

# Social geography: on action-orientated research

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It seems that many social and cultural geographers are happy to survey (and 'map') the exclusionary landscape, but rarely do much to change that landscape.

(Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999: 195)

The four years since Kitchin and Hubbard's *Area* editorial on the possibilities for critical action geographies have seen a number of commentaries and conference sessions where ideas, encouragement and examples of action-orientated geographies have been aired. This review and the two that follow aim to draw attention to this growing body of research within social geography. Nonetheless, as I discuss in this first review, this presents some difficulties in delimiting, finding and evaluating relevant work. I begin by considering wider recent debates about social geography, and especially its relationships with cultural geography, before suggesting that action-orientated research is one area where distinctively social geographies are thriving. The review then maps out the diverse modes of research which fall into this category.

## I The fortunes of social geography

The fortunes, shape and future of social geography continue to receive a lot of attention. Even as textbooks chart the subject matter and concerns of the subject (Hamnett, 1996; Pain *et al.*, 2001; Panelli, 2003; Valentine, 2001), reviews and commentaries over the past decade have been framed in terms of a crisis of identity for social geography, some forecasting its abandonment or natural death (see Gregson, 1995; Jackson, 2003; Peach, 2002). Much of this analysis has been stimulated by recent critiques of the cultural turn (e.g., Philo, 2000; Smith, 2000; Cloke, 2002). If the cultural turn has not quite become a folk devil, its intellectual and practical limitations, particularly in its apparent neglect of material practices and relevance, are increasingly evident. Where there has been a failure to relate a focus on representation and meaning to material life and social

welfare, it is fair to say that the cultural turn has led some away from earlier ideals of a progressive social geography which focuses on social problems and their resolution.

Yet there is no need for defensiveness on the part of social geographers. While some of the products of the cultural turn never came near to passing the 'so what?' test, others challenged and breathed new life into the traditional interests of social geography. Implicit in critiques such as Peach's (2002) is that social geography should be different, oppositional even, to the 'new' cultural geography, and that it has exclusive terrain which needs protecting from it. Others would see social and cultural geography as having overlapped so far in subject matter and perspectives as to have become one: they were never wholly separate (Jackson, 2003), and the same goes for the parallel divides which are often implicitly mapped on (empirical/theoretical, quantitative/qualitative, concrete/abstract, relevant/immaterial). The work of many social geographers straddles some, if not all, of these 'divides'; there are multiple social and cultural geographies and more than one story of their progress in the past decade (Gregson, 2003).

Nonetheless, rekindled interest in 'rematerializing' human geography (Jackson, 2000; Lees, 2002) and critical action research (Fuller and Kitchin, 2003; Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999) means there is space for a distinctive radical social geography to jump back into the breach. Social geography retains identifiable subject matter, focusing on the geographical aspects of social provision, social reproduction, social identities and inequalities. It is characterized by a continuing role in revealing and challenging injustice, and in interrogating phenomena which might matter to non-academics in ways which make some sense to non-academics (Cater and Jones, 1989; Gregson, 2003; Pain *et al.*, 2001; Peach, 2002). I would add to this a growing sense of 'the social' articulated recently by Cloke (2002): recognition of the capacity for more moral, caring and politically aware human geographies, and the potential for individual and collective action. These interests, while not exclusive from other parts of the discipline, provide both the imperative and many opportunities for wider engagement and action-orientated research.

## II The resurgence of action-orientated social geographies

These reviews will not be ordered around subject matter, then, but will focus on research which is explicitly concerned with engagement with individuals, groups and communities and action beyond the traditional research encounter. This project has fully re-emerged across human geography in recent years (Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999), alongside the critique that critical and radical geographies often fail to go beyond the production of empirical evidence and the development of theory. In choosing this focus, I am not suggesting that these are the only forms of social geographical work that matter, nor that they define the subdiscipline. Nor do I want to identify this as a new or renewed direction, as social geographers have never stopped working in these areas. However, recent years have seen considerable expansion, there are exciting possibilities in the topics, methodologies and theoretical debates now being tackled, and considerably more sophisticated and reflexive consideration of what is done and how. I hope these reviews will underline that there *is* a critical mass of involvement beyond the academy that is an important if undervalued dimension of academic social geography.

This first review will provide a broad sweep covering modes of action-orientated research in social geography. Further reviews will focus on these areas in more depth, rather than other areas in which geographers pursue activism, such as critical teaching (Hay, 2001) or challenging institutional practices (Castree, 1999) (though all these activities are related politically and practically). The reviews will not be exhaustive but will include what seem good illustrative examples. I am largely limited to the English-speaking world, but will include some research carried out in non-western countries, where social geography research is more often categorized by western geographers under 'development'.<sup>1</sup> As well as these usual provisos, there is a glaring paradox in a review of published work which focuses on action-orientated research. Relevant details on processes and outcomes are often not included in academic outputs. Much literature now reflects on the possibilities and problems of action-orientated research, or intellectualizes it; it is less easy to identify practical examples which contribute to geographical knowledge and give some account of how it made a difference. Action and activism are sometimes not mentioned, or downplayed, reflecting researchers' modesty, perhaps, or the schism between the messy everyday practice and politics of research and the polished products which journals demand. Also, without wanting to leave room for too much optimism, the full extent and nature of impacts outside the academy are unknowable and probably unintended. With all this in mind, I am quite heavily reliant on others to let me know about relevant work.<sup>2</sup> A final qualification is that cultural geographers are at it too, if in smaller numbers.<sup>3</sup>

### **III Some modes of action-orientated social geographies**

Action-orientated research takes very different forms. Its diversity is increasing as new constraints and opportunities from inside and outside the academy and the discipline of geography have an impact. These include: the growing need to look to non-academic bodies for research funding; the increasing pressure to at least claim that research has 'user relevance'; and theoretical and methodological developments, especially perspectives involving communities and agencies as peers in research. None of these influences can be pigeonholed as simply positive or negative. Until quite recently, debates on action-orientated research tended to present the various options in terms of polarities about what type of research matters, and how best to make a difference to 'real' people in the 'real' world – the relevance debate which re-emerged in the 1990s (Pacione, 1999). A key question for social geographers is to whom research is 'relevant' – is it about servicing and informing powerful groups and making policies work better, or about representing and empowering marginalized people? Often framed as 'top-down' policy research versus 'bottom-up' grassroots activist research (Blomley, 1994; Tickell, 1995), there is generally more credibility within critical geography for the former (Lees, 1999; Ruddick, 2003). Despite this divide rumbling on, both approaches are heterogeneous. Below, I briefly consider some relevant themes in activist, participatory and policy research, three modes which are not discrete but often overlap in practice.

## 1 Combining activism and research

While many social geographers engage in forms of political activism, recent years have seen a sharp refocusing of interest in activism as an explicit strategy and outcome of research and vice versa. Earlier assumptions that academic endeavours and activism were quite distinctive and separate pursuits which had to be forcefully and problematically combined have been dispelled, and reflection on concrete examples of practice has led writers to confirm the muddying of the objectives and roles of academic/activist noted elsewhere (Routledge, 1996). Activism exists on a continuum and is embedded to some extent in all our activity as academics (Ruddick, 2003). Of her own activism, Ruddick speaks of the difficulties of separating out her intellectual and pragmatic engagement on issues of homelessness, health and planning, as 'activism can become a generative locus of new ways of thinking about the world and being in the world' (Ruddick, 2003). In their recent manifesto for anti-racist geographies, Peake and Kobayashi (2002) also point to the necessity of dispelling the division between theory and activism. Both need to change, within and from the discipline, if the racist heritage and continuing practices of geography are to be challenged. They also suggest that geographers might see the different activities of scholarship, activism and teaching as linked in their pursuit of change.

Recent research demonstrates the diversity of strategies and levels and degrees of engagement in how activism is enacted. Chatterton (2002) gives an account of squatting as a form of protest at the growing dominance of large corporate leisure developers and the consequent squeezing out of services and points of contact for local people in the city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, England. Here the research account, which documents a broader problem, arises from his own activism and involvement in the protest, reflecting a tradition in social geography of charting social movements as one strategy to raise wider awareness of issues of inequality (e.g., Chouinard, 2001). In so doing, the boundaries between one's own and others' activism are often blurred. Moren-Alegret (2002) acknowledges this in his work on social organization and international immigration in Barcelona and Lisbon. His involvement in social activism was utilized as a fieldwork strategy which aided him in triangulating and questioning the different positioning of relevant groups. Within health geography, action-orientated research is often more directly policy-related (see below), but Kearns and Moon (2002: 616) have recently suggested that 'as critical health geography has taken root, a modest blend of activism and academic pursuit has emerged as a viable possibility'. They point to an example of Kearns' own involvement in a Safe Journeys Coalition in an Auckland primary school (Collins and Kearns, 2001). Here the conclusions of collaborative research led to recommendations and action to improve children's safety: a more traditional form of action research, but equally important in terms of outcomes.

In Lees's (1999) account of the public reception of her research on the exclusion of young people from urban public spaces in the USA, she raises some difficult questions about exactly what and how academics should contribute to real-world problems. One suggestion voiced elsewhere in recent years is for more sharing of skills and strategies for engagement with the world outside, as 'much of the recent writing on activism and the academy has been abstract and has paid limited attention to [...] "real" attempts' (Lees, 1999: 378). This needs to be accompanied by continuing attention to reflexive research practice. Maxey (1999), writing of his experiences of research on sustainability

and identity in small Welsh communities, rejects the idea that being self-reflexive goes against the imperative for action to have primacy in activist research. Instead, he argues that critical scrutiny of the activist researcher's field relations and activities is complementary and important in maximizing the potential of the work to contribute to action.

## 2 Participatory research

In the growing family of participatory research approaches, the common element is that research is undertaken collaboratively with and for the individuals, groups or communities who are its subject. Participatory approaches present a promising means of making real in practice the stated goals and ideals of critical geography (Kesby, 2000). They have been especially popular among social geographers, given the emancipatory potential of providing research space for excluded groups to highlight and act on their own concerns. The approaches also circumvent some of the usual problems of representation, though they are by no means a holy grail, as they raise new difficulties and dilemmas (Monk *et al.* 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003).

Recent work by Pratt has been particularly successful in realizing the ideals of participatory research, in research with Filipino women in domestic service in Vancouver (Pratt, in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1998; 1999) and with young second-generation Filipino immigrants in Canada (Pratt, in collaboration with the Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance, 2002). Both of these projects document inequality and oppressive practices, through planning, undertaking and publishing work in collaboration with advocacy organizations. Pratt and Kirby (2003) describe a participatory theatre project staged by a nurses' union, which sought to publicize and mobilize concerns about conditions of their work and health-care delivery. Their interest here is in the power of theatre as a process for changing popular geographies in itself, and also as a parallel for the process of representation and change which can come about through collaborative human geographical research.

Certain research areas have seen greater development and use of participatory approaches than others. In disability research, they are well established outside geography, and Kitchin (1999; 2001) has argued for their greater use among geographers. Writing on morals and ethics in researching disability as a non-disabled researcher (Kitchin, 1999), he advocates a partnership approach where subjects are co-researchers, and academics are facilitators, passing on skills, providing technical advice, and providing an outlet to inform policy-makers if appropriate. Chouinard (2000) has made related arguments for more engaged geographies of disability.

It is still the case that social geographical work in 'developing' countries is most likely to employ participatory approaches. In Peake and Trotz's (1999) study of identity and place among Guyanan women, local women contributed to the research design and implementation. Monk *et al.* (2003) give an account of the relations and processes involved in health research which involved collaboration between academics and community agencies at the Mexico-USA border. Kesby (2000) gives a reflective example of the use of a participatory approach in an evaluation of an HIV project in Zimbabwe, and a useful outline of the associated epistemology and the many practical and ethical benefits of carrying out research in this way. Kindon's (2003) research, using participatory video to explore place, identity and social cohesion among a Maori tribe in

Aotearoa/New Zealand, is an excellent example of 'deep' participation. The researchers and the researched constantly swap roles, there is reciprocity in the sharing of materials and skills, and the ownership of the videos produced lies wholly in the hands of the tribe.

### 3 Policy research

Often seen as the reactionary cousin of activist and participatory research, policy research can also be a viable strategy in critical action research. Social geography has a long interest in and engagement with social policy. Impacts are most likely the more direct the relationship with policy is: for example, in work funded by policy-makers or other organized groups, or work in which independent critique of policy is the main objective. Again, the commonly observed bad/good schism between work that is funded by and critical of policy-makers is misplaced; some contract research is highly critical, while policy critiques at the highest level often seem to be left on the shelf.

Social geographers' recent engagements have varied on a continuum from policy critiques from theoretical perspectives, through empirical studies, to work which is more collaborative and/or activist in nature. Much work holds more than one position on that continuum. For example, a number of social geographers have developed critical commentaries on policy which are informed by deeper engagement. In a paper on tenure legalization, Varley (2002) addresses debates of legality/illegality in low-income housing in developing countries, assessing governments' attempts to incorporate poor people into formal housing markets with reference to a case study in Mexico. Curtis *et al.* (2002) give a review of theories on the health impacts of urban regeneration which is informed by the views of stakeholders in a London borough experiencing redevelopment. Other recent examples include: Gleeson and Kearns (2001) on the philosophies and ethics of community-care policy; Kobayashi (1999) on multiculturalism policy in Canada; Smith *et al.* (2003) on the links between health and housing in Britain; and Gleeson (2002) on urban social exclusion in Australia.

Equally, much empirical work has raised the profile and improved understanding of social problems, as well as actively seeking policy changes at local and national levels. Examples include research on the problems of housing for young people carried out by a team led by Damaris Rose at the Urbanization, Culture and Society research centre of the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique (Canada Mortgage and Housing Association, 2000). In Shaw *et al.*'s (1999a; 1999b) long-standing and wide-ranging work on inequalities of health and housing in Britain, they apply statistical techniques to official data-sets in order to pursue critiques of policy. Klodawsky *et al.* are undertaking longitudinal interviews with homeless people in Ottawa, Canada, funded by the city authority and working with a community advisory committee and an activist group. They also suggest how images and representations of homelessness relate to policies in this area (Klodawsky *et al.*, 2002).

It is increasingly common for policy research to use qualitative methods and/or participatory approaches, which are often effective at reflecting the perspectives of those at the sharp end of policies. The work of Cheer *et al.* (2002) on the impact of housing on health for Pacific peoples in Auckland was commissioned by and undertaken for the group concerned, resulting in high-quality, in-depth research which is well placed to

feed into policy agendas. Likewise, Moss's community-based research (2002) on social cooperative housing in Canada is placed in the context of state cuts in social housing. The mutual contributions of social geographers to policy research, and of policy research to informing theoretical debates in social geography, is sizeable, though not always highly visible in the usual publication outlets.

#### IV Conclusion

I end on a much more optimistic note than previous reviews of social geography for this journal. The fears of a decade ago, of a social geography that 'legitimizes the retreat from the empirical world in terms of the crisis of representation' (Gregson, 1993: 529), has not been realized by any stretch. Action-orientated social geographies, which not only comment on but get directly involved in seeking solutions to social problems and inequalities, never went away; perhaps they became less fashionable, perhaps they received less exposure. There are strong signs that social geography is remobilizing, and, despite many pressures which militate against some of these types of academic work, there is a critical mass of engagement beyond the academy. While this review has largely remained in the usual territory of work published in academic journals, subsequent reviews will also consider more closely the other important outputs and outcomes of social geographers' work.

#### Notes

1. Thanks to Kay Anderson for pointing this out.
2. Thanks to everyone who has supplied information and references so far. I continue to be very grateful for alerts to examples of work which is relevant to scope of this review, whether and wherever published: please e-mail me at rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk. All help will be acknowledged in my third review.
3. See a 2003 session on applied cultural geography at the 2003 RGS/IBG annual conference.

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