**Epistemologies of participation, or what do critical human geographers know that's of any use?**

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Declining an invitation to take part in a seminar on 'the practices of sustainability transitions', Pat Borer, an iconic green architect (Mason, 2011), cited his dissatisfaction with participation in a previous seminar in the series. One issue Pat highlighted was academics' use of specialist language, stating that in his presentation: 'I did point out that I rarely get to use 'hegemony' and 'paradigm' on building sites – but that I shall try in future'. The use and misuse of specialist language is clearly something which both academics and practitioners should be aware of, but there is a gap between our acknowledgement of it as a problem and our practice in changing it. We still need to be reflexive about the language we use: explanation is not condescension. Academics have long argued over the necessity (or otherwise) of using complex language in order to understand complex problems. And academia is not alone in using specialist language – there is often a language of a trade or field – or in having a specialist audience. Complex language is a shorthand for communicating without the need for lengthy explanation and that is why the institutional expectation of academia is embedded in the need for theoretically rigourous and complex language publications (see Pain et al., 2010). Simplifying the language we use does not in itself make the knowledge we wish to share more useful. There is a bigger issue here which needs further attention especially in so-called radical geography. Here we explore three issues; types of knowledge, the economics of participation, and the mechanisms of power.

Pat's observation, pertinent in itself, serves to exhume deeper epistemic concerns (and, yes, we do realise the irony of using another term seldom heard on building sites!). By definition practitioners like Pat require knowledges that are useful in practice. In his case, green buildings need to be designed, built, operated and maintained; occupants need to learn behaviours appropriate to optimising performance, achieving comfort, and so on. Academics, on the other hand, are most often looking to critique designs, practices and behaviours. Although the intention of such critiques may be constructive, practitioner knowledges can be threatened or undermined. It seems even those of us who are sympathetic to the concepts still have a long way to go in enacting either the 'reparative' modes of enquiry advocated by Sedgwick (2003) or Connolly's (2008) 'affirmative critique'. Frequently, this is due to how and where results are framed and presented, which might appear to lack respect for the practical and hard-earned knowledge of practitioners. Sticking with the field of sustainability transitions, the examples of critiques of the Transition Town movement by the Trapese Collective and by Mason and Whitehead spring to mind (Trapese Collective, 2008, Mason and Whitehead, 2012, Mason, 2008). While such critiques are intended to be helpful, when framed by radical theory and presented in esoteric language via academic journal articles or political pamphlets, they can undermine the ideologies of social movements (see Hopkins, 2008a, Hopkins, 2008b), breaking the faith needed to move mountains

and effect social change. What we consider constructive critique can be received as damaging criticism.

Arguably, practitioners, from architects to climate activists, are most, though clearly not exclusively, interested in the form of knowledge discussed by Aristotle as *techne*, roughly what we today dub technology (see Flyvbjerg, 2001): Practitioners need to *know how* to do things, and they want to get on with it. Academics, meanwhile, are typically most interested in *episteme*, understanding or 'pure theory, i.e. analytical or scientific knowledge: We want to *know why* things are done. Often, figuring out the how and the why are contested and competing goals, resulting in not only different research aims but in different research outputs. The question thus becomes what are we seeking when we engage with and critique *techne*, particularly from a participatory perspective? The benefits of non-academic participation for academic endeavours is increasingly clear in this new (British) era of 'impact case studies', yet, the benefits to those concerned with *techne* remain ambiguous. As organisers of events promising interaction between academics and practitioners, we note that practitioners are increasingly asking what the benefits to them actually are. They doubt any useful knowledge exchange will occur and instead request payment for their time in sharing their knowledge with us. For many practitioners, the link between technology and economy is alive and direct. As Pat Borer also wrote: 'Patrick Belliew (a brilliant consultant) once said to me whilst we were waiting our turn to give a lecture at some conference or other, "Why on earth do you give talks to architects, are they ever going to give you a job?" Similarly, climate activists might ask of their participation in academic events: 'Are you going to fund us, plan with us, act with us…'

Too often such events involve both academics and practitioners articulating their knowledges, with neither group taking the time to listen, engage or actually interact around commonalities. There is a commodification of time and knowledge which leads to us miss a step in taking the time (and funding the time) to discuss first principles *before* we all get in a room and talk across each other. For academics, the funding needed to attend a seminar or conference often amounts to little more than covering our travel and subsistence costs.  We are paid to do this work. In contrast, for freelance practitioners or activists juggling precarious employment to sustain campaigning activities, time spent (unpaid) at a seminar is potentially income lost. We may have to challenge the institutional arrangements of academic funding programmes.

Otherwise, how can we tailor our academic practices to open up spaces for rewarding mutual learning with practitioners? And how can we avoid the segregation of knowledge outputs into academic and public ghettos without sacrificing either theory – as understanding - or practice? Boellstorff (2010) suggests it can be productive to 'surf binarisms', recognising that the wave surfers ride constrains the direction of travel but does not determine their destination. How can we craft better engagement and dialogue across the practitioner/academic binary? Only when we have addressed such questions can we ask how academics and practitioners might best act together to effect social change.

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Following Flyvbjerg, we might consider Aristotle's 'lost' intellectual virtue of *phronesis* or the art of judgement as bridging gaps between *techne* and *episteme*: 'The principal task for phronetic research is to clarify values, interests, and power relations as a basis for praxis' (Flyvbjerg, 2009). If, together with practitioners, we made this move, we might ask of our knowledge sharing and collaborations:

1. Where are we going?
2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is this development desirable?
4. What, if anything, should we do about it?

Focussing intently on how power works, the aims of phronetic research are to identify and to seek to address injustices. As critical human geographers, our contribution to practice is surely best framed space-relationally, a constructive critique of geographies of responsibility, of care over distance, from the local to the global, and over time (Massey, 2004, Massey, 2009). We should work with practitioners to locate their know-how in socio-ecological framings of justice and thence assess its desirability and what to do about that. In the same vein, Rachel Pain, Mike Kesby and Kye Askins state their commitment to:

'(R)esearch that pursues positive social change in partnership with non-academics, not just as research users whose knowledge and activities are to be impacted, but as collaborators who shape research agendas, and play a role in directing research processes and outcomes…. Along with others oriented by a commitment to social justice in and through research, we have argued that geographical practices can exceed the business of mapping and explaining unjust structures and unequal places' (Pain et al., 2010).

Pain et al are critical of an academic trend to value research with international impacts at the expense of local and contextual outcomes (Pain et al., 2010). Critical human Geographers, among other academics, are generally aware of this 'catch'; we understand something about situated and context-dependent knowledges, but frequently find ourselves complicit in professional circumstances that prioritise some forms of knowledge over others, and ignore the economic precariousness of those we wish to work with.

We began with the observation that practitioners require knowledges that are not only comprehensible but also useful. To confound simplistic binaries, however, we also recall situations when practitioners have welcomed the opportunity afforded by participation in academic events to step back from the 'useful' and reflect on their practice. But we also need to feed into praxis, not just feed off it. The most useful contribution geographers can make in this regard is, we suggest, to engage with practitioners in *phronetic* analyses of socio-technical systems, seeking out the workings of power and resulting injustices and thence striving to transform such outcomes. The contribution of geography to practice, then, may be best conceived as political and ethical via a consciously space-relational analysis of *techne* carried out with practitioners. We frequently presume common moral and political ground with research collaborators and

users (recognizing that these roles are not always synonymous), or we ignore the lack of it. On the sustainability transitions of our example, we know that not even the academic participants in a seminar agree on what sustainability is. So, why is it that, when we wish to understand the mechanisms of transition we somehow ignore – or at least do not bring out into the open for discussion - the entanglements of power in everyday practices along with the possible production or reproduction of injustices?

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