

Whatever happened to the social? Reflections on the ‘cultural turn’ in British human geography

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This paper focuses on the ‘cultural turn’ which has taken place in British and to a lesser extent North American and Australian human geography in the last decade. It begins by exploring what constitutes the cultural in what has been dubbed ‘new cultural geography’. It then explores contemporary claims that cultural geography has eclipsed or marginalised social geography. The final section evaluates these claims about the demise of the social, arguing that the social has not been evacuated but rather has been redefined. While this paper tells a specific story about a particular tradition and geographical frame of reference, it nonetheless has wider relevance because it provides an example of the differential development of particular sub-disciplinary areas, of the way sub-disciplinary knowledges shape each other, and of the way understandings of disciplinary trends are contested.

Keywords: *cultural turn, geographical thought, social*

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the ‘cultural turn’ which has taken place in British and, to a lesser extent, North American and Australian human geography in the last decade. As such it tells a very specific story about this particular tradition, which does not necessarily resonate with the development of human geography in other parts of the world where cultural geography has had a different tradition and a different trajectory (Claval 2001). Despite this paper’s specific geographical frame of reference, the British example still has wider relevance because of the way it provides an example of the differential development of particular sub-disciplinary areas, of the way sub-disciplinary knowledges shape each other, and of contested understandings of disciplinary trends. The paper begins by exploring what constitutes the cultural in what has been dubbed ‘new cultural geography’; the following section outlines claims that this cultural geography has eclipsed or marginalised social geography; the final section evaluates some of the claims about the demise of the social to argue that it never went away but has instead been redefined.

‘The cultural turn’

The sub-discipline of cultural geography has a long tradition, one which has been marked by divergent theoretical positions and methodologies. As such it is a very contested field. Within anglophone cultural geography the dominant theoretical tradition for much of the 20th century was shaped by the American Carl Sauer, head of the influential Berkeley school. Sauer’s concern was with the role of different human groups in transforming the natural landscape. His focus was on tradition, in which culture was equated with custom, and rural and folk were key themes. As such the emphasis of the Berkeley school’s work was on material culture and its physical forms rather than on its social and symbolic

dimensions. (Jackson 1989). Methodologically, Sauer was influenced by anthropology, from which he derived a commitment to ethnographic field research.

The ecological and ethnographic tradition that Sauer established shares much in common with the French *Annales* school and continues to be an important force within American human geography. For example, a contemporary concern with the visible form of cultural landscapes and the environmental impact of cultural practices is evident in articles published in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (Johnston et al. 2000).

The ‘cultural turn’ has largely been a product of emerging critiques of the Berkeley school’s concepts of both culture and landscape. Its beginnings are usually dated to the late 1980s and early 1990s when, influenced by British cultural studies, some cultural geographers began to challenge the universal notions of culture and normative values and beliefs evident in Sauerian cultural geography, arguing that its research agenda is theoretically naive and conservative (Johnston et al. 2000). The Sauerian focus on the environment and material landscape has been substituted by ‘new cultural’ geographers with an understanding of culture as a signifying process, a concern with cultural politics, and an engagement with post-structuralist and post-colonial theory (Jackson 1989, Crang 1998). This development has provoked a virtual civil war in American cultural geography (Duncan 1994).

The impact of new cultural geography is evident in major conferences such as the *New Words, New Worlds* meeting organised by the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers in 1991 (the papers from which are published in Philo 1991), and the subsequent conference held by the same study group in 1998 (a selection of these papers are published in Cook et al. 2000). It is also evident from the proliferation of writing and theoretical claims about the ‘new cultural geography’, the debut of journals such as *Ecumene* and *Social and Cultural Geography*, and of course the citation indices.

Yet quite what constitutes the cultural in 'new cultural geography' is hard to determine. Various writers have made attempts at defining it. Mitchell (1995) suggests that it is fundamentally about the patterns and markers of differentiation between people, the processes through which these are made, and the ways in which these processes, patterns and markers are represented and ordered. For Cosgrove & Jackson (1987, 99) it is 'the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomenon of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meanings and attach values'; a characterisation captured in the title of Jackson's book *Maps of Meaning* (1989), which itself is synonymous with the 'cultural turn'. While for Nelson et al. (1992, 5, cited in Mitchell 1995, 105) 'culture is understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities and so forth.'

What these geographical understandings of 'culture' share is a concern with *meaning, identity, lifestyle and representation*, although this is not to suggest that the 'new cultural geography' represents one field. McDowell (1994), for example, identifies a distinction between what she terms cultural materialism and the new landscape school, while Jackson (1993) recognises three strands of work that he labels landscape iconography, literary post-structuralism and cultural politics. There are geographical nuances too, with subtle differences evident between North American research and that being carried out in the UK and in Australia and New Zealand (Barnett 1998).

'New cultural geography' is located within the wider epistemological framework of what might be loosely termed post-structuralism. Indeed, Barnett (1998, 380) argues that:

'Both epistemologically and in the construction of new empirical research objects, the cultural turn is probably best characterised by a heightened reflexivity toward the role of language, meaning, and representations in the constitution of "reality" and knowledge of reality.'

As such 'new cultural geography' has drawn heavily on other disciplinary fields for its theoretical inspiration. Most notably, Barnett (1998, 388) claims that it '... involves a turn toward a set of disciplines in which distinctive individualised modes of authority are predominant.' Cultural and literary theorists such as Edward Said and Judith Butler, for example, have played a key role in redefining the horizons of human geography (Barnett 1998).

As such, the 'new cultural geography' has brought a radical shift in the pattern of research and scholarship within the discipline as a whole, in that culture is being seen as inseparable from economics, politics, society and the environment: the 'cultural turn'. Within economic geography it has been manifest, for example, in a recognition of issues such as the cultural embeddedness of economic processes, corporate cultures, and the cultural context of economic development (e.g. Sadler 1997); both political and historical geography have embraced post-colonial theory (e.g. Gregory 1994); and the influence of the 'cultural turn' is also evident in the contemporary theorisation of the production and

contestation of social identities and relations and in the cultural construction of nature and the environment (e.g. Anderson 1995). Indeed, Philo (2000, 28) describes 'the cultural turn' as sending 'shockwaves throughout the length and breadth of human geography.'

In many ways then, the 'cultural turn' has been very positive for geography, allowing new critical theoretical perspectives to emerge, and opening up new spaces for research on topics such as the body that were previously considered out of bounds. It has also revitalised the discipline by provoking reflection on ways of doing research, epitomised by debates about representation, situated knowledge and positionality (e.g. Gregory 1994, Rose 1997). Indeed, within the UK the 'cultural turn' has been credited with helping to shake off geography's old nerdy image, transforming it in the eyes of national newspaper commentaries into a cool or sexy subject (Barnett 1998). Philo (2000, 29) nicely summarises these benefits when he describes it as 'creating a new ambience for human geography that has blown away many cobwebs of convention, conservatism and downright prejudice'. Yet at the same time the 'cultural turn' has also come in for criticism, being accused of eclipsing the social (Gregson 1995, Smith 2000), dematerializing geography (Philo 2000), lacking political substance (Harvey 2000), and being caught up in its own pretensions. In the remainder of this paper I will outline some of these charges and reflect on what has become of the social in social and cultural geography.

The marginalisation of the social?

In 1992 Gregson (1992, 391) wrote that the 'growing coalescence of social geography and the new cultural geography reflects how the ideas of one have been used to transform the other, and yet, at the same time, serve to create something in which it becomes impossible to see where the one ends and the other begins.' Yet, with the benefit of several years' hindsight some geographers are now beginning to argue that the relationship between these two sub-disciplines appears to be much more one-sided than Gregson characterised it. Rather than mutually informing each other, some writers are claiming that the social has effectively been submerged by the ascendancy of the 'new cultural geography'. In this sense the fortunes of the two sub-disciplines have reversed compared to 25 years ago (Smith 2000).

While the 'cultural' is now commonly characterised as concerned with meaning, identity and representation, the social has traditionally been concerned with the relations between the individual and society, and more specifically with questions of structural inequalities, social justice and societal reproduction.

The intellectual roots of social geography can be traced back to the 19th century French tradition *la géographie humaine*, and its radical tradition to the anarchist writings of Pyotr Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus (Johnston et al. 2000). However, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that social geography really came into its own as a sub-discipline. This was a period of political protest and social consciousness, when western society was in turbulence, the time of student

riots, the civil rights movement and the emergence of the second wave of feminism.

In this social and political context, and informed by Marxism and French sociology, social geography became a dynamic and politicised field characterised by research and writing about social/spatial inequalities (particularly focusing on urban poverty, housing, health and crime), social justice and the emergent social movements that were struggling for change (e.g. Harvey 1973). The development of a humanistic approach to geography in this period also brought a renewed concern with the way that social groups perceive and experience space (e.g. Ley 1983). As such social geography developed a strong empirical tradition, evident, for example, in work measuring and mapping social segregation, urban ethnographies and so on (see Jackson & Smith 1984).

Despite this impetus, Smith (2000, 1) suggests that social geography gradually got 'squeezed between a powerful political economic research focus, revolving around young Marxist, feminist and other radical work, and [that] an emergent cultural geography; political economic and cultural approaches both claimed authority over the "social".' Though, in turn, the political economy approach soon also found itself marginalised by the strength of the 'cultural turn'. For example, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries work on gender and race has increasingly shifted its focus from questions of social justice to a concern with cultural representation, in which literary theory and deconstruction have come to the fore.

The agenda of social geography has always been bound up with the wider political context. It is the political context of Europe and North America in the 1980s and early 1990s which Sayer (1994) suggests provides a possible, and somewhat uncharitable, explanation for the rise of cultural geography and the decline of political economy – and I would add social geography too. This, after all, was the period in which the new Right emerged. At the same time there was a parallel weakening of the left, socialism as an alternative political and economic system lost credibility, and a belief in collective social and political movements, such as the trade unionism, was supplanted by an emphasis on individualism. These trends were epitomised by the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration that 'there's no such thing as society'. In the face of this hostility Sayer argues that culture offered geographers a convenient and fun way out of the depressing anti-social political context of the time. After all, the cultural analysis of gender, sexuality, and the environment – what Amin & Thrift (2000, 4) term the 'alternative delights of cultural geography' – offers more prospects of fun than 'being absorbed in the dour world and crushing realities of capitalist exploitation' (Harvey 2000, 5; see also McDowell 2000a).

In the 1990s, social theory, grounded in structural social inequalities, was written off as a product of modernity (Gregson 1995, 139). Rather, it was cultural theory that stole the show. As such, without a theoretical anchor, social geography soon found itself floundering around in something of an identity crisis (Cater & Jones 1989). Gregson (1995, 139) explained that 'social geography finds itself in a position in which, bereft of any fashionable theoretical direction, it is seemingly caught, between on the one hand,

clinging dinosaur-like to the past and, on the other retreating into empiricism.'

This loss of direction and theoretical focus led to what Gregson (1995) has described as the 'evacuation of the social', in which concerns about social and spatial inequalities have been substituted by a concern with all things cultural. At the beginning of the 1990s, even the Social Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers renamed itself the Social and Cultural Study Group. Indeed, the collective loss of confidence and sense of uncertainty in the field means that those who label themselves as social geographers are a diminishing band.

A growing awareness of this apparent marginalisation of 'the social' is one of the factors which is beginning to trigger a backlash against the 'cultural turn'. Critical voices are articulating a diverse range of arguments, including charges that the discipline has become 'culturalist' and 'theoreticist' (Thrift 2000, 1). In particular, some writers have argued that the focus that the 'cultural turn' has placed on issues such as representation and the theorisation of identity has obscured the details of social relationships and the material realities of everyday life. Philo (2000, 33), for example, writes about his concerns about the dematerialisation of human geography, which he describes in terms of the discipline's 'preoccupation with immaterial cultural processes, with the constitution of intersubjective meaning systems, with the play of identity politics through the less-than-tangible, often-fleeting spaces of texts, signs, symbols, psyches, desires, fears and imaginings.' He goes on to explain that:

I am concerned that, in the rush to elevate such spaces in our human geographical studies, we have ended up being less attentive to the more "thingy", bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in the-world kinds of "matter" (the material) with which earlier geographers have tended to be more familiar.'

In a more blunt expression of a related point, Binnie (1995), commenting on cultural geography's eagerness to embrace lesbian and gay identities, lifestyles and culture, observes that sexual dissidents cannot consume their way out of queer-bashing. This view is implicitly echoed in the work of some disability theorists (e.g. Crow 1996, Moss 1999), who have warned that by emphasising issues of identity and challenging representations of the disabled as dependent or vulnerable, contemporary researchers are also in danger of ignoring the very real bodily experiences of pain and everyday frustration that an illness or impairment can cause.

In other words, critics of the 'cultural turn' are arguing that the drift towards meaning, identity and representation has perhaps led human geographers to lose sight of the very real material consequences and effects of social identities and processes, and to ignore the political economy of difference and social relations of power. Smith (2000) speculates that this in turn reflects the extent to which cultural geography's focus on 'representation' (in which looking at magazines, movies, advertisements, texts and landscapes has become *de rigeur*) has undermined the importance of fieldwork, so detaching its practitioners from the specific realities of everyday life.

For other writers the contemporary emphasis placed on

celebrating the multiplicity and fluidity of identities has had the more insidious effect of producing political paralysis. Mitchell (1995, 112), for example, suggests that we have 'allowed ourselves to become mystified by the romance of resistance and dazzled by diversity.' This point is also made by Harvey (1993) in an article in which he contrasted a fire in 1991 at the Imperial Foods chicken processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina, US, in which 25 workers were killed and 56 injured, with a similar disaster – the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire – that occurred in New York City, US in 1911. Whereas the Triangle Shirtwaist fire triggered mass protest marches about the conditions in which the employees were working, the deaths of the Imperial Foods workers were largely ignored by the media and political activists. Harvey attributed this political apathy to the fact that at the time both were pre-occupied with the Hill-Thomas hearings and the Rodney King trials, arguing that there has been a shift away from a class-based universalist politics to a relativist politics of difference, with the consequence that the specificities of sexist, racist or homophobic oppressions are fragmenting a 'progressive' politics.

Harvey (1993, 2000) is making the case for the continued relevance of Marxist theory, pointing out that the persistence of capitalist economic exploitation highlights the need for geographers to (re)engage with class and questions of social justice. Indeed, he suggests that the current failure of geographers to do so is somewhat paradoxical given the deepening economic and social divisions which have become evident in western economies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (a point also made by McDowell 2000b).

While Harvey's critique of the weakening of working-class politics in the US has some merit, other writers have been quick to warn of the dangers of throwing the baby out with the bathwater in any retreat to a class-based analysis. Most notably, Young (1998) points out that part of the motivation for the emergence of so-called new social movements focusing on gender, race, sexuality, ecology and so on has been the very failure of universalist movements to be inclusive. She goes on to observe that:

'The suggestion that feminism or environmentalism is more particularist than a working class interested-based movement seems odd. Women are everywhere, at least as universal a category as workers. Environmentalism is certainly universalist in its impulses. Movements against colonial legacies and racism appeal to universal values of non-domination' (Young 1998, 38).

Whereas Harvey advocates a return to Marxist theory, Smith suggests that social geography needs to be recentred through a return to one of the original strengths of the sub-discipline, its empirical tradition of fieldwork (in place of looking at magazines and movies), in order that as geographers we might immerse ourselves in the specific realities of everyday life. This point is not made with the intention that as human geographers we should return to a narrow form of unthinking empiricism, but rather to refocus attention on the material world, and specifically, on the material inequalities and socio-spatial differentiations which remain pressing issues in contemporary western societies. After all it was Bunge's expeditions into the inner cities of

the US which did so much to inspire an emerging 'radical' geography in the late 1960s and 1970s (Cloke et al. 1991).

A similar point is made by Philo (2000), who critiques what he describes as the dematerialisation of human geography following the cultural turn. He writes:

'... we need to keep an eye open to the processes – we might call them more material processes, even if they are not directly observable in the fashion of, say, trees, roads and libraries – which are the stuff of everyday social practices, relations and struggles, and which underpin social group formation, the constitution of social systems and social structures, and the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. More concretely (or more materially), it is to continue paying urgent attention to the mundane workings of families and communities (however we understand such phenomena); it is to register the battles to get by on a daily basis, to earn a crust, to keep the house warm, to cope with the neighbours, to walk down the street without being afraid; it is to take a stab at sharing the happiness and the sadness of being people with or without friends, groups to hang out in, things to do, to share, to enjoy, to complain about; it is to pay attention to the child crying in the road, the old man shuffling to the pub, the young mother and her pram negotiating kerbstones; and so on and so on' (Philo 2000, 37)

Rediscovering the social

Read as broad-brush criticisms of the general trend known as 'the cultural turn' within anglophone human geography, and British human geography in particular, the various arguments made in the previous section each represent valid commentaries on the state of the discipline. Undoubtedly, following the waning influence of Marxism, social geography has suffered a loss of theoretical direction. Against a social and political backdrop in which collective politics and even the notion of 'society' have been questioned, the 'cultural turn' with its focus on meaning, identity, difference and representation has contributed to a decline in the emphasis given to questions of structural inequalities, and particularly to notions of class and social justice, within anglophone human geography. And compared to the radical era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, geographers appear to be less politically engaged and to take less social responsibility beyond the academy.

However, there is also a danger that such generalisations about the overarching trends within human geography also obscure the complexities, contradictions and contested nature of what is a very diverse 'community' of research and writing. A closer focus on the range of work within the fields of social and cultural geography suggests that perhaps the demise of social geography has been overstated. It is not that the social has been evacuated, but rather that understandings of the social have shifted.

It is certainly true that there has been a general loss of focus within British social geography on universal questions such as structural inequalities and the wide-scale distribution of resources at a national and international scale (though

there are of course exceptions to this rule). Yet, this is not to suggest that geographers have ceased to be concerned with the social: with the way that individuals relate to each other and to society. Rather, the scale of enquiry has shifted. The contemporary emphasis of the sub-discipline is being placed on everyday social relations, in which questions of identity and difference are understood to underpin individuals' and particular social groups' experiences of oppression.

For example, contemporary studies on sexual dissidents, illness, impairment and disability, children and young people (Bell & Valentine 1995, Butler & Parr 1999, Holloway & Valentine 2001) all highlight the unequal nature of power relations within society, and demonstrate the heterosexist, ableist and adultist nature of everyday spaces. Rather than thinking about social justice in terms of unequal resources and distributional outcomes, these 'new' social geographies follow the social philosopher Iris Marion Young (1990, 1998) in focusing on questions of unequal treatment, and the domination and oppression of one group or groups in society by other(s). She argues that such social injustices occur not only through formal institutions, but also through everyday practices, which she terms 'cultural imperialism'. These geographical studies of the socio-spatial experiences of marginal groups certainly provide plenty of evidence of such everyday struggles. However, as Young's term 'cultural imperialism' suggests, in focusing on everyday social relations and experiences of oppression and injustice, these studies also address questions of identity, difference and meaning.

As such, these studies do not necessarily prioritise the 'real' over the constitution and contestation of meanings, nor the material over the immaterial. Rather, the very significance of these, and other social geography research, lies in the ways that some of these studies (e.g. Smith 1989, Butler & Bowlby 1997) demonstrate how meanings and definitional disputes can underpin many forms of social injustice and oppression (Philo 2000). In this way, notions of social exclusion and marginalisation – in which these concepts are understood in terms of the inability of citizens to participate in 'normal' life rather than merely in terms of their access to particular material assets (Valentine, Holloway & Bingham in press) – have replaced notions of social injustice expressed in terms of the wide-scale distribution of resources.

At the same time other geographers have continued to address the traditional concerns of the sub-discipline of social geography, including the heterogeneous nature of, and social segregation within, the city, the housing market (notably in terms of gentrification), racism, homelessness, social networks, 'community', fear of crime, order and policing (e.g. Rowe & Wolch 1990, Hamnett 1991, Fyfe & Bannister 1998, Dwyer 1999). Here too there is evidence that cultural geography has reshaped social approaches to these sorts of topics. While many of these studies continue to draw attention to patterns of social exclusion, the tenor of the debate has also shifted somewhat, from explaining these patterns in terms of structural inequalities and the wide-scale distribution of resources, towards thinking in terms of explanations framed in terms of lifestyle, consumption, meaning, identity and cultural representation.

Rather than drawing on one theoretical perspective, contemporary social geographies are eclectic in their

approach. One of the most significant contributions to contemporary understandings of geographies of exclusion is Sibley's (1995) book of the same title, in which he draws on a range of insights from psychoanalysis, social anthropology, and black and feminist criticism to examine the tendency of powerful groups to 'purify' and dominate space across a range of geographical scales. Other social research is increasingly drawing on writing from the social studies of technology (Callon 1987, Latour 1993, Law 1994), which have begun to reconceptualise relations between the material and immaterial world, highlighting the hybridity of people and objects, nature and culture, practices and discourses (Demeritt 1996, Hinchcliffe 1999, Whatmore 2000).

In other words, cultural geography has not so much squeezed out the social but instead has contributed to reshaping what it is understood to be. This is not to suggest that the social is an identifiable thing which can somehow be separated analytically from the cultural, the political and the economic. Nor is it to claim that the boundaries of social geography can somehow be staked out and then maintained in a sub-disciplinary straitjacket. On the contrary, the development of both inter- and intra-disciplinary theory in the last two decades highlights how artificial, fluid and porous are the boundaries between different areas of knowledge. Thus the question for British human geography is not so much one of whatever happened to social geography, but rather whether it matters that there is a shift in social geography away from a concern with the wide-scale distribution of resources and universal notions of social justice, towards a concern with the way that meanings underpin many everyday social oppressions and a concern with the everyday experiences of different social groupings.

Harvey (1993, 2000) certainly thinks it does. As mentioned, in critiquing relativist identity politics Harvey has urged geographers to (re)engage with Marxist theory and to return to a more class-based analysis. Philo (2000, 37) also observes that perhaps social geographers have become too 'hung up on identity politics and cultural representations, rather than patiently excavating the grain of component social lives, social worlds and social spaces.' He calls for social geographers to seek their theoretical inspiration not just from Marx, but also from classic sociological authors such as Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Parsons and Pahl.

Perhaps what is at the heart of these and other critiques of the 'cultural turn' is not so much a concern with the evacuation of the social but rather with the depoliticisation of social geography. By focusing on the everyday experiences of different social groupings and how social oppressions are underpinned by notions of meaning and identity, social geography appears to have lost its voice in that it is no longer addressing broader social questions, which in turn has undermined its effectiveness at employing its critical insights to the world beyond the academy.

However, Young (1990, 1998, 39) argues that it is possible to acknowledge broader concerns without losing sight of social differences and the shifting nature of social relationships. She writes that social justice

'... carries embedded in it an acknowledgement that we are together, socially bound to one another, whether we

like it or not. . . . Many interpret such recognition of being together as a recognition of *similarity*, but it need not be so. We may be quite differently situated in the context that binds us together, with quite different historical narratives, cultural meanings and structured advantages and disadvantages

She continues:

‘In my view it is a grave mistake to rest appeals to justice on perceptions of similarity, because it invites us to deny that we have obligations to those whom we perceive as different. I think it is better to rest appeals to justice on recognition that we are objectively together even though we may not see ourselves in community’ (Young 1998, 41).

To do so, she advocates the need for ‘careful coalition building which affirms social specificity’, claiming that the different perspectives we hold from our structurally different social positions will produce a more comprehensive awareness of the issues confronting us all than we each have from our own position alone.

The challenge for social geographers, therefore, is how we can address broader social concerns about oppression and exclusion in ways which allow the sub-discipline to have a greater critical voice beyond the academy, and how we can become more politically engaged, without losing sight of the specificities of the everyday experiences of different social groupings. One possible way forward is offered by Anne Snitow (1990). She argues that academics need to retain a constantly shifting scale of focus, in which sometimes it is appropriate to focus on difference and minimise claims to a shared identity or goal, whereas at other times it is politically expedient to ‘maximise’ a shared identity or position to proclaim common needs and political aims. To think in terms of shifting scales seems a particularly appropriate direction for social geographers to begin to map a new agenda for the sub-discipline.

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