

## **Cultural geography going viral**

Short essay to a special section on 'Provocations for cultural geography today'

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I'm writing this the day after a member of the UK's opposition government resigned over a photograph she posted on Twitter. Until the evening of 20 November 2014, Emma Thornberry had been the shadow attorney general. Earlier that day, however, she'd posted a snap of a house with three St George flags draped from its windows and a large white van parked on its driveway, captioned by the words 'Image from #Rochester'. Many people on twitter, including another Labour MP, as well as various tabloid newspapers, had picked up the tweet and interpreted it in a particular way: as being contemptuous of working class voters, as critical of people who displayed the English flag on their houses, and as a sign of how out of touch the Labour Party was with 'ordinary people'. After a couple of conversations with the Labour Party leader, Emma Thornberry announced her resignation.

What has that incident got to do with cultural geography? Well in one sense rather little, given the subdiscipline's general lack of interest in social media (indeed, in any kind of media). However, in another, it tells us quite a lot about how political debate and cultural meaning is created now, at this moment, in the UK at least, and thus why cultural geography should be at least partly interested in social media platforms like Twitter. Indeed, it might also suggest that cultural geography has something to contribute to understanding the effects of social media on understandings of place and landscape.

Cultural geography as a subdiscipline is very good at thinking about the cultural politics of images, and particularly images of places; exploring the implicit power relations of representations of places is its bread and butter, from founding texts like Peter Jackson's *Maps of Meaning* (1989), Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984) and James Duncan's *The City as Text* (1990) to the current issue of *Cultural Geographies*. This rather minor incident of the tweet demonstrates very well just how specific places can come to be very powerfully associated with particular social groups. For example, in the furore over the tweet, the idea that the Labour Party leadership was too distant from its traditional voters – the working class – was often expressed in terms of where that leadership lived. It was often pointed out that Emma Thornberry herself lived in a house worth £2 million (or £3 million, Twitter was divided on this), that the Labour leadership in general were based in Islington, a particularly expensive part of London, and that they were thus also 'metropolitan'. In the discussion about the tweet, then, social distance was being mapped straight onto price or place of residence. So the tools of cultural geography are useful for understanding specific aspects of that tweet and the discussion in which it was embedded. I want to suggest, however, that useful as that is, it is not where the main contribution of cultural geography might lie in relation to contemporary, digitally-mediated culture, for a number of reasons.

One of the interesting things about the online discussion of the picture in Emma Thornberry's tweet was that many people did not understand why it was being seen either as picturing a working-class residence, or as doing so in an offensive manner. For that was the scandal as it developed: this wasn't simply a

picture of house, a van and some flags; it was persistently described as a "derogatory" image that was "contemptuous" of the white working class. But as @mallory rather plaintively tweeted to @BBCNews, "I'm american so this went over my head. How is this offensive? I don't know what the flags mean". Which demonstrates that some people needed an explanation of the tweeted photograph because they didn't have the necessary understanding to undertake the required interpretive work. Interpreting cultural signs and symbols – reading cultural objects as texts – is an unevenly distributed skill, and in this case you needed to know 'what the flags mean' in order to understand the reactions the photo created. This is not news to cultural geographers. Indeed, in an intensely globalised world, the dynamics of cultural understanding are highly complex, with the interpreting of self and other by no means straightforwardly mapped onto territorialised locations of 'here' and 'there' ("american"?). Cultural geographers have some skills to bring to bear on the intricate spatialities of the creating of cultural meaning.

What @mallory's tweet also demonstrates, however, is that there is a widespread desire to understand cultural difference – even if highly unevenly distributed and articulated – as well as a public forum for expressing that desire. There are also plenty of respondents who are happy to explain the cultural significance of an image. Here is a post doing just that, from *The Independent* newspaper's website:

The Cross of St George is ostensibly flown to show English patriotism and support for the England football team.

However, it is sometimes (not always) flown ostentatiously as a "dog-whistle" to show that the owner of the house/ shop has extreme right-wing/racist political beliefs. You'll see the cross-of-St George flown prominently at English Defence League rallies.

The White Van is symbolic of a stereotype called White Van Man -- a pushy, hard-working, aggressive, self-centred, uncouth, selfish, antisocial lower-middle class or working class figure.

In the UK white vans are often driven by...<sup>1</sup>

... and the explanation goes on to talk more about white vans, snobbery and class difference. There was also quite a lot of commentary on Twitter and elsewhere about how the media – newspapers, the BBC and social media – were generating specific ways of interpreting the "gaffe", and discussions of how the meaning of a photograph – any photograph – gets established more generally.

What all this suggests to me is that the skills of the cultural geographer are now widespread (cf Marres, 2012). In fact, they are probably no more widespread than they ever have been, but social media and online commentary is making them more visible than ever before. Everyone is reading cultural texts and coming to conclusions about their meaning and sharing their

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rochester-byelection-labour-mp-emily-thornberry-apologises-for-white-transit-van-and-england-flags-tweet-9874088.html>

interpretations, it seems – and if they can't understand what's going on, they ask and they get an answer. Those answers unpack both the symbolism of specific cultural texts but also the production and circulation of those texts by specific forms of media institutions. In other words, cultural interpretation has gone viral.

It's also gone fast, vast and wild. A lot of work was being done in those few hours between Emma Thornberry posting her tweet and her resignation by various actors to shape the form of that interpretation. A lot of outrage and indignation was expressed, which surely generated more. Tweets were retweeted, other images were added to the flow, usually taken from another context and re-captioned to make reference to the controversy. Jokes were made related to the kids' cartoon show *The Thornberries* among other references to other television characters. So here we have not only very widespread cultural interpretive work going on, we also have work that's quick, creative, irreverent; it was also rather nasty in places. It spread and mutated, as political activists and ordinary folk and jokers and trolls all pitched in. And this is how a great deal of cultural meaning emerges now (Goriunova, 2013; Hartley, 2012). Quick, distributed, dialogic, reflexive, creative: a network of mutating positions, links and streams, deliberative, silly, puzzled and offensive.

Another intriguing aspect to the Thornberry tweet was the way in which a photograph with almost no interpretive text attached to it could generate such debate and controversy. Some tweeters noted that it might not mean anything very much; indeed, as I've already noted, to some tweeters not familiar with the

nuances of the British class system, it was meaningless. In fact, Emma Thornberry herself claimed a certain sort of meaninglessness for the image. In her defence, she said that she took the photo because she'd never seen so many flags draped on one house before – not even in the council estate she'd grown up in. This of course was immediately interpreted by many as rather disingenuous, as well as an attempt to regain some credibility by reminding everyone that wherever she lived now, she certainly hadn't grow up in a mansion. Whatever the specific motivation she had for taking that particular snap and tweeting it, it is definitely the case that very many photographs are posted on many social media sites with very little deliberative thought. Many, of course – including the much-derided selfie – are carefully posed and uploaded. An awful lot though are snapped because something is noticeable and seen as shareable; photographs are posted to be shared, not to become symbolic. These are not 'meaningful' in the way that cultural geography tended to approach its interpretive task.

I think all this suggests that cultural geography faces some challenges right now. Not only is it more obvious that its core skills are actually rather widespread, particularly in relation to mass media and social media; but also, the form of interpretation that might be required of much of that media is changing. Slow and careful analysis of individual cultural texts simply cannot address the contemporary cultural landscape as it is revealed by the Thornberry tweet. I've argued elsewhere that in order to understand this sort of cultural activity, cultural geography needs to develop some different concepts and methodologies (Rose, forthcoming). And it is important that it does so, because, in many places, this is the media through which places and landscapes are being defined now: on

Twitter, and Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram and Pinterest and Tumblr. (For some important starts on this project, see Graham, Zook & Boulton, 2013; Jazeel, 2010; Parr & Davidson, 2008; Sparke, 2013).

But also, perhaps we just need to speed up a bit. Go a bit more casual. Risk a misplaced symbolic reference or two. The interpretive practices of those trained as cultural analysts – whether in cultural geography or cultural studies or cultural sociology – are by definition slow, detailed, theoretically-informed and thoughtful. And I'm not suggesting we should stop doing that. But perhaps there's also a need now to get out there, engage with all that everyday interpretive tumult, in ways that are quick, perhaps a bit dirty, and possibly require less than 140 characters. I blog and I tweet as well as write at length, and I think of these various writing activities as a kind of ecosystem, not always in balance, but as a structure which allows me to think both slowly and on my feet, be both a solo author and a networked poster, about the same things but with a different voice. The distinctive kinds of energy and care that both require feed into each other, for me, in ways that are intellectually productive. So I'm not simply arguing that blogging and tweeting are effective means of 'getting ideas out there'; they are not just an impact pathway (though they may also be that). My participation in the networks that they assume is itself teaching me about how those forms of communication work, by making me perform differently. Perhaps you can see that in this piece (which is both too long and too short to fit my ecosystem, actually).



All this is not only a question of cultural geography keeping up with the times and being able to engage effectively with the media through which political provocations are now shaped. There's also something that I think cultural geography can contribute to these discussions. A lot of the talk about the significance of digital technologies has emphasised, in different ways, the nonhuman agency of digital technologies, whether that's the hardware or the code. Some scholars inspired by Actor Network Theory, among other things, describe cities as 'assemblages' composed of sociotechnical objects which automate the management of urban space (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; Thrift, 2014); post-phenomenological theorists argue that visual digital devices have affective agency; 'material realists' inspired by Stiegler theorise technologies as coequal agents with humans (see Kinsley, 2014); while digital scholars like Manovich (2013) claim that "software takes command". These various literatures all insist on the importance of technologies to the production of cultural work, but none are interested in the reflexive and creative agency of human actants. ANT's efforts to assert the agency of the nonhuman has long been criticised for its lack of interest in the particular agency of the human (Krarup & Blok, 2011). Post-phenomenological theorists turn to neuroscience to justify their claim that digital media connect directly to pre-cognitive neural pathways. And Manovich as well as the 'new material realists' are so keen to emphasise the material affordances of technologies that in their work, as Lenoir (2013, p. 565) points out, "the materiality of the media rather than their content is what matters."

Cultural geography's alignment with the humanities is valuable, at this point, I think (Daniels, 2011). Certainly, cultural geography as a subdiscipline

needs to engage much more fully with the changes being wrought to the cultural articulations of space, place and landscape. The subdiscipline also has something to contribute to the current debates about digital cultural production however: an attentiveness to the complex work, both reflexive and intuitive, that humans do in various contexts in creating cultural meaning (and affect), particularly in relation to place, space and landscape. Now, to deploy 'human' here is hardly straightforward. Amidst claims that digital technologies are themselves changing what it is to be human, which is in part to experience geographies, the notion of the human (already no longer able to claim universal status) needs careful elaboration (Wilson, 2011). Nonetheless, there is a need, I think, not to focus so much on the agency of machines and their code that we neglect the networks of humans within which digital technologies are embedded, and the thoughts, feelings, processes and practices which are then mediated by such technologies. This, then, might be the task to which the subdiscipline should be provoked by some of the changes in the form of contemporary politics and, perhaps, in its own practice: to think again about the different forms of human enabled and disallowed now, at a moment when many of the media for articulating subjectivity have changed significantly.

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