

## Observations

# Border geography

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### The spectre of irrelevance

... left-wing academics, ... no matter how much they write for each other, ... never find themselves writing for anyone else. (Alan Wolfe 1996, 25)

Wolfe's terse observation bespeaks an anxiety felt by many on the academic left. It's a double-sided anxiety about the contemporary role and relevance of university-based 'critical thinkers' (Michael 2000). First, there is a concern that in order to achieve professional success left-wing academics have all too frequently 'sold out' and become 'tenured radicals'. Cocooned within the space of the university, the worry is that their pretensions to radicalism have been neutered. As Wolfe would have it, academic leftists are simply members of a professional 'writing class' who discourse polysyllabically with one another but with precious few others. Second, there is a corollary concern that left-wing academics are today insufficiently engaged beyond the university. The implication is that this failure to 'connect' with all manner of constituencies fighting for change in the 'real world' is something that urgently needs to be rectified.

Of late, those who would describe themselves as 'critical geographers' seem to have been experiencing this anxiety more than most in the social sciences and humanities. The recent 'Beyond the academy: critical geographies in-action' conference, held in Newcastle in September 2001, is just the latest of a multitude of attempts to figure out whether and how critical geography might matter in a practical, worldly kind of a way.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this ongoing self-scrutiny among critical geographers are not hard to fathom. It is a peculiar fact that the geographical left

has achieved unprecedented vibrancy when, outside the precincts of the university, the world it studies and would like to change seems more Dickensian than for a very long time. Unlike sociology or politics, human geography came relatively late to a full-blown 'critical turn'. It is only in the last decade that approaches like Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism, critical realism and post-colonialism have moved from the margins of the discipline to something like the centre. Yet it was in this same decade that the neo-liberal onslaught in Western countries made left thought and practice a virtual non-starter in public life outside universities. This dissonance, this inverse correlation between the professional fortunes of critical geography and the fortunes of leftist thought and practice in the wider world, has arguably raised in an especially acute form the hoary question of the 'ir/relevance' of university radicals. In short, many self-styled critical geographers are spilling much ink and uttering many words trying to figure out what a 'border geography' might look like: that is, a critical geography that can transcend the real but nonetheless permeable divide separating academics from myriad non-academic constituencies.

In this observation I want to question some of the assumptions underpinning critical geographers' anxiety about whether and how their work matters. In so doing, I attempt to take forward arguments made elsewhere (Castree 1999 2000a 2000b; Castree and Sparke 2000). My contention is that current debates over critical geography's relevance are hobbled by two shibboleths. Once these shibboleths are exposed, critical geographers might be in a better position to determine the worth of their academic endeavours. If there is any 'border'

for critical geographers to transgress it is not, I argue, first and foremost that separating them from the 'real world', but that mental border which stops them thinking differently about the possibilities and limits of their own university-based existence.

## The shibboleths of critical geography<sup>2</sup>

We need to see research not simply as a mechanism for studying and explaining change but ... as an instigator of change, as an activist endeavour. (Ron Martin 2001, 190)

... academics are being coerced into juggling all aspects of our jobs all of the time ... [I] have often found myself talking on the phone, answering e-mail ... , eating lunch and waving hand signals to students at the same time. And this is considered normal. (Katharyne Mitchell 2000, 1714)

The ongoing debates over the purpose and relevance of critical geography fall into two related categories. First, there is the now familiar soul-searching over critical geography's inability to matter 'out there'. Most recently, Ron Martin (2001) and Doreen Massey (2001) have bemoaned human geography's persistent failure to influence public policy, while Michael Storper's (2001) paper 'The poverty of radical theory today' laments the utopian posturing and political ineffectuality (as he sees it) of what passes for 'critical' geographic research today. Whether, as in the case of Martin and Massey, the concern is with a 'grey geography' (Peck 1999) or, as in Storper's case, with the recovery of a more activist geography, the premise is the same: namely, that critical geographers ought to be making a difference out there in the real world.

This assumption that critical geography will matter only when it gets its hands dirty is, it seems, so obvious to Martin, Massey, Storper and others as to be axiomatic. For them issue is not whether but how critical geography can reach beyond the academy. But I would make two points. First, rather than take the desire to craft a border geography for granted, I would ask: what explains this desire in the first place? Why does it seem so self-evident, so 'right', to want to 'make a difference' in the wider world? Second, there is clearly a deep connection between the forces now structuring academic labour in countries like the UK and US and the very possibility – never mind the practical details – of reaching beyond the academy. Indeed, while these forces have permitted

critical geography to flourish intellectually, they have arguably made it doubly difficult to make practical interventions in non-academic settings (a point I'll return to below) (Dorling and Shaw 2002).

To summarize, I think it is one of the shibboleths of critical geography that reaching beyond the academy is both desirable and possible – if only we try a little harder to make it happen. If critical geographers want to make a difference 'out there', they need to pay some serious attention to their institutional situatedness within the university system.<sup>3</sup> The ground-rules organizing the collective wage-labour of critical geographers at this moment in time are, I believe, the horizon of a problem – a problem that cannot be wished away by heroic attempts to 'keep it real' by connecting with non-academic constituencies.

This last comment brings me to the second and most recent category of debates over the point of critical geography. In the last 2–3 years, there has been a flurry of critical geographic interest in precisely the institutional ground-rules I mentioned above. Only the other day, I picked up my new issue of *Environment and Planning A* to find Lucy Jarosz (2001) discussing the need for graduate student unionization. In the same journal, Katharyne Mitchell (1999 2000) has written two provocative commentaries on what Jane Wills (1996) calls 'the academic sweatshop', while *Antipode* recently devoted a whole issue to the theme of 'Professional geography and the corporatisation of the university' in which Neil Smith (2000b) talked about higher education as a 'sausage factory'. Most provocatively of all, Euan Hague (forthcoming) has accused *Antipode* – human geography's best known left-wing journal – of succumbing to the forces of academic professionalization. His commentary '*Antipode inc.?*' raises the wider issue of whether critical geographers have uncritically embraced the academic reward system now prevailing in countries like the US and UK. In effect, Hague asks a question few have dared to: namely, is the recent proliferation of 'critical' approaches in human geography simply part of a disciplinary product cycle where new ideas (in this case, feminist, gay and lesbian, post-Marxist, post-structural etc.) are the currency that buys professional success?

Unlike Martin, Massey and Storper, authors like Hague are less concerned about reaching out from the academy than with contesting the moral and political economy prevailing within it. The two issues are, of course, deeply connected. As I mentioned above, any attempt to reach beyond the academy

must first make a sober assessment of the forces now structuring academic labour. But it is here, in my view, that we come to a second shibboleth of critical geography, which in some senses is the mirror opposite of the first. Arguably, those geographers who have called for a more domesticated critical geography, like Jarosz, Mitchell, Smith and Hague, risk overstating the problem and under-estimating the possibilities at hand. Added to their stygian and slightly alarmist narratives about the corporatization, marketization and commodification of higher education, is an implication that the professionalization of critical geography – for professionals we are, like it or not – has somehow tainted it. Hague is especially culpable here, implying that one cannot be a tenured academic and properly (sic) ‘critical’ at the same time. Yet Nancy Fraser (1989, 1) was surely right when she said that ‘The real contradictions of our lives notwithstanding, the [critical] . . . academic is not an oxymoron’. We cannot overcome those contradictions, but we can recognize and *work with them*. This is why I would agree with Bruce Robbins (1993, 56) claim that ‘there are resources within our imperfect professionalism that radicals can draw upon’. I will briefly explore some of those resources toward the end of this short essay. First, though, it is worth highlighting those forces currently defining – and circumscribing – the particular form of professionalism English-speaking academics are accustomed to. I will make particular mention of the UK, where, like me, the majority of this journal’s readers make their living.

## The value of academic labour

... [A] schoolmaster is a productive labourer, when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, does not alter the relation. (Karl Marx (1867) cited in Smith (2000b, 330))

The value of academic labour has changed fairly dramatically in the UK since the early 1980s. I am not talking about monetary value, like the decline in real wages for lecturers, the persistent gender pay-gap or the pecuniary inequities suffered by contract researchers (though these issues matter immensely). Instead, I am talking about what, within the peculiar value system now structuring the academic field, actually *counts* as valuable activity. Gramsci once said that ‘the critic’s starting point should be “know-

ing thyself” as a product of historical processes to date’ (quoted in Robbins 1993, i). For all the disciplinary interest in ‘situatedness’, ‘positionality’ and ‘reflexivity’, it is only very recently that critical geographers have started to pay serious attention to their ‘unheroic institutional grounding’ (Robbins 1993, 59). To locate oneself institutionally is, to quote James Sidaway (2000, 266) ‘not primarily a project about self-knowledge, but rather concerns . . . the conditions of production of the “self” and its knowledges’. In Britain today, the ‘successful’ academic self is a figure who publishes not just a lot but in the ‘right’ journals; who wins pots of research money, preferably from blue-chip funding-bodies; who does ‘professional service’ like sitting on editorial boards; and who, unglamorous though it now is, does their fair share of teaching and administration. It takes a tremendous amount of hard work and, for many, not a little personal sacrifice, to be a successful academic today. Indeed, many of us know highly talented, hard-working people who are not considered achievers by the prevailing standards and whose careers have stalled as a consequence.

But we also know that there is a price to pay for success. I would argue that critical geographic research has become the force it has in the British geography precisely because critical geographers have played the academic game so very well. Protected from the rigours of the free market, their ideas, insights and activities – whatever their intellectual use value – have conformed all too well to what Barnett (1995, 421) calls ‘the economies of value and force that structure the institutions in which . . . [critical geographers work]’. Critical geographers publish in the *Annals* and the *Transactions*, win grants from the ESRC and Leverhulme, chair RGS-IBG committees and get professorships. They have, in short, ‘arrived’. And they have achieved this not because the content of their work is valued for itself, but because it can be abstracted into the contentless currency that serves as the measure of academic value in Britain today – just like the work of their putatively ‘non-critical’ colleagues in the political centre and on the right is, and with whom, to all intents and purposes, they are structurally isomorphic.

Here we confront one of the contradictions to which Fraser alludes. The very forces that have allowed the British geographical left to blossom academically these last two decades are also those that decree non-academic activities – like political organizing or community work – to be ‘unvaluable’.

Some readers might say that this doesn't matter because these things can be done in one's spare time. But my response to that suggestion is not hard to anticipate: what spare time (Wills 1996)? Another argument is that critical geographers should reach beyond the academy during their working days, and thereby spend less time embellishing their CVs or performing mundane administrative tasks. But again I'd make a counter-point: it takes a very brave and very special person who is prepared to flout, wholly or in part, the rules of the academic game. Human geography already has the example of Bill Bunge (among others) to show us that academia and activism cannot so easily be reconciled. Finally, despite the arguments of Martin, Massey and Storper, the idea that critical geographers can do research and simultaneously be interventionist outside academia is much easier said than done. At worst, this 'best of all worlds' perspective underplays the often irreconcilable demands that being an academic and a policy adviser or activist outside the university make upon critical geographers.

### The resources of professionalization

[We need to] . . . ensure that the theme of professionalisation can be brought up as a real political question, rather than a . . . complete political judgement . . . the endpoint of a teleological narrative of . . . degeneration. (Bruce Robbins 1993, 94)

Perhaps the desire to reach beyond the academy bespeaks an anxiety about the social relevance as academics in Blair's Britain, or perhaps a guilty feeling that critical geographers' sensibilities have become little more than an accumulation strategy in their attempts to build careers. The anxiety is understandable but the guilt, I think, unnecessary since it is an unavoidable fact of our professional lives that we 'are, *of course*, not motivated . . . solely by pure disinterested altruism' (Robbins 1993, 188, emphasis added). I use the word professional deliberately. In his book *Marginalised in the middle*, Alan Wolfe says this:

An academic professional can be understood as a person who is committed to specialisation in a particular discipline, engaged in producing work to be read primarily by other professionals, committed to a career in which the rewards are long term, devoted to self-governance . . . and convinced that amateurs are unable to do what professionals do best . . . (Alan Wolfe 1996, 21)

This well describes the status of many, if not most, critical geographers, though in Britain, as I've already said, self-governance is under-attack.

But, contra Jarosz, Mitchell, Smith and Hague, professionalization is not *necessarily* antithetical to a more activist and engaged critical geography. Hague, in particular, repeats the lament about 'tenured radicals' initiated in the 1980s by Russell Jacoby, whereby left 'academics' – for Jacoby specialists without vision and sensualists without heart – have supposedly come to replace the left 'public intellectuals' of yesteryear. But this is too one-sided a reading, and is perhaps accounted for by the fact that these four geographers are writing out of a North American context where the market intrudes more aggressively into universities than it does in the UK.<sup>4</sup> Professionalization entails claims to expertise, and it is precisely the use value of this expertise that marks out what critical geographers do as distinctive and potentially valuable in non-instrumental ways. But how to harness this use value and where to direct it?

This returns us to the question of self-governance, a defining feature of professionalization. Exposed directly to the market, professions like law or accountancy must adapt to the rigours of an invisible hand. Academia is a profession in a different sense and this is why the quote from Marx cited earlier is not, in fact, quite right. Dependent on and answerable to the visible hand of the state, and notwithstanding the marketization of certain parts of the sector, British academics are 'public professionals'. They are wage workers *and yet*, unlike most other paid labourers, they still enjoy freedoms characteristic of the private professions. Despite their employment relation, academics still have relative autonomy from the state and generally have second order ties with non-state institutions and publics, with the signal exception of students. What has happened in the prevailing RAE/QAA culture, then, is *not* that academic self-governance has been fundamentally eroded (though erosion there has certainly been) but that the much cherished independence and autonomy of academics has been channelled to remarkably conformist – dare I say *un-critical*? – ends. And it is critical geographers, along with other academics, who have been doing much of the channelling! It is too easy to lament the onward march of the audit culture, as if it is an unstoppable juggernaut. Rather than challenging and changing the very rules organizing the UK academic field, critical geography has grown fat by following them

very carefully. Has there been a collective lack of nerve, a failure to take responsibility for making our own history by resorting to the alibi of overwhelming outside pressures? The critic Louis Menand (1990, 39) has described the academic world as 'a vast sea of conformity . . . [in which] all the fish try to swim in the same direction'. Perhaps it is time for critical academics to behave once again, as the old adage would have it, like cats.

As Robbins argues, their imperfect professionalization does, in fact, offer critical geographers the resources to contest the conditions of their own labour – and therefore the ground-rules that determine what counts as valuable academic activity at this moment in time. What is more, many critical geographers are now in the positions of power and influence that might allow them to change these rules, and so valorize activities that have heretofore been deemed valueless. This is the kind of activism that critical geography might want to consider as a matter of priority.

### Figures of academic activism

. . . how [might] we . . . as critical scholars think through some of the institutional arrangements we inhabit[?].  
(Susan Roberts 2000, 242)

In conclusion, I want to explore three figures that might serve as candidates for a more 'relevant' critical geography. All these figures are unashamedly about activism *within* the university, not just because there is so much to do on our own doorsteps en route to an 'out there' critical geography, but also because it is not clear to me why working with, say, a disadvantaged community, is any more political than teaching Marx or Foucault to undergraduates. All three figures rest on the assumption that the remaining and very real, if under-appreciated, autonomy academics have should be harnessed in a collective effort to redefine our roles within the tertiary sector. Without an effort of this kind, it seems to me, talk about reaching beyond the academy will remain so much hot air.

### Figure 1: Accountability

The first figure is that of accountability. Accountability signifies 'being answerable to' and, in the modern British university system, is a figure associated historically with academics' role as 'public

servants', offering a collective good – that is, advanced learning – albeit to a small segment of the wider society. There is, for me at least, something appealing about offering a contemporary and robust defence of the idea of higher education as a public service against the encroachments Jarosz, Mitchell and Smith worry about. But accountability cannot, in the end, serve as the figure around which to resurrect this idea because, as is now widely acknowledged, it has become a debased synonym for accounting: that is, for academics being answerable to a value system that measures worth in terms of papers published and research monies won. Accountability today connotes a narrow and one way street: that linking academics to a neo-liberal state apparatus.

### Figure 2: Vocation

We look, then, to other figures. Vocation is a classical, rather noble figure that we might consider dusting down for present purposes. It conjures up a sense of purpose, a rightness of fit for an important occupation. Though very old-fashioned, it captures something of what critical geographers do: most of them believe in their research and writing and believe in the value of sharing it with others. They also forgo more lucrative careers in order to spend their working lives in public institutions, and (like most UK academics) suffer the everyday ignominy of ordinary people misconstruing what they actually do for a living and just how hard they work. But, like accountability, the figure of vocation is ultimately spoiled goods. It arguably smacks too much of paternalism, of the knowing but concerned authority ready to dish out wisdom to those who will listen.

### Figure 3: Responsibility

This brings me, finally, to a third figure: responsibility. Unlike accountability, it implies reciprocity and the possibility that these mutual commitments might be many and varied. And unlike vocation it does not presume that critical geographers' expertise is there to enlighten the great unwashed. If one takes the remaining autonomy academics have seriously, and if left-wing geographers want to make their critical credentials matter, they might think who, exactly, they have responsibilities to. Though the likes of Martin, Massey and Storper want to explore responsibilities to those outside the university, I think there

are some more local commitments to consider first or at least at the same time.

Critical geographers have a responsibility to themselves to define what they do less in terms of 'my CV is bigger than yours' – that is, the empty currency of our present accounting system – and more in terms of a creative rethinking of what it might mean to be a 'critical academic' today, in twenty-first century Britain, where public spending on higher education is at a post-war low, yet where student numbers have doubled in a decade within an increasingly bureaucratic tertiary system. What value system – what redescription of the academic role – can be put forward to both enrich the labour of critical geographers and revalorize activities, like teaching, that are political through and through? Secondly, there is a responsibility to students, critical geographers' biggest audience. Universities, it is easy to forget, are major institutions of social reproduction. What kind of education do critical geographers want to give students? What are their responsibilities to them? These questions have barely been explored by the critical geographic fraternity. Finally, there is a responsibility to knowledge itself. This may seem oddly abstract, but what I mean is that the production of new knowledge is vital, not because we know where it will go and who will use it, but because we *don't*. Knowledge is material through and through, and though most critical geographers – indeed most academics, myself included – are guilty of speaking only to each other most of the time, our ideas now and again circulate in other communities with surprising results. This is not about formally 'reaching beyond the academy' but about allowing the ideas and insights left-wing academics produce to go where they will. In the meantime, critical geographers should carve out a space where they can do the kind of work that they might consider to be of real value: work that makes universities less sausage factories and more institutions where critical thinking is not grist for the next peer reviewed article.

## Notes

- 1 This essay originated as the final presentation at this conference.
- 2 The inspiration for this identification of critical geography's shibboleths is an unpublished paper by Neil Smith (2000a) delivered at the latest International Critical Geography Conference.
- 3 And, as I explain below, this focus on institutional situatedness is not (or should not be) synonymous with self-indulgent navel-gazing on critical geographers' part.

4 Though see Philo and Miller (2000) for a counter-argument.

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