcomes for community, students, and faculty, as is the assumption in university partnership models? Further, we need to keep asking questions about who gains and loses power through university-community collaboration, what benefits are realized at the community level, how power dynamics within organizations are affected, and how student empowerment is affected.

We suggest that critical pedagogy in action provides a viable alternative to a more isolated university environment. But as universities move to implement models such as the one we have developed and implemented, the criteria for educational outcomes should be expanded to include not only learning outcomes, but community outcomes. This would truly change institutions of higher learning. Until that happens, these types of programs at best can help mitigate the unequal power relations between the university and the community as well as within the university.

References


Moving Beyond from Within: Reflexive Activism and Critical Geographies

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Introduction

I begin this chapter with a discussion of ‘activism’. Noting the discursive nature of this term, I argue that a broad, inclusive understanding of activism can offer a number of ways for us to develop critical geography conceptually and practically. Drawing on the Gandhian notion of Satyagraha and critical work on reflexivity I note the overlaps between these reflexive processes and inclusive understandings of activism. I suggest the term ‘reflexive activism’ describes this form of activism and may help us develop our critical geography praxis. Indeed, central to this reflexive activism is a critical reflexivity that can help us question boundaries such as those between theory/practice, academia/activism and the very notion of engagement ‘within/beyond’ the academy. However, I do not suggest that such boundaries can or should be ignored or entirely. In particular, I note academia’s shrinking spaces for activism under neoliberalism and the resultant pressures on activism ‘beyond’ the academy. I draw on my own experiences with grassroots groups to illustrate the value of such engagement within critical geography. However, I also acknowledge the pressures on activism ‘within’ the academy and suggest there is a continuum of reflexive activism from the internal/personal to the more external and from engagement located within academia to that beyond. I share these thoughts and experiences in the hope we, as critical geographers, can learn from them as we explore and develop critical geographies into the twenty first century.

Bringing it home – reflexive activism

Activism is a discursively produced term, actively constructed within a range of discourses such as those found in the media, grassroots organisations and academia. My own experiences of non-violent direct action (NVDA) within the British anti-roads movement of the mid-1990’s highlighted how dominant macho, physical understandings of activism can produce their own series of oppressions and exclusions. This echoes the experiences of others within radical/critical geography such as Gerry Pratt, co-organiser of the Inaugural International Conference of Critical Geography (IICG): ‘It seemed to me that a type of deep-seated sexism defined what counted as radical and activist at the IICG conference’ (Pratt, quoted in Katz 1998, 265).

The discursively produced nature of activism and its subsequent potential to foster as well as challenge oppression encourages me to advocate a broad, inclusive understanding of the term (Maxey 1999). Activism is not restricted to those directly opposing genetic engineering by destroying test sites, or to those who gather to block world trade talks or the latest War for Oil. Rather, activism is something we can each engage with in our everyday lives. I see it as attempting to do as much as we can from where we are at. ‘Where we are at’ includes our status emotionally, physically, financially, politically, etc. As a critical, on-going process this acknowledges that my position is always changing and on some occasions I will have more time and energy for certain forms of action than at others. However, this process is progressive, so that ultimately, over time I hope to see positive changes in terms of both building equality/overcoming oppression and the roles I play within these changes. As I am committed to this process in the long-term I strive to celebrate my successes and what I am able to achieve, rather than denigrate myself for what I am unable to do.

This inclusive approach to activism draws on a rich tradition of theory and praxis highlighting activism as an everyday practice in which we are all, at least potentially, engaged. Gandhi, for example, developed the notion of Satyagraha, which extends well beyond the tactic of NVDA, for which it is often confused. Satyagraha, the search for and practice of ‘truth’, involved a continual process of reflection and practice (Gandhi 1984, Merton 1996). This has many overlaps with the notion of activism I am concerned with, particularly as the search was not for a universal truth, but for truth grounded in the everyday contexts of each of our lives. More recently many feminists have developed similar notions of activism, suggesting, for example, that overcoming patriarchy requires all women to be engaged in building equality (hooks 1994) and that activism includes our everyday theorising and practices (Stanley and Wise 1993). Indeed, these ideas can be found in the feminist slogan ‘The personal is political’.

Following these approaches to activism, and drawing on post-structural understandings of power as saturated and performative (Foucault 1980) we can see the social world as (re)produced through the acts we each engage with every day. We – you and I – are already involved in shaping the world. Critical reflection allows us to place ourselves more actively within this process. A strong body of work on reflexivity within critical geography also informs this approach to activism. This work on reflexivity demonstrates the value of questioning our shifting positionalities, assumptions and actions (Rose 1997; Gormley and Bondi 1999). Critical engagement of this kind encourages us to question internal as well as external forms and sources of oppression, including our own
values and assumptions and the various boundaries surrounding us and our work, including those between academic disciplines, researcher and researched, theory and practice and even those surrounding discursive terms like activism. In particular, critical engagement and the notion of activism explored here, has led me to question the boundary between activism and academia (Maxey 1999). Rather than separating activism off as something we do ‘beyond’ the academy, this approach suggests every aspect of our work has the potential to help overcome oppression, liberate and empower ourselves and others. Drawing on these critical understandings of reflexivity and their overlap with the inclusive, reflexive view of activism I outlined above, I suggest the term ‘reflexive activism’ may be useful in helping us negotiate our engagement as critical geographers. Reflexive activism involves a continuous interaction between reflection and practice.

Reflexivity is an important and useful tool for shaping critical geographies. However, as developed so far within academia, reflexivity has tended to be a rather cerebral, individualistic enterprise. As an academic I am prone to residing in my own head, agonising over what I have done, why I did it and even who I was when I did it! I am not suggesting these questions, or such forms of activism are unimportant, rather that this is a limited approach to critical engagement. To be fair there have been valuable departures from this solitary, cerebral process of reflexivity throughout critical geography. In addition to ad hoc discussions between individuals and several conference sessions, there is a growing body of published material in which critical geographers (and others) have developed an elaboration and appraisal of reflexivity, sharing their own ideas and experiences and the problems they have faced (Aldridge 1998; Blomley 1994; England 1994; Katz 1994; Roberts 2000). In many respects this chapter is a contribution to this sharing. Reflexive activism, however, offers us one way of helping to extend and broaden our critical geographies. Reflexive activism is something we can engage with alone and/or with others, within and/or beyond the academy. In engaging with others we have opportunities to share in the process of reflection-action and to help, support and inspire each other in a diverse range of ways, limited only by our imagination (and time/energy!). Such support is certainly needed as academia’s spaces for activism shrink under neoliberalism.

Academia’s shrinking spaces of activism

Increasingly, throughout the world academics are feeling the effects of neoliberal macro economic policies which privilege the ‘free’ market as a mechanism to promote ‘efficiency’ and ‘value for money’. ‘Performance’ tends to be measured in crude quantifiable terms such as the number of students taught and how much money we as academics can generate – as Smith (2000, 330) puts it, how many sausages are churned through the ‘higher education sausage factory’. Above all, money is becoming the measure of, indeed the reason for academia. This places particular tensions and strains on our abilities to act as critical geographers, from concerns over censorship and the control of research data to the conflicts between our epistemologies and the paradigm within which we work. In particular, we are faced with increasing pressures on our time (Roberts 2000).

The implications of neoliberalism in general and the time pressures it generates in particular are felt within every sphere of activism throughout the academy. Further discussion of these implications, how they are experienced and how we may address them,
would be useful in developing our critical geographies. This discussion may include, for example, how we, as critical geographers, can work individually and collectively to foster personal values and professional contexts which are not dominated by money. There have been some useful and provocative contributions to this debate from critical geographers as illustrated by the special issue of *Antipode* (2000). However, a focus of the discussion so far has been upon critical geographies ‘within’ the academy, for example, looking at the tensions, conflicts and activist potential of teaching (Roberts 2000; Heyman 2000) and writing (Sidaway 2000). As I and others in this volume suggest, critical geography is more than the teaching, research and writing that takes place within the university, it also encompasses our engagements with groups and individuals beyond our academic institutions. From both my own experiences and discussions at several conferences and workshops, it appears that activism ‘beyond’ the academy has been most immediately and significantly hit by the pressures implicit in neoliberalism. Colleagues report that whereas perhaps five or ten years ago they would have carried out a certain amount of research, consultation and support for free with grassroots and community groups, this has gradually been replaced by work that brings in revenue:

‘They get you both ways. A, the focus on ‘core business’, i.e. revenue generation, means we don’t actually have scope to work with groups in the wider community anymore. B, if you do want to get involved the University’s concerned about ‘Risk Management’ and guarding against legal liability so they insist on contracts and these are very expensive, so you end up having to charge. These act as twin constraints against participation’ (Miller, A. 2003, personal communication).

Many suggest they had not noticed such changes until we began discussing them.

Responding to such insights, I began to see a value in the within/beyond academia distinction as it could perhaps help us focus on and re-invigorate the most eroded forms of activism beyond academia. However, there is a danger that in accepting boundaries such as this we encourage the privileging of one form of activism, or begin to see them as mutually exclusive or rigidly separated. This need not be the case. Reflexive activism insists that activism is not restricted to particular people, places or contexts. It emphasises the blurring of boundaries and the shifting, contingent nature of reality. This allows me to question the boundary between activism within/beyond the academy, as I employ it in considering my own experiences of reflexive activism beyond the academy.

**Reflexive activism ‘beyond’ the academy**

Following the critical discussion of boundaries above and their often fluid, relational character, I suggest my own experiences of activism with grassroots groups beyond the academy can be described by three loose levels or types of engagement:

1. Initiating role – where I have been involved in helping to start the group and/or keeping it running on a regular basis
2. Supporting Role – where I contribute to an existing group on a regular basis
3. Peripheral Role – where I am more removed from the group physically/socio-culturally and my support is irregular.

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I use these categories as a tool to help me reflect on my experiences of activism, the different forms it has taken, how my positionality has shifted and the tensions and implications such changes, and indeed the activism itself, brought about. The experiences I draw upon concern my involvement with three grassroots groups, GENEaction, STIC and SANE.

**GENEaction**

GENEaction is a diverse group of citizens who wish to inform and inspire themselves and others to act on the issue of GE [genetic engineering]. We welcome everyone to join us in our monthly meetings and regular actions. Our actions include everything from two people leafleting together to hundreds gathered with costumes, banners, music, Street Theatre and song, from talks with school and community groups to lobbying industry and government (GENEaction, 1999).

Although the group formed in October 1999 in Toronto, Ontario, where most of its activities were carried out, it also inspired and supported the formation of similar autonomous groups across Canada and participated in a Canadian-wide alliance of groups including Greenpeace and the Council of Canadians.

As the quotation above suggests, the group sought diversity and inclusivity in terms of both membership and the way activism was understood. In many ways GENEaction was successful in this respect, adopting a largely consensus based decision making process, the membership consisted of a considerable age range, including children who participated with their parents, teenagers and retired people. However, with the exception of two active members, during my time with GENEaction from Oct 1999-August 2001, the group was overwhelmingly white, middle-class and English-speaking. As both a group and individuals we tried addressing this. For example, French and Mandarin versions of GENEaction’s brochure were planned and promised, but never materialised as the translations were never completed. This highlights one of the central vulnerabilities of grassroots groups working beyond the academy – their frequent lack of resources. If there had been money to pay for a translation this would not have been a barrier. Instead, we were dependent upon voluntary work for all the organising, research, writing and dissemination that the group carried out. Although membership was predominantly what may be described as broadly ‘lower-middle’, such descriptors are problematic for several reasons. We were, on the whole not a wealthy group of people, but included students and others, including myself, who were unwaged. As it was, members often clubbed together to buy the materials for props, leaflets, etc., so financially our resources were always stretched thinly. Within such contexts, support from academics (and other ‘professionals’) can often bring vital in-puts to a group, including advice, research and knowledge, but also physical resources such as access to photocopying, office space, telephone, email, and so on.

Another point raised by GENEaction’s attempts to be diverse and inclusive within its membership and activism concerns gender dynamics. Women were always at the forefront of GENEaction. Three of the four founding members were women and throughout my time with the group there was a gender balance amongst active members, those regularly attending and contributing to the creation of meetings and other actions. However, whilst women were usually a majority in terms of numbers and level of
involvement, the group was by no means free of patriarchal oppression. As time went on it was clear to me that a significant part of the activism GENEaction was facilitating had less do with GE than with more ‘internal’ forms of activism. People who had never previously done so began to question and change their own assumptions, values and patterns of behaviour in the wider interests of the group. This process, however, was by no means neat or linear and at times the behaviour of one or two men in particular caused tensions within the group.

For those of us in GENEaction this posed questions pertinent to all of us as critical geographers/reflexive activists. When and how should these issues be raised? To what extent should the group focus on personal/internal forms of action and issues of group process rather than wider issues of activism, in this case GE? These questions revolve around tensions central to our identities and practices as activists-academics. For example, one man left the group after a heated discussion in which his patterns of behaviour towards other members were raised. Some members expressed regret at this as he was an enthusiastic member who clearly gained a lot from his involvement in the group. As far as I know no one had intended to exclude him from the group, yet if his behaviour had gone unchecked it was likely to have excluded others, particularly women in the longer term. From this experience I suggest that it is better to raise such ‘internal’ issues or behaviour and prejudice directly and explicitly rather than leaving them to simmer and exclude by default. However, as reflexive activists we have some level of responsibility to all those we work with, and perhaps collectively, to develop ways of raising such personal issues in less confrontational and more supportive/empowering ways.

**From initiating role to peripheral role**

Whilst I was heavily involved with GENEaction for almost two years from its formation in 1999 to my return from Canada to Wales to complete my Ph.D. in 2001, I was generally reluctant to acknowledge my role as an initiator or leader of the group. I wanted GENEaction to be an inclusive, open group. I associated leadership with hierarchy and felt this may foster divisions and exclusion. My experiences within the group and in particular feedback and discussion with other members helped me to refine this view, however. I realise now that my reluctance to consider my role demonstrated a lack of reflexivity on my part. I did not take time to sit back from my involvement with the group and actually think about that involvement. It was only through the help of others raising this and sharing their thoughts that I was really able to think through the issues more fully.

A more reflexive appraisal of my roles with GENEaction was important in at least three ways. Firstly, it helped me see leadership in a more (g)rounded way. It takes time and effort to organise a group. As many members had very limited time and energy to contribute, doing some of this work ahead of time made it easier for them to get involved. This process should ideally be as transparent and reflexive as possible and the idea of consensus decision making is that the group does much of this work collectively. However, the theory and language of consensus is often adopted by, or pushed onto groups without sufficient reflexivity and as such is capable of fostering oppression (Maxey 2002). Secondly, acknowledging my ‘leadership role’ was more honest. At times I worked full-time with GENEaction and whilst I was rarely alone in this, it was clearly more than most other people could maintain, or be expected to maintain. This is an issue for all reflexive activists, including critical geographers – the extent to which we are free to put
in time and other forms of energy, and the implications this has for the group and our positionality. Putting so much time and effort into the group changed my position vis-à-vis those with different levels of involvement. A failure to recognise this would leave material differences within the group hidden/implicit. Reflecting on my positionality I was more able to address its implications. For example, I developed more contacts between members and with others working on GE beyond GENEaction than any other member. This was particularly important when my position shifted from initiator to peripheral member.

Perhaps the best illustration of the value of reflexivity within activism is the fact that after I left Canada GENEaction not only continued, it went from strength to strength and indeed is still thriving today! The importance of reflexivity regarding my pending role-shift from initiator to peripheral member was highlighted when I learnt that although GENEaction filled a gap in terms of grassroots groups working on GE in Toronto, there had in fact been a group previously. However, this group had folded when its initiator, also an academic-activist, left the city. Learning this combined with other member’s help focused my thinking about my own initiator role. I did not want my leaving Canada to precipitate GENEaction’s decline. As other members of the group shared this concern we began to work on the transition of my role from initiator to peripheral member. Throughout the final six months of my time in Canada I and other members of the group consciously worked at this transference as I passed on contacts, information and ideas and played a progressively diminished role in the regular running and wider activities of the group.

This process was a success, albeit a qualified success. For example, one member has still not fully forgiven me for leaving. He acknowledges that this is in part due to his own unresolved sensitivity to rejection developed from childhood traumas. However, it demonstrates that my transition from initiator to peripheral member was striated and contested (see Sibley, this volume). Furthermore, this points to the tensions surrounding role-shifts when we work with groups beyond the academy. It also raises the question of where our responsibilities as academic-activists lie. Finally, my transition was problematic as although I intended to maintain a peripheral role by writing/editing documents and communicating via email from Wales, I actually had little time or energy for this once I was in Wales and setting up house, looking after two children and tying up the pieces of my Ph.D. My limited access to email exacerbated this so I ended up feeling like I had left GENEaction, rather than shifted to a peripheral role.

In many ways this story demonstrates the value of making a clear break with groups beyond academia. However, such apparently neat and clear-cut shifts may be both highly problematic and unnecessary. Although I did not pursue my peripheral role as I had hoped, by maintaining contact with the group my partner and I were able to re-engage with it when we returned to Canada for seven weeks in 2003. This was highly beneficial for us and the group. The value of negotiating roles and levels of involvement beyond a clear-cut dis/engagement and several other tensions around academic engagement are illustrated by my experiences with two other grassroots groups.

**STIC and SANE – beyond dis/engagement**

Stop The Incinerator Campaign (STIC) is resident-based group formed in January 2001 to oppose Crymlyn Burrows Incinerator, located adjacent to the neighbourhood of Port Tenant, on the east side of Swansea, South Wales (STIC 2001; SCHNEWS 2002). As
is the case with most incinerators, its location places the increased risk of cancer from dioxins, particulates and other pollutants predominantly on low income, working class households (Friends of the Earth 2002; STIC 2001, 2002). I became involved with STIC in 2002 because I concur with Chomsky’s (1996) assertion that as a western academic I have a privileged access to knowledge and other resources which gives me a particular responsibility to act (see also Roberts 2000; Routledge, this volume). As I had both activist experience and research knowledge of environmental sustainability, I felt I could help those working on the incinerator. My experiences with STIC, however, demonstrated both strengths and limitations in this approach. Firstly, my scant knowledge of incineration contrasted markedly with that of several group members, who had been researching, writing and campaigning on this topic intensively for more than a year. Secondly, although I had energy and ideas to contribute I was highly aware that the group had already been very active and successful in its campaign for the year before I joined. Whilst the group was very open to and supportive of my contributions I appreciated the importance of being sensitive to the group’s history and the impact this had on members energy and perspectives. This raises the importance of reflexivity for us as critical geographers engaging with groups beyond academia. Whilst we may be able to bring a range of skills and resources to such groups, we should try to avoid going in with pre-determined notions of what our contributions will be. Instead we should try to embrace and support the needs, limitations and competence of those with whom we work.

As I worked with STIC the motivations for my involvement changed. I developed considerable respect, empathy and friendship with residents who refused to sit back and have the incinerator forced upon them. Many residents felt Port Tenant was chosen because it was a financially ‘deprived’ area and the company (HLC) and local authority (Neath and Port Talbot Council) believed residents would be less able to oppose it! Furthermore, they suggested to me, and other examples support the view, that if they had been a wealthy neighbourhood they would have been able to stop it, pulling levers of power, paying for research, lawyers, and so on. Instead, residents did all this work themselves, clubbing together for monitoring equipment, so they could carry out their own research, wading through and responding to technical reports which were way beyond what I had time or energy for. I admired their energy and resourcefulness as they engaged with technical and bureaucratic reports and processes. I was clear that I could only offer a supporting role and limited this largely to helping publicise events, and supporting various letter-writing campaigns. Maintaining a supporting role allowed me to contribute to the group, without pushing myself too far.

This role was facilitated by the group’s openness to my contribution, so I felt accepted as an equal, despite being far less engaged with the group than I had been with GENEaction, for example. In addition, my spatial distance from the group shaped my involvement as I lived on the other side of Swansea. Whilst this made cycling to meetings difficult, it still placed me within a 5 miles radius of the incinerator. Within this radius there is likely to be an significantly increased risk of cancer due to emissions from the incinerator (STIC 2001). Although pollution from the incinerator may affect up to a 50 miles radius, being placed so near helped maintain my level of involvement. The significance of space within my activism is highlighted by the fact that moving home to a location three miles further away has contributed to my shift from supporting member to peripheral member. I am still within the 50-mile radius, but the level of urgency I feel to
stop the incinerator in order to protect my children’s health has dropped. At the same time, other commitments have increased, particularly my involvement in SANE (Swansea Airport No Expansion), which I co-founded in December, 2002. Swansea Airport is located four miles from my current home.

My adoption of an initiating role with SANE and a peripheral role with STIC was shaped by several factors overlapping with these socio-spatial ones. No grassroots group was opposing the airport’s expansion until SANE was formed, whereas two groups, STIC and PAIN (Parents against Incineration) had already mobilised many residents and their commitment was clear. Equally, living so near to the airport, I am directly affected by it on a daily basis, again emphasising a spatial component to my activism. Before SANE started several residents from the surrounding area had complained to me about the airport’s expansion and even suggested I helped do something about it. This spatial and socio-cultural connection has helped focus and maintain my commitment. Academically, I have more knowledge and background in transport and aviation than I do on incineration so I feel more confident working on this issue. Logistically, I have less distance to travel to SANE meetings and other actions than I do for those with STIC. Given the time pressures I am under as an aspiring academic and equal parent, as noted above (see also Roberts 2000), time tends to be a crucial factors shaping my activism. Given such time pressures, there is an attraction and value in a clear disengagement from groups beyond the academy, and it may be that this is the most appropriate path in particular situations. However, we should not see our choices as restricted to dis/engagement, but recognise the range of forms reflexive activism takes and the range of roles we may adopt as critical geographers. I am still a peripheral member of STIC. It takes little time or commitment to support the odd action if you do not feel obliged to help organise it, or even attend it. Reflexive activism emphasises the range of ways I may contribute, from circulating the odd flyer or pinning up the odd poster to including them in my academic work! Maintaining these varied spaces of engagement helps to broaden my own activism. Equally, keeping a connection with groups we have worked with may maintain space within which friendships and future work-activism can grow, within and beyond the shrinking spaces of academia.

These reflections demonstrate the role of space and other factors in shaping my activism and I suggest they are not entirely unique to me. Everyone has a point at which they feel able to get more actively involved in resisting oppression and building equality. For some it takes a road being built through their back garden, for others it may be reading a book, attending a talk, or thinking about things in new way! Part of the value I see in reflexive activism is helping us question and broaden our perspectives, so that we may draw on personal, spatial and other factors which help motivate us to act, without succumbing to NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard). There are a series of tensions here and addressing them collaboratively may help us develop critical geography and our other forms of activism. For example, part of the empowering and radical potential of reflexive activism is its ability to encourage us to move beyond narrower understandings and motivations such as NIMBYism, even if that is where we initially begin. I may begin opposing a road because it goes through my back yard, for example. However, in opposing it I may actively engage with others and, doing so reflexively, I may come to fuller, deeper understandings of transport policy and indeed the crises of sustainability! A good example of reflexive activisms’ transformative potential taken from critical geography is Amy
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Freeman’s (2000) insistence that graduate student unionizing is not just about graduate students seeking better wages and work conditions, but includes their participation in shaping the very future of education and resisting neoliberalism. As Freeman reports, the process of critical engagement was both empowering in itself and opened up numerous additional liberatory spaces.

My activism tends to coalesce around my own social, cultural and spatial positionality. When I am in Toronto I (re)engage with GENEaction, now that I have moved house I am more focused on SANE than STIC. My negotiation of a potentially simultaneous range of positions from initiator to peripheral supporter broadens and tempers, but does not eradicate this tendency. The locally embedded nature of my activism is, I suggest neither unique to me, nor something to be ignored for fear of its parochialism or NIMBYism. Under neoliberal globalisation the impacts of our everyday actions are increasingly displaced spatially and temporarily. Our ability to engage actively and critically with the world is thus challenged. Reflexive activism, I suggest, involves us doing as much as we can from where we’re at. Starting from our immediate spatial and socio-cultural positions we are then able to progressively develop this through reflection-action and interaction with others.

**Conclusion: reflexive activism – a continuum of critical geographies?**

As critical geographers, ‘starting where we’re at’ involves developing everyday practices within our academic institutions so they form part of our reflexive activism. There have been some excellent discussions of how we may do this in our teaching (Roberts 2000; Heyman 2000), writing (Sidaway 2000), research (Area special issue, 1999) and union organising (Freeman, 2000). More experimentation, reflection, analysis, collaboration and sharing is needed in all these areas, and others, if we are to continue developing critical geography. My own teaching on a course entitled ‘Citizenship and Sustainable Communities’ illustrates this. I developed the course with two colleagues and we ran each session collaboratively. We structured the course so as to give students as much choice and involvement in its organisation as possible, hoping that the course itself would be participatory and empowering. The small group size and students’ background facilitated this (ten mature students took the course run through DACE (Department of Adult and Continuing Education)). For their final projects students, chose as a group, to undertake an evaluation of (and thus participated in) the local authority’s Unitary Development Plan public consultation. Feedback from the course was highly positive. A key component of the course is the way we began to break down the boundaries between teacher and student. All three of us who initiated the course felt we also learnt from each session, so that we were co-learners with the students. We hope to further develop such participatory approaches as we run this and other courses in the future.

Reflexive activism, then, clearly involves us working critically and progressively within academia, whether resisting wider external structures such as neoliberalism, or our own internal assumptions and values such as those shaping our relationships with students. As I have emphasised within this chapter, reflexive activism can also inform our critical geographies by highlighting the value of engaging with forms of activism beyond the academy. Indeed, as the spaces for such activism shrink under neoliberalism it becomes imperative that we actively embrace them within our critical geographies. I have used a threefold schema to summarise the roles I performed within three grassroots movements. I
see this schema as a tool supporting analysis. It emphasises the shifting and contingent nature of our roles as we engage with groups beyond the academy and the tensions and concerns associated with this changing positionality. The threefold model of my activist roles highlights some of the ways reflexive activism can help us embrace the fluidity of our roles so that we leave as many spaces as possible open for questioning oppression and working towards equality within and beyond academia.

Indeed, the various experiences of activism I have outlined, and the notion of reflexive activism, highlight how boundaries such as those between research and practice, activism and academia blur. I suggest there is a continuum of reflexive activism from that within, to that beyond the academy. Many of the tensions and concerns I raise drawing on experiences with groups beyond academia resonate with my experiences of activism within it. For example, a sensitivity to the needs and status of all groups and individuals we work with can inform the roles we adopt in every setting. This sensitivity is itself supported by a reflexive approach to activism, so that we are more able to consider our own needs, motivations and levels of commitment and thus to communicate and share these with those working with us.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the importance of reflexive activism as a progressive, on-going process, breaking down boundaries between different aspects of our lives. Thus activism is not something we leave at home when we go into work, equally, it is not something we leave in the office once we return home. Rather, our reflexive activism is something we, as critical geographers, carry with us throughout the day, enriching our lives and helping us live them so that life more generally may be enriched. There are clearly limits to how much we can do, particularly given the pressures on us as academics working within a neoliberal macro economic paradigm. Within this, rather than over stretch ourselves or feel guilt that we cannot do more, it is far more constructive and healthy to celebrate what we can achieve, reflexively acting both individually and together.

References


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Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?

For the past thirty-five years geographers have systematically engaged with radical and critical theory to examine and expose uneven, unequal, exploitative and oppressive socio-spatial and environmental relations. By drawing on and developing different theoretical traditions - such as Marxism, feminism, and poststructuralism - they have shared an ideological commitment to challenge injustices and seek positive change. More recently, however, many have started to question the extent to which radical/critical geographers actually do make a difference beyond the academy; whether they really are changing the situation on the ground for everyday people in everyday places. The works in this volume examine this contention and investigate how radical/critical geographies might proceed. Drawing on their own experiences of seeking to ground radical theory through critical praxis, the contributors vibrantly explore the role of the academic in society; the relevance and meaning of 'making a difference' beyond the academy; the relationship between academic praxis and activism; and the neo-liberal threat to enacting certain kinds of critical praxis.

Radical Theory/Critical Praxis is an essential read for academics and students ideologically committed to challenging and transforming the status quo. More generally, the book provides critical stimulation for anyone with an interest in the history of geographical thought, alongside those concerned with the relationships between academia and those apparently 'beyond the academy'.

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