

## **Engaging climate change: cultural geography and worldly theory.**

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### **Introduction**

This provocation proposes that cultural geographers should pay more attention to theory as itself as geographically and historically located cultural material. The paper argues this opens up the possibilities for theorising within the context of interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research and that concerned with engagement beyond academia. It adopts the example of climate change to highlight some of the ways theories and concepts both connect and divide in interdisciplinary contexts. It argues for an historical and cultural approach to theory and theorising able to both contextualise different approaches and open up theoretical spaces to informed creative thinking which might help us bridge disciplinary divides.

In this context, theoretical 'worldliness' means recognising the situated nature of knowledge and developing sensitivity to the various ways in which theories circulate and act beyond the familiar territory of our own discipline. As used here, this notion foregrounds the way theories operate across a range of scales from the global and universal to the local and particular. The climatologist Mike Hulme (for example, Hulme 2009) has done much to argue for the importance of culture in understanding climate change issues, engaging publics at a wide variety of levels from the personal to the global. Cultural geographers have certainly taken up this challenge, developing specific concerns with cultures of science and scientific understanding, collaborations with artist practitioners around issues of place making, environmental understandings and public engagement (for example, Daniels and Enfield 2009; Brace and Geoghegan 2010; Miles 2010; Enfield and Morris 2012; Gabrys and Yusoff 2012). If as Hulme argues, sensitivity to cultural specificity is central to effective environmental engagement then theory too must be recognised in its specificity. One might ask, how can we develop theory within such environmental debates which is modest enough to engage specific experience yet imaginative enough to speak creatively and constructively beyond its home territory?

### **Climate change and cultural geographies of theory**

With a few very notable and high profile exceptions it can be argued that human geography is a net importer of theory and that geography does not develop its own theory often enough considering that it is such a strong, vibrant and well established discipline (see Philo and Söderström 2004:106). As Massey (2005) argues in the context of theory drawn from both the human and physical sciences, geographers must disentangle their own particular theoretical interests from the agendas and interests 'provoked by their moments' and 'the debates of which they were a part' (Massey 2005:19). Massey argues that geographers need to recognise that theories are worldly in the sense that they are the products of particular geographically and historically specific sets of social, cultural and political relations. In order to use theory creatively it needs to be critically situated rather than taken at face value.

Attention to situating and historicising theory has a particular relevance to debates about climate change. Academic debate concerning climate change has distinctive ways of problematising the local and the global, in terms of general processes and particularly understandings of process and change. Fleming et al (2006) show how issues of local and global, the specific and the universal have been a constant point of tension in the history and science of weather. Recognising this, Hulme (2008) borrows the concept of cosmopolitanism from Latour in order to provide a theoretical context for the plurality of climate change understandings and discourses operating across a variety of spatial scales. However, the term cosmopolitan is not without its critics, or its historical, cultural and geographical baggage. The term has been roundly critiqued within post colonial theory as valorising the privileged position of highly mobile, educated, urban westerners. Outside the metropolitan heartlands of the developed North the concept not only does not necessarily have much purchase on the world, it might well be both oppressive and reactionary (Jazeel and MacFarlane 2010).

Hulme's use of the term cosmopolitanism highlights important issues raised by for example Edward Said and James Clifford, concerning how theories, concepts move, travel and translate from location to location and time to time. This sense of situated theory still does not seem to work often enough within the north as a driver for theorising. The south it seems needs its situationally specific theory in order to gain purchase on the world, but

northern theory remains all too often 'universal' and universalising in its cultural and geographical claims (Mignolo 2002). It is all too easy for even relatively enlightened theorising specific to issues such as climate change to fall into the trap of devising local solutions to a global problem defined around the theoretical framings of the global north.

### **Interdisciplinarity and engagement**

Within present day cultural geography, issues of engagement and interdisciplinarity are very much on the agenda and it is very likely that these issues will be an increasing focus of attention in the future. Engagement and interdisciplinarity are particularly pressing issues for work on climate change. It is easy to pick out several reasons for this:

Firstly: the need to bring together a wide variety of disciplinary knowledges in order to study climate change in its physical and human complexity.

Secondly: the need to engage, consult, inform and converse with publics in terms of both understanding the nature, trajectory and implications of the changes that might take place and producing viable and publically agreeable futures in the knowledge of change.

For cultural geographers the concept of landscape is both a key interdisciplinary term and one which has considerable potential with regard to the study of climate change in terms of developing more modest and culturally specific theorising (Brace and Geoghegan 2010). But landscape itself is not an unproblematic or uncontested term even within cultural geography where it is variously a set of aesthetic codes and/or practices of living and dwelling. One then needs to add to this usage the very different ways in which the term is used as a group of techniques for planning and design in, for example, landscape architecture, planning and ecology. Using terms such as 'landscape' it is easy for cultural geographers working in interdisciplinary contexts to talk past colleagues from other disciplines even where we appear to be using a shared vocabulary and conceptual framework. Given Hulme's appeal for geographers to understand experiences of climate change as culturally and geographically specific it seems evident that long standing concepts such as 'landscape' like that of more recent ones such as 'cosmopolitanism' might offer universalising false friends unless thought carefully in historically specific ways. Finding ways of understanding these and other concepts as themselves cultural materials with specific

histories and usages is an imperative if cultural geography's expertise is to play a constructive part in debates around climate change.

### **Art engagement and worldly theory**

Increasingly cultural geographers concerned with issues such as climate change are working with practicing artists. In turn artists engaging with social scientists draw on theories, concepts and metaphors from social science and social and cultural theory. Varieties of performance and social process art, have become important ways in which cultural geographers work with artists and others to engage publics with climate science and its consequences, see for example organisations such as *Cape Farewell*, *Tipping Point* or the well known London based arts collective *Platform* (Miles 2010; Hawkins 2013). This interaction is productive and encouraging; however it also provides multiple opportunities for conceptual mismatch. In this context, I found a rather refreshing approach in a recent book by the composer, improviser and champion of democratic forms of music making Sam Richards. Richards discusses how musicians can engage with issues of potentially cataclysmic change posed by the present including that of anthropogenically induced climate change. He says:

Zizek's version of the present as "end times" has inevitably caused controversy. Some critics have responded cautiously to his Slavic gloom, seeing it as apocalypse rather than analytic, and his method of argument – non sequential, irrational, uneven – has also attracted criticism. But these qualities are also those that can make him interesting to artists for whom metaphor, fragile connections can be *prima material*. As fact, and definitely as prediction, it is possible to question his idea of "end times". As both image and text it has tone and texture to recommend it (Richards 2014: 37).

What I admire here is how Richards recognises Zizek's work as flawed, problematic and a contested way of understanding the world, yet at the same time is able to celebrate its situatedness. Most telling of all, Richards is suggesting that the 'flaws' in Zizek's theory, its worldliness, open up the potential of this theory conditionally and contingently in a creative and productive way. Rather than deploying theory in spite of its 'faults' and constrained by its limitations, Richards suggests we might actively cultivate its worldliness and invite its

rough, ambiguous open edges to create spaces engaging productive and creative possibility. To this extent his thinking approximates what Mignolo might call 'plurivesality' understood as a dwelling within the worldliness of theoretical entanglement rather than observing it from a fixed point outside its relationality. Richards' thoughts are both modest and expansive. An ethos of sympathetic elaboration can take Zizek's ideas elsewhere and in the process interest, engage, constitute and potentially enrol new audiences and new publics.

To work constructively with concepts such as 'end times' or indeed, the cosmopolitan or landscape involves taking the cultural geography of theories and concepts seriously in order to work creatively with their limitations and possibilities. In this context, the alternative usages and definitions of terms and concepts with their potential for mismatch and contradiction become themselves poetic resources which engage and animate imaginations. This requires a cultural geography of theory which examines how theory is made, remade and operates in specific circumstances. A cultural geography that explores the capacity of theories and concepts to animate, organise and engage particular constituencies, audiences and publics. From this position it might be possible to produce academic - art practice public engagements which, for example, maximise the opportunities for creative imaginings of climate change futures by recognising theoretical situatedness whilst not defining or foreclosing possibility.

## **Conclusion**

My wish is to see a greater sensitivity to the historical location of theory, concepts and metaphors within cultural geography as rather more than critique in the sense of defining, regularising and regulating meaning. Rather, I would like to see us critically evaluate the cultural-historical geographies of theory, its 'worldliness', as a means of creative and constructive conceptual engagement. This might actually encourage geographers and particularly cultural geographers to do more theorising and perhaps produce more geographical sensitive theory for the discipline, particularly in relation to such pressing issues as anthropogenically induced climate change. In this context, theorisations, concepts and metaphors have to be cast upon the world as points of departure rather than as attempts to control, define and capture. This does not mean a relativistic free for all but a

very careful thinking through of the ways in which the spatio-temporal specificity of particular theories, concepts and metaphors open up possibility, allowing them to resonate and elaborate in and through the world.

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