

The Surprising Sense of Hope

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In 2004 I started a research project called 'Autonomous Geographies,' which was concerned with exploring the everyday lives of anti-capitalist activists. The project was partially inspired by my own experiences as both an academic and an activist. Along with another U.K. geographer, Paul Chatterton, I was interested in activists' experiences of being between disparate worlds: those incorporating the activist arena, and 'the rest' (family, workplace, academia etc.). How do activists accommodate these types of disjunctures and even use them creatively to make new spaces for anti-capitalist ideas and practices?

Unlike my earlier research however, I was now in a permanent faculty position with a steady salary. Accepting that post just a year before appeared to be the decisive point at which I became a capital "A" Academic. At this time I began to struggle internally with whether my job precluded my being the type of activist (and person) I had previously perceived myself to be. Others were also highly critical of my new role. The following is an email from Jake (a pseudonym) in response to my invitation to take part in an advisory panel for the Autonomous Geographies project (February 2006, *emphasis added*);

"No matter how I look at this project - it just smacks of academics on-the-rise from so-called activist backgrounds who are finding a niche for themselves in academic circles with 'activist' kudos. You flaunt a large sum of money, but promise very little 'social change' potential from your proposed uses of this money... *Political transformation [is] a by-product of your careers not the other way around.* Getting involved in a project like Autonomous Geographies looks like it's uncomfortably straddling the two worlds... Simply working within an institution frames your work. The political line will have to go somewhere down the middle because of this... it is actually totally disgusting for me to see [you]... becoming an 'expert on the subject' in the eyes of the academy, and taking a salary for it, yet operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the real work and have made financial/lifestyle sacrifices."

This resonated with heightened criticism from friends with whom I had previously taken non-violent direct action. They felt that I had 'sold out' and was using my activist links to advantage my career rather than push for progressive social change. My negotiation of this apparent disjuncture between activism and academia is, of course, a personal journey, but it also reflects the ongoing calls within geography and the wider academy for academics to be

more 'active'. This paper is a reflection upon that journey and upon what it really means to be *active*.

Deeds Not Words

It was during the course of my Ph.D research that I became radicalised. Visiting protest camps to explore environmental activists' use of the internet changed and inspired me. I saw in those I interviewed a passion, commitment and quest for change that was lacking in academia and formal politics. The use of non-violent direct action not just as a tactic but as a way of life, made change seem possible, immediate, and empowering. Slogans such as, 'If not you then who?' and 'Do-it-Yourself', awakened in me a new sense of urgency and desire for action. At the same time the work of feminist geographers encouraged me to see the power relations inherent in research, and the political potential of more participatory approaches in the design, methodology and production of knowledge. I began to understand that it was not just what topics we explored as academics that was important, but *how* we approached such topics.

This participation gradually consumed my life. I loved the thrill of being subversive, the amazing solidarity of friendships made in protest, and the empowerment of feeling part of something changing. Police confrontations and the incarceration of friends only served to deepen my commitment for environmental and social justice. But as the post-Ph.D prospect of becoming a 'full time' activist drew closer something did not feel right. The more I worked on my thesis, the more I wanted to write. Although it was empowering to campaign, I began to realise my skills were not being best used. I was, frankly, not very creative when it came to ideas for direct action. It seemed that there were other ways I could use my love of writing, research, teaching and photography to good effect. This is beginning to sound like an apology or justification, the old adage of 'those who can't, teach'. It is not meant this way. Ultimately my political beliefs had not changed, but the outlet for my passions had. In December, 2000, I left my friends defending a squat and our free food café *Mushy Peace*, to take up a post-doctoral position in Australia.

This move was a deliberate attempt at a clean break. I wanted to reinvent myself as an academic-activist. In effect I simply tried to do both simultaneously without any real thought as to what I was trying to achieve. The result was sporadic, partial, and doubtless ineffectual. I over committed to too many campaigns, started too many projects and finished very few. Starting as a new lecturer compounded the irreconcilable dualism between activism and academia. Academia appeared to have taken over my life and I resented it. With a high teaching load, long hours and the pressure to publish in top journals my activism diminished. Despite enjoying my new job I felt frustrated, a failure and a sell out. I wanted academia to be more 'active' and drafted several articles arguing such, but the hypocrisy of me making 'calls for action' while I did little, prevented me from publishing any of them.

'Good Work'

It is only in recent years that I have realised how blinkered I was. The notion of what constituted 'activism' had become fixed, bound up in radical environmental rhetoric that direct action was not just the best tactic but a life choice. As a result, anything less felt ineffectual. I had disempowered myself of any potential to use the academy to push for social change, undervalued my own skills and failed to acknowledge the intricacies of political action, including the critical roles of writing and teaching. This ideological dead-end has been

compounded by the plethora of academic articles debating how to make geography relevant, public, activist, moral and far-reaching. The authors of such polemics speak from concern at what constitutes ‘critical’ geography and of the fear of becoming disengaged from their political passions. While they argue for different agendas they have one thing in common, they implore academics to ‘do more’; more writing, more outreach, more activism, more empirical research. This, of course, is just my reading of such works, but as an early career academic the path to becoming a public scholar seemed to involve being superhuman. Being more ‘active’ (in whatever form) remains an addition to, rather than an alteration of, all the other demands of academia. I would argue that we actually all need to do *less*, but do what we do better.

Our work for social justice should include our teaching and our everyday practices. I do not regard myself as anything close to being a ‘Public Scholar’, which is far too grand a term for my small contribution. However, I am attempting to do ‘good work’ in a way that appears to clash with a more conventional view of my role as an academic, but from which I reap rich emotional rewards. Recently I have steered my choice of research topics towards those where there is a real social need (increasingly identified by the groups with whom I work). Moving beyond my obsession with ‘deeds not words’ I am now more determined than ever to fight the anti-intellectualism of parts of society and direct action activism.

The Importance of Methodology

Removing the notion that I am as much an activist as an academic from my research encounters enables me to practice a more ethical methodology. As many have noted, problems of objectification do not disappear simply because we share experiences through participation. The cover of ‘trust me I’m an activist too’ has been used by some to suggest that we can unproblematically straddle multiple worlds simply by dint of our political commitments. This belies our position of privilege and neglects consideration of power relations, reflectivity, and feedback loops. It also does little to temper the critique that academics are “taking a salary for it, yet operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the ‘real work.’ ” Further, it can lead to the belief that participation is research in and of itself, obviating the need to undertake any further rigorous or in-depth analysis of others’ experiences. This kind of participation quickly becomes self-referential.

I still undertake what might be termed ‘action-research,’ and this has implications for my academic practice. In-depth empirical research is time consuming, slow and can be difficult to co-ordinate. It takes time to take on advocacy roles, be accountable to those one is working with, and deliver the different range of ‘outputs’ that are demanded by all involved. Such a methodology has been core to my attempts to do ‘good work’. However, I have been advised (by my academic mentors) to reduce my empirical work and spend more time writing theoretical essays. This approach appears to prioritise abstract over lived experiences and career advancement over good work. It fails to consider the risks of becoming divorced from the subjects of our research. Most worryingly it begins to remove the possibility of doing any ‘action-research’ at all.

Writing and Teaching for Most People

We also need to be critical of our roles as gatekeepers. There has been much discussion of the need to publish our work in more accessible language. Yet I would be a hypocrite if I were to suggest that we should all diversify our outputs; I’m well aware that it’s

only because I published in academic journals in an academic style that I gained a permanent academic position. Until we challenge our collective obsession with publishing in obscure, albeit highly regarded academic journals, graduate students and early-career academics will have little choice but to do the same. However, for those of us in a position of relative comfort (and this is much earlier than many seem to think) we have a responsibility to reprioritise how we write. It is not for others to decipher our work. We could so easily write more in the style through which we teach. This is not simplifying our analysis or undermining our academic seriousness, just enabling more people to understand it. As for format, there seem few good reasons why more of us cannot spend our time writing books and pamphlets, making as much of our material as possible freely available on-line (or available under creative commons licenses), and livening up our work with better use of images.

Moreover, when we consider ‘outputs’ from our work we often neglect the importance of teaching. I view it as one of my most important roles as an academic. Through teaching we can challenge and critically engage with our students and in so doing encourage them to critically engage with the world around them. I have tried to re-orientate my teaching towards task-based learning, and where possible introduce local day trips, based on the belief that by *doing* and *seeing* broader lessons will be learnt than from simply reading a text.

Instilling a belief that students can make changes and that these will make a difference (however small) is core to my teaching. It is not apathy that holds students back, but an inability to articulate and direct their passion while supporting their ideas with sound knowledge. My final-year students now have to put in place an action-plan to reduce their carbon footprint, intervene in campus environmental management, and design material (including a magazine) that will communicate to a policy-orientated audience their thoughts on eco-house building practices. These tasks extend their communication skills while still requiring detailed geographical knowledge. Most importantly, I hope they begin to value their own agency for change and ultimately put such agency into practice. Moreover, I have begun to take my teaching out beyond the university and have readily accepted invitations by campaign groups to run workshops on my research topics.

Walking Your Talk and Creating Space for Passion and Hope

Doreen Massey has suggested that we need to bring “our lived practice more into line with our theorising *about* that practice” (Massey, 2000, 133). On one level that is a relatively simple and enjoyable thing to do. Treating others with respect, demanding equality, and living ethically is not hard if we are reasonably pragmatic about our attempts. I am not suggesting that there is not an urgent need for major social change, rather we need to think more carefully about our roles as people in that change. It is about our priorities and the value we place on good work; this ‘good work’ must be valued above the other trappings of academia, such as career progression and recognition. It is also about focus, perseverance and balance. If I am to ‘be the change I want to see’ and to live now as I wish to in the future then my lived practice must match my theories. This involves not just writing more clearly and in more accessible locations, but spending more time with my community, friends and family. It is about acknowledging that change starts at home. It is about creating space for passion in all of our life endeavours.

I used to believe that work was my passion but I now realise that academia has simply enabled me to follow my passions. This is an important difference. I only want to be an academic if I get to do good, political work. This may mean that I am forever destined to be

caught in-between competing demands, or relegated to the margins of the discipline, or both. There is a messiness in bringing passion to an academic job.

I have been challenged, screamed at, and physically and emotionally drained by my research and teaching. I have made mistakes and been out of my depth. Yet I have also been inspired, warmed by the welcomes I have received, and motivated by those I encountered to carry on. Most of all I have had fun. In the darker times, especially when dealing with those in stark need or who have suffered tremendous loss--such as Indigenous activists in Australia--there has been a surprising sense of hope. The horrors I have listened to have saddened and depressed me to my core. Yet with every story there has been a note of optimism. Always the hope of a way forward, even if we are unsure of the direction the journey will take us in. I want to always be listening, learning, and sharing that hope. For we can all have hope, and we can all use that hope to move forward together.

Suggested Readings:

Massey, D (2000) 'Practising political relevance' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 25, 131-133.

This short piece explores how we as geographers could make a more explicit political intervention with our work.

Solnit, R (2005) *Hope in the Dark: The untold story of people power*. Canongate, Edinburgh, New York.

This book documents the hope and optimism of activism, and the often hidden consequences of taking action to trigger social change. Using a broad variety of examples Solnit argues that grassroots activists actually have great power and seeks to celebrate their many accomplishments.

Nearing, S (2000) *The making of a radical: a political autobiography*. Green Books, Devon.

Nearing reflects on his life as a radical. He became a noted freelance lecturer and writer in the US after being fired from academia for being too radical, and went on to practice autonomous living in Vermont.

Singer, P (2002) *Writings on an ethical life*. Fourth Estate, London.

A selection of writings on ethics and how to put them into practice. Includes reflection by Singer on his own journey through academia.