

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

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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

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.

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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