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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

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'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

– 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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