

Socializing culture, radicalizing the social

Neil Smith

Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA

Cultural geography and social geography experienced divergent fates in the English-speaking world during the last decades of the twentieth century. Cultural geography has benefited tremendously from a broad-based political and intellectual shift toward cultural issues since the 1970s, so much so that cultural questions now predominate at the research frontiers of the human side of the discipline. By comparison social geography has languished. The inauguration of any journal expresses an optimistic intellectual ambition for the future, but it also invites historical reflection as a means to comprehend the ways in which that future might be unfolding. Accordingly, just twenty-five years ago the fortunes of cultural and social geography were very different. Adapting Jürgen Habermas's felicitous description of modernism, US cultural geography from the 1930s to the 1970s was 'dominant but dead', while its British counterpart was barely more alive and much less evident. Social geography, by contrast, was a strong presence in Britain in the 1970s and looked to have a promising career in the USA as well, fuelled very much by the social consciousness, uprisings and movements of the period. In retrospect, it seems that social geography was squeezed between a powerful political economic research focus, revolving around young

marxist, feminist and other radical work, and an emergent cultural geography; political economic and cultural approaches both claimed authority over 'the social'. Questions of race or gender, for example, that were often viewed through political economic lenses in the 1970s, were by the 1990s increasingly subject to cultural deconstruction.

The recombination of social and cultural geography articulated in this journal is therefore every welcome and a clear expression of the resurgence of social geography. It is also fortuitous, because cultural geography finds itself at a crossroads today. The power of the cultural 'turn' over a few short years has been palpable, its success emphatic. If it began in many ways as an additive and corrective to political economic analyses that paid little attention to cultural questions, it has now graduated into its own worldview that is influential well beyond academia. Cultural intellectuals now play very complicated and powerful roles, brokering back and forth between academic and cultural economies: between critical analyses of contemporary culture and new fashions; architectural style and urban development; identity politics and new frontiers of consumption; local identity and globalization; academic personas and glamour activists; between iconic figures, locations and styles, and the advertising

industry. Seemingly arcane academic theories are transcribed with lightening speed into advertising copy or movie scripts (cf. Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry*). The vital rear-guard insistence after the 1960s that culture is political too has achieved such total victory that the inherent politics of culture is now taken for granted. But this success brings its own dangers. In *The University in Ruins*, the late Bill Readings (1996), a leftist professor of comparative literature, connects the rise of cultural studies in academia at the end of the twentieth century with the ideological emergency that accompanies the putative hollowing out of the nation-state. He makes a convincing case that the restructuring of those social processes and activities which previously constituted the national scale now leaves the university, whose traditional role was the construction of a national culture, struggling to define a new mission. Cultural studies is a symptom rather than a solution to the crisis of the university. However radically tinged in the beginning, cultural studies, he says, steps in to fill the void: cultural studies spawns the new multicultural ideologies/discourses that facilitate rather than challenge 'globalization'.

There are various points on which this critique can be challenged, but its power and originality are surely undeniable. It already has echoes within geography. When in 1995 cultural geographer Don Mitchell made the claim that 'There's no such thing as culture', the response was disappointingly defensive. Mitchell's tongue was well glued to his cheek when he chose this title, but the larger point, that the new cultural geography and (more broadly) cultural studies reinvent culture as 'superorganic', represents a trenchant challenge to a cultural discourse that Mitchell himself holds dear. Culture has again, seemingly, come to mean everything, and therefore nothing.

There are other signs that the limits to the

cultural turn may be in view. As a member of the editorial collective of *Social Text* and sometime writer about 'the production of nature', I would be the last person to agree with the scientific anti-intellectualism of Alan Sokal, whose 1996 hoax of that journal not only made international news but garnered a lot of support, not just in conservative circles but among many feminist, marxist and activists. The point is not that Sokal's idealism about the positivist transparency of the world is correct, but rather that such a dense intellectual conservatism could have galvanized such an outpouring of nervous relief from so many, signalling a deep impatience with academic esoterica more and more distanced from its original political rationale.

A backlash against progressive, critical and politically informed social science is already evident, perhaps more so in the USA than the UK. National disciplinary associations have angled to the right and, in the case of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* and the *American Anthropologist*, have tried to marginalize social theory within their flagship journals. Younger scholars interviewing for jobs are more likely to face a re-animated conservatism from middle-aged department members who may not know the difference between marxist, feminist, post-modernist or post-structuralist scholarship but are happy to deploy such descriptors as all-condemning epithets. And the corporate sponsorship of GIS technologies provides a pro-geography shield for reinstating—sometimes with remarkably defensive, disciplinary messianism—the same positivist worldview that was displaced in the 1970s.

The continual, creative reinvention of the critical edge of scholarship is the best response to this backlash, and today that means cultural scholarship in particular. Forging a more replete connection with social geography repre-

sents an important step, and one already intimated in the literature. Sensing that of course there is such a thing as culture, albeit not superorganic, Don Mitchell rejects the more idealist position that culture represents an assemblage of meanings and proposes instead that we treat culture as the outgrowth of social relations. Numerous writers already do this in practice, much as Mitchell does, and they also no doubt recognize that such a neat conceptual shift away from a certain cultural idealism only begins to create an alternative. But insofar as it hitches cultural to social questions it undoubtedly points a sharply reconceptualized cultural geography in the right direction. At the very least, such a move helps to ground cultural geography more firmly in social process.

Equally important is the role of empirical research, and here the comparison between geography and anthropology is very instructive. To put it bluntly, cultural geography, perhaps human geography in general, has downgraded the importance of fieldwork and has too often come to think of empirical research as a question of perusing texts—magazines, adverts, movies, landscapes—for representations of this or that. Much of this presumption comes on borrowed authority from some parts of the humanities, especially literary criticism, where most facets of reality are treatable as texts, discourses or narratives, and where the deconstruction of texts and representations, conversely, can come to carry universal authority for explanations of the real. Studying texts is not only legitimate but a fundamental necessity, yet the best textualists are also activists for whom the limits of textuality are viscerally real (Said, 1999) (that's why, incidentally, the journal is called *Social Text*.) Of whatever stripe, disciplinary imperialism combines the violence and laziness of its geopolitical namesake, and is in the end unsustainable. In anthropology, by contrast, whatever the struggles over what con-

stitutes ethnography, the tradition of serious and sustained fieldwork remains very much alive. This is not a fieldwork that confuses representation for reality but one that insists on immersion in specific realities as a vantage point from which to proceed. Knowledge of that represented is indispensable to any discussion of representation. Empirical research necessarily informs the critique of ideology and is informed by it, but should not be confused for it.

The symbiosis of empirical with theoretical work is therefore elementary. The so-called empirical turn of the late 1980s, bound up with the locality debates, identified the global as theoretical and the local as empirical, but it wrecked itself on the shoals of this scale conflation precisely at the point when the new empirics of globalization were filling newspaper headlines across the world. This taught us squarely that empirical research recognizes no necessary privilege of the local, and instead points in the direction of a more sensitive investigation of the cultural and social constitution of geographical scale. What is the local anyway? The trick here may be for our empirical comprehension of scale to catch up with our more ambitious theoretical propositions. However that may be, it is the symbiosis of theory and empirical work that needs to win out.

Paradoxically, in the era of greatest availability of international news and information, the USA, in cultural terms, may be one of the most provincial countries in the world, while the explosion of cultural geography in England may have encouraged a parallel intellectual insularity. The faux-cosmopolitanism of Anglo-American geography is well known outside Britain and the USA (Minca, 2000), and it seems to me that a new journal of social and cultural geography in the twenty-first century could take on this narrowness of focus,

from which we all suffer, as a *cause célèbre*. In the era of globalization, internationalism is not necessarily such a radical idea anymore, and the connections of global and local are as likely to dominate corporate boardroom agendas—from Honda to Coca Cola—as social scientists' conference schedules. A remixed social and cultural geography can play a significant role in nurturing a new radical internationalism.

Culture doesn't just happen. Culture is work. And work is a social process. The symbiosis of social and cultural geography therefore is itself intimately tied to political economy. While some early cultural geographies defined themselves as alternatives to political economy, today some of the most interesting work is happening as part of a *rapprochement* between political economic analyses and cultural and social critiques. Although this is not necessarily the aim of *Social and Cultural Geography*, an openness to exploring and transgressing this particular false conceptual border would link the journal with another significant new depart-

ture. In doing so it would not only achieve the limited disciplinary goal of recentering social geography, but would, if we were self-critical, pose all over again the question: what constitutes and comprises the social? A generation after Margaret Thatcher, whose hateful, anti-social individualism evoked the famous outburst that 'there is no such thing as society', and whose legacy still in many ways haunts contemporary neo-liberal policies around the world, and with global struggles again on the rise, asking the question of the social may just be a radical act.

References

- Minca, C. (2000) Venetian geographical praxis, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18.
- Mitchell, D. (1995) There's no such thing as culture, *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 20: 102–116.
- Readings, B. (1996) *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Said, E. (1999) *Out of Place*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

