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British social and cultural geography: beyond turns and dualisms?

Rachel Pain and Cathy Bailey

Rachel Pain

Department of Geography and International Centre for Urban and Regional
Regeneration Studies
University of Durham
Science Site
Durham DH1 3LE
UK
Tel +44 (0)191 374 4736
Fax +44 (0)191 374 2456
email rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk

Cathy Bailey

Institute for Health Research
Lancaster University
Alexandra Square
Lancaster LA1 4YT
Tel +44 (0)1524 593701
Fax +44 (0)1524 592401
email c.bailey@lancaster.ac.uk

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Rachel Pain and Cathy Bailey

1. Introduction

We've sympathised with ourselves while working on this review, given the volume and breadth of British social and cultural geography, but it has also crossed our minds that at least we can begin without the standard apology for Anglo-American bias (an issue we return to at the end of the paper). This is not to say that it is always easy to place work as British when researchers work co-nationally, across sub-disciplines and within a broader international and human geography context. Our focus is very selective, but none of the current interests we consider are solely British.

Perhaps one enduring characteristic of British social and cultural geographers, though, is our self-absorption. The last four years, to which we are largely restricting this review, have seen several commentaries by British geographers grappling with the problems of social and cultural geography and seeking to establish its identities (Gregson 2003; Jackson 2003; Pain 2003; Peach 2002; Smith 2000). A symposium held by the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group in 2003¹ also took stock of the direction of social and cultural geography, key issues and challenges for the future, and its engagement with other disciplines. While it sometimes feels that there is more talk than action, there are signs of any 'crisis' having been averted, or at least, being responded to in constructive ways. There are palpable shifts that are attempting to rise to various challenges with some interesting theoretical and methodological perspectives, some of which we go on to outline. There is considerable diversity within these discussions; but a key theme has been the call to 'rematerialise' social and cultural geography in different ways.

Our focus is on this response to the cultural turn and the related re-emergence of 'the social'. Although these are generic debates in human geography, they are 'turns' that have been most intensely felt in social and cultural geography, and in British work in particular². In the next section we examine the push to 'rematerialise', firstly in work concerned with investigating and addressing social inequality and injustice, some of

which is employing critical action research approaches, and secondly in work that engages with spatialised and politicised performances and practices of everyday life. Though these two directions are sometimes viewed in dualistic terms, even as polar opposites, we suggest they share more common ground than meets the eye. We highlight the potential of recent work on emotional geographies, which sits somewhere between the two, and is bringing together a concern with relevance and social policy with new theoretical and epistemological directions. In the third section, we examine issues of knowledge production as they affect British social and cultural geography, including the relationship between social and cultural geography and the wider discipline, debates around pedagogy, Anglo-American bias and institutional constraints. We emphasise the significant and unwelcome implications of the Research Assessment Exercise for all of these debates in Britain.

2. From the material to the immaterial and back again

For a while there were concerns that a geography seduced by textuality and deconstruction would snuff out ‘the social’ altogether (see Gregson 1995; Peach 2002). However, growing concerns about theory for theory’s sake, and talk about ‘difference’, ‘otherness’ and ‘giving voice to minorities’ that only seems to take place from within the narrow confines of the academe rather than being part of a bedrock of substantive politics and social analysis (Hamnett 2003a) have led to a critique of the cultural turn and the re-emergence of ‘the social’ (see Cloke 2002; Gregson 2003; Philo 2000; Smith 2000). With each ‘turn’ there has been a tendency to dualistic thinking, to the extent that cultural geographers sometimes felt unfairly caricatured as ‘united in pointless cultural playfulness’ (Nash 2003, 645). But there is an undeniable move away from discourse, ideology and text, and calls to ‘rematerialise’ social and cultural geography on several fronts (Jackson 2000; Gregson 2003) or at least strike a finer balance between the material and the immaterial (Lees 2002). We review two significant strands to this rematerialisation below.

Inequality and action

First, while it has been a long-standing concern in social geography, there has been a resurgence of research on aspects of social inequality and well-being. Here ‘rematerialising’ means refocusing attention on the material realities and lived experiences of oppression and injustice. Social and cultural geographers have made

some important recent contributions by applying spatial analysis and theory to social problems and policies³.

Significant work on welfare, poverty, social polarization and exclusion has continued (see the work of Dorling and Rees 2003, Gregory et al 2001; Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Smith forthcoming; and see Mohan 2000, 2002). Research on recent education policies and patterns emphasises the role of parental choice and school segregation (Taylor and Gorard 2001), and attempts by community leaders to defend religious identities and religious ways of life through the construction and maintenance of socio-spatial education boundaries (Valins 2003). A number of interesting papers on 'food deserts' and their relationship to social exclusion and health inequalities appear in a special issue edited by Wrigley (2002). Work on housing markets has recently included a continuing interest in the impact of gentrification on socio-spatial stratification (Butler 2003; Cameron 2003), and critique of the links between policies on housing and health (Easterlow and Smith 2003). Within health geography itself there is further evidence that policy critique is alive and well, for example in a critical 'new public health' (Brown and Duncan 2002) and work on spatial economies and cultures of caring (see Milligan 2000; Robson 2000; and Parr 2003 for a review). Theories of health and place have undergone a socio-cultural turn in recent years (Kearns and Moon 2002), applied in highly relevant ways in work such as Davidson's (2000) on agoraphobia, gender and the body. The field of crime continues to be surprisingly small in British social and cultural geography, given its current profile as a social issue, with many interesting avenues going unexplored (see the interchange between Fyfe, Herbert and Smith in 2003). Studies of violence are few and far between (though see Warrington 2001). There is more work on fear of crime, some with more emphasis on cultural construction, perceptions and discourses (e.g. Valentine and Holloway 2001; Yarwood and Gardner 2000), some on policy and planning (Fyfe and Bannister 2001), some on the material realities, spatialities and politics of fear and its consequences (Shirlow and Pain 2003).

The rich vein of research on spaces of identity formation and exclusion also continues, having broadened out to include normative, hegemonic identities and, to some extent, activism. The focus of much recent work on race and ethnicity has been on whiteness (Bonnett 2000) and anti-racist geographies (Nash 2003). Heterosexuality

is gradually receiving more attention as an object of study (see Hubbard 2000), and work on masculinity is burgeoning: see McDowell's (2000) work on young white working-class males' identity, and Little's (2002) excellent book exploring relationships between masculinity, sexuality, nature and the rural. Geographies of youth and children continue to expand, marked by the establishment of the international journal *Children's Geographies*. Recent work ranges from discourses and images of childhood (Nicholson 2001) to lived experiences of public spaces (Matthews et al 2001). The special issue edited by Imrie (2001) on the spatialities of disability demonstrates the quality of recent work in this field, though he argues that there is room for multiple and more diverse understandings. Other areas, including old age (Pain et al 2000) and ethnosectarian identities (Bairner and Shirlow forthcoming), have received relatively little attention. Perspectives on multiple identity are central to all this work (see Bondi and Rose 2003), in particular connecting geographies of gender and race: for example Dwyer's work on young British muslim women (Dwyer 2000), and Lloyd Evans and Bowlby (2000) on experiences of racialised gendering for Pakistani migrants to Britain. Vincent and Warf's (2002) reflections on diasporic Jewish identity invoke theories of the spatialisation of consciousness and subjectivity. Meanwhile Crang (2003a) provides a timely challenge to any complacency about the gender composition of British geographers, suggesting it should concern us all that 'the situation is still so dire at the start of the 21st century' (Crang 2003a: 1715).

Much of this latter work has continued to use mainstream 'ethical' qualitative methods; much of the former has explicit policy relevance. However, the refocusing of attention on social inequality has increasingly been accompanied by calls to incorporate activism and forms of policy and action research which are truly more democratic (see Fuller and Kitchin forthcoming). Empirical and theoretical development of these issues is underway, and the issue is being championed in many areas of work using various frameworks (see Pain 2003 for a review). To some extent this new imperative of action is helping to undo resilient divides between quantitative 'science' and 'ad hoc qualitative impressionism' (Hamnett 2003b, 165). So, for example, there is wider acceptance that Geographical Information Systems have a role in documenting and challenging oppression, especially where those being mapped have a meaningful input (e.g. Matthews et al 2003). Somewhat later than elsewhere, in parallel with slowness in the policy sphere, participatory and collaborative action

research approaches making use of a range of verbal, visual and arts techniques are emerging in British social and cultural geography (see Kesby 2000; Kesby et al forthcoming; and Pain in preparation). The debate is not without injections of realism; Dorling and Shaw (2002) argue that relevance is difficult to attain or measure, and often stifled by institutional constraints that have a particular impact in Britain (which we return to in our conclusion).

Related debates have been taking place in postcolonialist geographies. While having developed primarily as a perspective to challenge global inequalities and geographers' role in sustaining them, the impact of postcolonialism on social and cultural geography has largely been in terms of perspectives and theories. Like the wider field of cultural geography, it has been criticised for being overly focused on text and discourse (McEwan 2003b, Nash 2002), and an agenda is growing for more explicit practical and political ties with the lived experiences and material realities of global inequality (McEwan 2002). For Nash (2002, 228), postcolonial geographies offer great potential to work 'between the critical engagement with a grand narrative of colonialism, and the political implications of complex, untidy, differentiated and ambiguous local stories'. As she and McEwan (2003a) demonstrate, effective methodological strategies are emerging to achieve this meeting of theory and practice.

Performances and practices

The second strand to 'rematerialising' British social and cultural geography that we have chosen to focus on is one which, to many, seems at odds with the first. This body of work has been engaged with embodiment, performance and practices. In particular, non-representational theory dismisses the constructivist approaches that have often characterised the work reviewed above. As one of the first to reject the work of representation in cultural geography, Thrift (1996) argued for greater emphasis on materiality and lived experience, to be accessed by attention to practices. Dewsbury et al's (2002) influential editorial develops such ideas about regaining the material. Arguing that one cannot adequately represent or explain the world, just 'present' it, they explain that:

‘Our understanding of non-representational theory is that it is characterized by a firm belief in the actuality of representation, not representations as masks, gazes, reflections, veils, dreams, ideologies, . . . [but rather] as ‘doings’. . . [a move away from] ‘*posited meaning*’ towards ‘*material compositions and conduct*’ of representations’

Dewsbury et al (2002, 438).

Here, the material may be reclaimed through explorations of bodies, performances and practices; not through uncovering ‘orders, mechanisms, structures and processes’ (Dewsbury et al 2002: 437) but rather through a more sensuous ‘doing’. Their plea is for ‘empirical moments’, invocations and iterations, that may be seen as an ‘ongoing exposition of the social and material world’ (Dewsbury et al 2002, 438). Just as the re-emergent concern with social inequality (above) is being accompanied by new forms of action research, one exciting – if far less established - development here is research practices that engage with performative and embodied knowledges. For Crang (2002, 2003) these are avenues that might address the now highly problematised issues of positionality and representation in qualitative research. Predicting a renaissance of methods based on performance (and coincidentally echoing some of the key tenets of participatory action research practice), Thrift suggests:

‘It becomes possible to use knowledge of performance to produce other means of presenting research [. . .] to analyse how and why certain spaces seem to have such powerful effects, and to co-produce certain kinds of project in ways which genuinely even up the terms of trade between researcher and researched’

(Thrift 2002: 296).

Both Crang (2003) and Thrift (2002, 296) extol making inroads into a bodily ‘logic of sense’, moving beyond the dominance of the visual to include sound, smell and touch.

For example, in the special issue edited by Dewsbury et al., McCormack (2002) weaves ‘expressive and theoretical spaces’ (469) of an interest in rhythm, avoiding ‘representational ethics’ that inevitably miss the beat or ‘becoming seduced by an

aesthetics of weightless escape' (469). Wylie (2002) offers a narrative of the ascent of Glastonbury Tor in England that gives a sense of the material: the Tor's visibility, its cultural histories, and the visceral reality of the inter-twinings of self and landscape. Harrison (2002) draws on the work of Wittgenstein to suggest that the 'performative', that which captures distinctly geographical understandings of the present, taking place, making sense, might replace both idealism and the Cartesian ideals of certainty. Finally, Rose (2002) draws on Bataille's notion of 'labyrinth' to offer an alternative understanding of how landscape works as both a visual and a material space, to consider 'the landscape's capacity to be called forth through practice' (455).

Elsewhere, in a paper on history and land use heritage, Crouch and Parker (2003) contend that more attention needs to be paid to the micro-politics of 'doing', as 'through practice [individuals] engage, discover, open, habitually practice and enact, reassure, become, create' (398). Others extol a more 'embodied' sense of the relationship between nature/society/culture; such as Milbourne's (2003) socio-cultural critique of hunting with dogs and Philo et al's (2003) critique of the representational politics of rural mental health.

The challenges of non-representational theory and non-verbal research methodologies have not been widely taken up. Nor are they without criticism; for example Nash (2000) has voiced concerns about the rejection of representation and text, about the implications for ethnographic method, and about the 'new' forms of politics being espoused:

'The energy spent in finding ways to express the inexpressible [...] seems to imply a new (or maybe old) division of labour separating academics who think (especially about not thinking or the non cognitive) and those 'ordinary people' out there who just act'

(Nash 2000, 662).

For us, questions also remain about the outcomes of this sort of research, an issue thrown into sharp relief by the rapid diversification of action research approaches elsewhere. So, we would suggest, some mutual recognition might be helpful here.

While the two ‘rematerialisation’ turns we have discussed often appear to be travelling in different directions, there is more common ground than meets the eye. This is evocative of British social and cultural geography over the last decade and a half; the two perspectives would benefit from constructive dialogue. In both can be found an interest in ‘rematerialising’ geography; both advocate new methods and tactics for accessing and investigating the socio-spatial world, particularly those working with media and senses that are relatively new to human geography; both seek greater democracy in research relations while exploring ways of addressing the problematised issues of representation, positionality and constructivism; and both espouse the need for new forms of politics. As Massey (2000) has suggested, ‘practising political relevance’ may involve constructivist and non-constructivist approaches.

Emotional geographies

One fruitful perspective that is beginning to indicate how some of these apparently disparate concerns might come together is recent work on emotional geographies. It sits somewhere between the two, and in it can be found concerns with wedding theory, practice and action. In a landmark editorial, Anderson and Smith identify:

‘Our concern...that as the policy-relevant movement increasingly distances itself from the ostensibly narcissistic extremes of cultural studies, a concept at the heart of the latter, yet (in our view) crucial to the former, will fall by the wayside’

Anderson and Smith (2001, 7).

The ways in which ‘the human world is constructed and lived through the emotions’, the affective domain, is central to lived experiences of social inequality and to performances of action, and is highly policy relevant. However because emotions are a political and highly gendered issue, and they involve self-reflection which still makes many geographers squeamish, they have been absent from academic and policy analysis (see also Nash 1998; Panelli et al 2003; Widdowfield 2000). Nonetheless, two special issues edited by Davidson and Bondi (forthcoming) and Davidson and Milligan (forthcoming) build upon Anderson and Smith’s agenda. Valentine (2003) reviews the impact of ethics and emotions in health and disability research, though

there are few reflective examples as yet; researchers such as Widdowfield (2000) and Laurier and Parr (1998) stand out for their examination of the implications of emotions for research methodologies and experiences. As Anderson and Smith (2001) identify, emotional geographies offer great possibilities for non-constructivist approaches to research – those focused on being and doing, participation and performance – and for researching the world through feelings.

Such work represents just one meeting point for differences which are still rife within and between social and cultural geography in Britain⁴; the ‘extremes’ of the sub-discipline, and the methodological and political avenues they are currently exploring, may not be so disunited. Echoing an earlier criticism, the impenetrability of language in some parts of cultural geography still sometimes isolates and creates hostility to interesting ideas.

3. Knowledge production: angsts and isms

This concern with rematerialising, prevalent in recent British work, has run parallel with wider concerns about knowledge production in geography. Again these are generic issues, but they come into sharp focus here because of the recent histories of social and cultural geography and its concerns.

British geography has played its part in the wider ‘spatial turn’ in the social sciences (Thrift 2002). The fruits of such turns may be that geography is noted by outsiders to be ‘worldly, catholic and resourceful’ (Whatmore 2003), and geographers publish in other disciplines (such as cultural studies, sociology, political studies, public health), though arguably we borrow more than we give back (Ferguson 2003). The influence of social and cultural geography on the wider discipline is also evident. One example is the rich seam of work around consumption/commodity ‘cultures’, with geographers breathing new spatial life into commodities that have been neglected as ‘anthropological artifacts’ or ‘economic cargoes’ (Bridge and Smith 2003). For example, Dwyer and Jackson (2003) explore ‘ethnic’ design clothing companies, how they ‘sell’ corporate social responsibility, ‘ethical trading’ and ‘ethnic meanings’ and how consumers interact with such meanings. Leslie and Reimer (2003) use the notion of ‘commodity chain’ to trace how masculinist modernism in the production phase of home furniture becomes ambivalent and more complex as the commodity moves

through different parts of the chain. Hughes (2000, 2001) examines how value and knowledge are distributed between producer and consumer, in the global, cut-flower trade. Others, by exploring commodities as diverse as coffee and elephants, explore human-nonhuman relations and the artificial boundaries between the two (Whatmore and Thorne 2000). While this body of work is not without its difficulties (not least trying to transcend boundaries of the 'economic' and the 'cultural'), it does encourage geographers and others to question 'the mutual constitutions of culture-economy, production-consumption, and practice-politics in the everyday, intimate, and lived worlds of the commodity' (Bridge and Smith 2003, 266).

For teaching, there have been critiques that recent developments in social and cultural geography have been less positive, in particular that the cultural turn has encouraged academic neo-conservatism in pedagogy (Barnett 1998; Castree 1999). As Heyman (2001) has countered, however, critical pedagogy has emerged too; there are moves, albeit for a minority, to rematerialise teaching, to encourage more inclusive, emancipatory and democratic practices inside and outside the classroom, and to foster habits and skills of participatory democracy and critical citizenship (in particular see Cook (2000) on 'border pedagogy').

While British geographers continue to pay attention to inequality and difference, our external gaze seeking other geographies and wider knowledges has been accompanied by an internal gaze on the underbelly of knowledge production. Humanness, cultures and knowledges are intricately bound; knowledge producers become entangled in this and cannot speak with authority (Sibley 2003). British geographers are grappling with the strong critique that we rarely question our own privileged positioning (Desbiens 2002; Minca 2000), and promote geographical discourse examining situated contexts yet only in one language (Agnew 2000). Thus strategies for opening out Anglo-American geography and breaking down its dominance are beginning to be seen, whether through international contact and knowledge exchange, or efforts to open up publishing (see Kitchin and Fuller 2003).

What may be less apparent to those outside British geography are the increasing disparities within. Ironically, just as social and cultural geographers are beginning to utilise approaches, theories and methods which actively challenge knowledge

hierarchies, a mesh of institutional constraints is further delimiting who is a legitimate knowledge producer in the discipline. The main mechanism is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) by which the narrowly defined ‘quality’ of British geography departments is assessed in competitive funding rounds. Fierce critiques have been made of its impact on intellectual freedom and innovative scholarship (Short 2002; Sidaway 1997), on teaching (Jenkins 1995) and on the trajectories of young researchers (Shelton et al 2001); and that it militates against positive engagement with communities and policy-making (Castree and Sparke 2000). It has concentrated power among a small number of departments, primarily in ‘old’ universities which are already the most advantaged, and among a small number of individuals who are prominent on assessment panels, editorial boards and funding agency committees and whose research interests are therefore most likely to be reproduced (Short 2002). The increasing importance of citation indices by which only certain journals ‘count’ in the RAE, alongside the ‘black box’ of the publishing process (Kitchin and Fuller 2003) reinforces the over-representation of certain Anglo-American scholars and particular ideas. It is now at some professional and personal cost that individuals find time for activities outside playing this increasingly tyrannical game. A worrying outcome for British social and cultural geographers is that many of their efforts as discussed in this review – bridging theory and action, pursuing relevance, and actively challenging inequality inside and outside the academy – arguably face increasing obstacles.

Notes

1. 'Envisioning Geographies: Social and Cultural Perspectives', organised by the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group of the RGS/IBG, London, June 2003
2. Our view is that, within the English-speaking world, social and cultural geographers in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada have been more successful at wedding theory and action in their work.
3. While more of this work falls in what is traditionally 'social' geography, a session on 'Cultural Geography at the Coalface' organised by Sara McKian at the RGS/IBG conference in London, September 2003, showcased many examples of policy-engaged work in cultural geography.
4. There are other potential meeting points – we have focused here on one which seems particularly significant at the time of writing.

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