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Provocations of the present: what culture for what geography?

Back in 1989 Peter Jackson's book *Maps of Meaning* set out an agenda for the 'new cultural geography' that was firmly committed to bringing together issues of culture and politics through an engagement between geography and cultural theory. He was one of several authors at the time (such as Cosgrove and Daniels (1988, p. 6-7) who addressed the *asymmetries of power* by taking as their starting point the politics of history, culture, identity, property and belonging as these play out through the *geographical* concerns of place, region, land and landscape. These early cultural geographers insisted that the production of culture, broadly defined in a multitude of everyday practices, objects, events, structures and institutions, was also a production of space. This theorisation formed the basis for addressing a variety of 'issues' which were significant at that conjuncture including race, gender, nation, nature and culture. Today those provocations for culturally attuned spatial thinking have either altered or at least been significantly reframed. At the same time issues of wider public engagement, collaborative arts practice, and new ICT-based social and creative media are changing the terms and terrain on which cultural geography is made and practiced. More than twenty-five years on, it is time to ask: what are the provocations of the present for cultural geography today and how could and should we respond to these provocations?

This collection of eleven short essays reflects on these issues from a variety of different perspectives.¹ This introduction sets the context for the papers by interrogating the terms of our debate: provocations, its locations, culture and geography. We explore what the dynamicity of these terms mean for the politics and practice of cultural geography today. We understand the term ‘provocation’ as an assertion that is both challenging and inviting, one that encourages critical reflection, but which is offered in a spirit of constructive and supportive collaboration. It is this collaboration that is evoked in this special section.

What does it take to be provoked?

The nature of culture and the work that the concept can perform for cultural geography has become increasingly diverse. Dialogues and debates concerning the current state of cultural geography and its future hosted by journals and books (see for instance, *Journal of Cultural Geography* 2004, 2014) both celebrate its diversity and recognise the practical and political implications of different versions of culture now used within cultural geography. The initial impetus and subsequent purpose and intellectual vitality through wider engagement with the political provocations posed by issues such as race, gender, nationalism and national identity, nature and culture have been enriched over the decades by critiques of ocular centrism, the focus on practice, the quotidian, the affective, the emotional, the body, the agency of materials and material processes, the decentering of subjectivity and the development of new participatory methodologies. These shifts have all challenged prior

¹ The collection arises from a one day workshop event held at the Open University on 6th June 2014. We are grateful to the presenters, audience – online and at Milton Keynes - for the discussions that have fed into these responses.

conceptions of culture and cultural practice adding to what was already a complex and contested concept within cultural geography (see Mitchell, 1995). As Domosh (2014, p. 247-8) says these debates 'raise important questions about the nature of cultural geography; both ontological queries (what constitutes "culture" and the "geo") and epistemological ones (how we can know and write about it; "graphy")'. She concludes that addressing such questions can help us 'make the "doing" of cultural geography more meaningful, truthful and just.' By linking conceptions of culture with the practice and purpose of cultural geography, Domosh sets out her own provocation for cultural geography that is sympathetic to the agenda set here. Given this context we ask: what are today's concerns? How have earlier issues morphed, been joined and/or modified by new concerns? Issues such as sustainability, environment, mobility, globalisation, liberalisation, security, sexuality and cultural intolerance have become more prominent political issues while other concerns may have faded away. Hence, the questions that require, indeed, demand reflection have themselves changed over time.

That said, provocations may be more or less self-revealing. Many may be implicit and immanent, deeply embedded in unreflected practice, common sense and quotidian but ultimately situated dispositions towards the world. In this collection, Claire Dwyer raises one such concern – the taken for grantedness of secularism in public spaces that marked a particular period of academic thinking. The political significance of religion reminds us how provocations are dynamic and ever-changing even when they continue to demand pressing responses from cultural geographers. Some potential provocations take time to work up into an issue particularly if they are based around monotonous or routine activities. For example, the food we choose to eat has become politicised and deserving of attention but

this has required effort from celebrities, health ministries and so on. Jackson shows how expressions such as 'consumer choice' around food are often framed to serve specific interests. Other issues may, however, pass off as mundane, everyday (Johnson et al., 2004). How some of these issues become provocations while others are allowed to slip by unnoticed is itself an important political concern. Moreover, the proliferation of new media also both shapes and frames interests and possibilities. Rose asks how we respond to the large number of fleeting messages that pass us by through, for example, digital media. How do we address the problem of volume that the digital poses and what does that mean for how we think about the objects and methods of study in cultural geography?

Equally important is the diminishing space afforded for other concerns or rather the fashioning of 'relevance' in somewhat constricted terms. The narrowing down of research agendas to meet immediate concerns that are newsworthy and politically and economically pressing through instruments like research funding and the impact agenda leave less room for the long term, the incipient/nascent and the waning (such as research contexts raised by DeLyser). Accepting the claim that space and place are central to understanding social and environmental issues, that geography matters (Massey and Allen, 1984), it is clear that attending to the way questions, entities and practices are made to matter, given presence and prominence is important if cultural geography is to continue to be lively, engaged and engaging in changing circumstances (Latour, 2004; Sayer, 2011). So we ask: how does one make something provocative and what role is there for cultural geographers to respond to concerns and make them matter for wider publics? The following sections suggest some of the questions that may be important to address if our provocations are to have currency and continue to engage both within academia and beyond.

Dis/locating provocations

As Datta reminds us the issues that demand these responses are variable just as the tools to address them also shift globally. An attunement to place is crucial but we could also ask whether this matters more for cultural geography than for many other sub-disciplines. Moreover, in many parts of the non-Anglo world there is a reluctance by geographers to engage culture as a geographical concept given the dominance of environmental, political and economic issues at play. Is the demand to recognise culture as significant for geographical research something that should be left to those facing those struggles? How do we form cross-national alliances in order to highlight the relevance of cultural geography?

It is not only the significance of cultural geography as a sub-discipline but also the difference in the objects that might be studied under its rubric that deserves attention. Despite years of discussion on how to address the North-South divide in geography (Mains 2004), to use borders and mobility as a way of doing so and to look at those occupying in-between spaces (Kong, 2004), is cultural geography still parochial (Noxolo)? Or rather how can the attunement to place (which cultural geographers are often quite good at) be used to recognise the complexities of place-making in an interconnected world? What resources do cultural geography's strengths in deep understandings of the local offer in addressing issues in other locations (Madge and Ehsun)? So we ask: how do we balance the humility of limiting the scale of our findings and situated theorising with the political need to reach out

to other places – in our research objects, methods and indeed our understandings of cultural geography as a sub-discipline?

Re/defining culture

What constitutes 'culture' formed a vital topic of debate following, for example, Don Mitchell's intervention in the 1990s and received further impetus with debates focused on the non and indeed more than representational in the early years of the 21st century. Nonetheless, there is little recent sustained debate concerning the ways in which cultural geography understands and deploys concepts of culture and the cultural. This may be because cultural geographers have become content with a sort of pluralism in which a diversity of approaches operates within the discipline semi-autonomously and substantially without engaging with one another. Maybe those concerned with, for example, landscape and nature or emotion and practice, the phenomenological and the representational, thick descriptions and participatory methods, deep history and immediate experience simply agree to disagree. Since the late 1980s cultural geography has certainly attained both a prominence and critical mass of practitioners within the discipline of geography which suggests that overall coherence and shared understanding may be impossible to achieve even if this was thought desirable.

Yet, the questions of local and global that have been raised above and how cultures are understood are crucial at a time when culture is increasingly used as a primary marker of difference and distance between 'them' and 'us'. Culture wars have become a dominant discourse in the public sphere. It is therefore necessary for us to reiterate the limits of

analysis of 'whole culture' which cultural theorists have worked so hard to achieve. Cultural theory from the 1950s onwards and particularly through its analysis of subcultures showed how cultures were produced not only internally as coherent ways of life, but relationally. But when public distrust and media attacks of whole cultures are gaining ground and becoming entrenched, the insights from those periods and the methods of analysis used then to good purpose have been slow to surface. Is this not one of the needs of our time - to dislocate 'culture' as a simple explanatory variable for explaining individuals, groups and places and to embed them in networks of practices?

Other provocations demand different definitions of culture. For Tolia-Kelly, the fight to control the geological stratum which is so necessary to producing our mineralised bodies means that alongside the naturecide which is mourned through terms such as the anthropogenic is culturecide – wholesale destruction of cultures. Does the anthropocene require new conceptualisations of culture and if so, what is this newness? In her case, perhaps holding 'cultures' together offers the potential to make an intervention, to raise the importance of a presence, to highlight threatened absence and to argue for preservation. In short, the meaning of culture itself alters with the nature of the provocation. So we ask: how do we deploy culture as a conceptual and material lens in order to address current provocations – methodologically and ethically? Taking time to reflect on how to conceptualise culture in the context of issues provoked by a rapidly changing world is important and necessary.

Changing geographies

It is not only the wider world and the issues it presents that are changing, but human geography itself is constantly being transformed. The theoretical tools, methodological inclinations and the relationship between human geography and cognate disciplines are altering. Theoretically, emphasis on materiality and the non-human have entered the sphere of spatial thinking. In this collection, Forsyth explores the thoughts and everyday activities of soldiers at war. The diary reflections of soldiers give life to what can often be portrayed as the dry, mechanised world of war which is seemingly devoid of any feeling and emotional conflict. The re-emergence of narratives within objects and tools of war enrich the understanding of the human in conflict situations. As Kinsley critiques, by categorizing studies in technology as non-human or even post-human, there is an assumption that these somehow preclude the human. If the human becomes recast as socio-technical, does this change the human, cultural or spatial relationships?

Methodologically, new media have influenced how the discipline engages with its subject matter and its audiences, questioning conventions of expertise and lay knowledges. Domosh (2014) usefully summarises the unease that cultural geographers feel with the ontology, epistemology and methods that they use to understand culture today. However, the implications of these shifts for cultural geography are still unfolding. Some changes in the media and modalities of politics are quite subtle while others seem more dramatic as, for example, 24-hour globalised rolling news and the impact of social media on shaping debate, action and publics. As Rose reminds us, as culture changes so too should our methods. Digitalisation amplifies issues of volume, reproducibility and creativity. It further problematises already impossible to sustain boundaries between so called 'high art' and 'popular culture' (Kinsley). It also reminds us that the issues that push through and become

objects of concern are always mediated through technics and technology. Does the digital make a difference to culture and to geography and what does this demand from cultural geographers? How and what provocations emerge in a digital age?

The relationship between geography and other disciplines is also continually being readjusted. Geography as a discipline may incorporate theoretical perspectives from other disciplines but we need to remind ourselves that its spatial perspective makes a distinctive contribution to current issues. Hence, critiquing and querying culture from a spatial perspective draws people from other disciplines into the fore. As geography alters, cultural geography too is constantly being transformed. This takes us back to questions of what that means for how we understand culture, and cultural geography. As Peter Jackson said back in 1989:

If cultural geography is to be revitalised, ... , 'it cannot be by the defensive reiteration of well tried and by now well worn formulae. It can only be by an engagement with the contemporary intellectual terrain – not to counter a threat, but to discover an opportunity' (p. 180; Stedman Jones 1983, p. 24).

So we ask: what characterises current relationships between the cultural, the political and the spatial? To what extent are concepts such as place, region and landscape relevant and productive in the light of current provocations? Such concepts do after all each have significant histories invoking specific forms of politics in relation to particular sets of cultural issues. For example, it is possible to argue that developments in digital and information technology remake certain forms of proximity and co-presence, the public and the private, questioning accepted spatial orderings in the process. At the same time, the long-term

physical processes bound into such issues as our understanding of climate change render conventional approaches to historical time scales increasingly problematic (Revill). It requires us to rethink relationships between the cultural, the political and the spatial as these are problematized in current provocations. It also requires us to rethink relationships outside academia. With research councils seeking to broaden creative partnerships, more and more academics find themselves working in interdisciplinary environments, with artists and scientists, and in charity organisations and publicly-funded institutions outside academia. As Revill indicates, these situations present themselves with methodological, theoretical and interpersonal challenges and opportunities that may require a shift in how we 'do' research and how Higher Education appreciates research. For instance, let us consider how to document public engagement initiatives beyond publishing in academic journals: is writing a blog post about a walking tour developed by an academic and a local artist sufficient to demonstrate impact? And if this walking tour is done outside the academic's workload, will it 'count'? These questions may appear beyond the remit of this special issue, however, if geographers strive to care, it is also important to consider how to make our discipline thrive in the current climate in which we operate.

Conclusion and introduction

Cultural geography is in a very different place compared with where Peter Jackson found it in the 1980s. We are not suggesting that there is a 'malaise' requiring revitalisation. Neither are we proposing a single best way forwards, however echoing Jackson's words we do agree with him that defensive reiterations of entrenched positions are not the way to find either common purpose or a useful way forwards. Rather, a collective focus on how cultural

geography might remain a lively place from which to engage with, study and intervene in the world might provide a moment in which the diversity of cultural geography might be profitably mobilised for the future.

This collection of short essays aims to sketch out some of the contours and address the possibilities for a cultural geography which thinks through and responds to the demands of the contemporary moment. The authors contributing to this project were asked to respond to a set of questions and issues within the limits set by approximately 2000 words of text. We recognise that this sets some very challenging constraints in terms of making a sustained and supported academic argument; however we believe the brevity and directness that this invokes is itself in the spirit of a provocation. Over to the authors...

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