

Too Many Others?

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This is a short paper reflecting on an aspect of contemporary human geography which I find exciting and appealing, but with which I have recently become increasingly troubled. This concerns the increasing interest shown by human geographers in studying the lives, worlds and geographies of 'others'.

Gricers and their geographies

Let me begin with a newspaper article from *The Guardian* (7 April, 1996) entitled 'Railway buffs who do it in the buff', and subtitled 'Activist trainspotters go over the wire'. This article discusses the activities of people identified as 'radical trainspotters', also known as 'gricers', whose efforts in pursuit of their first love (railway rolling stock) go some way beyond just standing on platforms in anoraks with notebooks. To quote from the article:

Gricers do not collect numbers, they take photographs, usually of trains in depots after stealthily negotiating the obstacles of security guards and barbed wire in broad daylight. Once inside, dropping trousers or, even better, getting completely naked and climbing inside the cab and being photographed is the accepted way of proving they made it, as well as showing their disdain for those whose job it is to prevent them (Gill, 1996, p7).

The ambition is hence to catch a glimpse of, even literally to embrace, British Rail (BR) rolling stock which is out of commission (waiting to be scrapped) or which is only used occasionally (late at night along freight or private lines). This practice often involves trespassing on BR property, 'dobbing in' (to use the gricers' parlance), which inevitably brings them into conflict with new government views and legislation on trespass as a criminal offence:

Gricers see it as a challenge to visit well-secured depots, such as the test tracks where nuclear accidents and other incidents are rehearsed. They appreciate the implications of being caught on Ministry of Defence land but are more concerned about the destruction of their beloved engines: 'It's a waste of a good train' (*ibid*).

The fight here is against the state, and more particularly against the 'corporate enemy' in the shape of the new companies springing up with railway privatisation, and it is also a struggle in line with 'New Age' resistance to forces determining precisely where people can and cannot go in modern Britain. As Jesse, a gricer, says: 'I don't like being told where I can and can't go' (in *ibid*). For a few folk it appears as if gricing has very much become a way of life - a 'reason for living', says Jesse - and the article stresses how a 'culture' of sorts attaches to the gricers (mainly young men in their late-20s):

With other groups of lads it might be beer or rock bands: with these it happens to be trains. Gricing, like any self-respecting underground movement, does have its own music scene. Jesse and Bambi have named their band Eastfield, after a depot. Another band, Blyth Power, is named after a train. Their drummer is infamous for his percussive imitations of types of locomotives ... There is even a gricing fanzine, *Dob In*, in which great gricing moments are relived and photos of gricers in compromising positions with dirty engines are displayed (*ibid*).

Reading this article inspired me to think about a new research project: one which would tackle the geographies of gricers and gricing, perhaps as a moment when transport geography meets the new social-cultural geography (a possibility for introducing the notion of 'other transport geographies': see also Revill, 1991). I could see it all laid out before me:

- (i) maybe a 'trendy' bit, bringing in ideas from Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and others (eg. Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1993) about the intimate connections between humans, complete with their biological bodies, and a plethora of technologies and machines of all sorts (thus prompting thoughts about the unity of gricer and locomotive as 'actant' or 'cyborg').
- (ii) lots of conceptual nods to the likes of Tim Cresswell and David Sibley (eg. Cresswell, 1996; Sibley, 1995) on how to think about and study the phenomena of 'matter out of place' in the human world, with due reference to the transgressing of socio-spatial boundaries (as when gricers enter the out-of-bounds depots).
- (iii) conducting more grounded research on the 'cultural worlds' of gricers and gricing, reconstructing from in-depth interviews and maybe even ethnographic work gricer senses of space, place and environment, and maybe also offering deconstructive readings of the fanzine (*Dob In*) or of the lyrics sung by gricer bands.
- (iv) thinking about the material social geographies of this movement, asking about who are the gricers, where do they come from, their socio-economic *milieux*; and asking too about the genderings inherent in gricing, and about the cross-cuttings here with other axes of social difference (to do with class, age, ethnicity, sexuality).

I could envisage lots of possible angles, then, for creating a detailed geography of gricers and gricing which would be rich in theoretical resonances. And I was excited by the potential for researching an oppositional social grouping which deliberately resists the spatial practices (of fixing, bounding, excluding) routinely deployed by the forces of both state and capital.

Other geographies

This whole new research project could then be framed by the challenge of taking seriously 'other geographies': with the ambition of inquiring into the spaces and places - real, imagined and constructed - of social groupings who, in one way or another, stand outside of the 'mainstream' of Western society thanks to not looking 'right', not doing the 'right' kinds of things, not occupying the 'right' kinds of places, and so on. It surely can be argued that one of the most healthy disciplinary developments of the last decade or so has indeed resided here: in the explicit realisation that the human subjects researched by human geographers are *not* all the same, are not all the white, male, middle-class, middle-aged, healthy, able-bodied and 'straight' individuals who commonly set the terms of hegemonic mainstream society, but are in fact fragmented along a near-infinity of axes to do with race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, political affiliation, religious persuasion, and the like. The human-geographical texts that we now write are therefore much more

alert to all of these differences, these 'othernesses', and many researchers *do* begin to focus explicitly on the spaces and places associated with different fragments of the whole, giving wonderful geographies of women, the workers, the underclass, people of colour, children, the elderly, the disabled, the sick, gays, lesbians and bisexuals. There are numerous co-ordinates in this emerging alertness to 'other geographies', but for me special reference should always be made to the path-breaking work of David Sibley, whose text *Outsiders in Urban Societies* (Sibley, 1981) explored in detail the spaces and places (as structured from without and as experienced from within) of 'outsider' groupings such as gypsies, [1] nomads and other travellers. In the process Sibley mixed together a range of perspectives from sociology and anthropology, thinking carefully about the roles of boundaries, exclusions and closures in shaping the geographies of gypsies and other mobile peoples, and in addition he included a dash of anarchism by critiquing the ordering propensities of mainstream society's 'rulers' which are so alien to the lives of many outsiders. In passing, it is perhaps worth noting the remarkable parallels between what Sibley has done in this respect and the work on Irish travellers ('tinkers') conducted by someone well-known in the Cork Geography department, Jim Mac Laughlin, whose careful accounts of Irish traveller history, anti-traveller racism and associated geographies of exclusion and closure are themselves also inspired from various sociological, anthropological and even anarchistic sources (eg. Mac Laughlin, 1986, 1994, 1995).

I personally celebrate the deconstructing of human geography into a plethora of many and different other human geographies, and in many ways this is, quite simply, the point that I have reached in my own thinking on such issues. Indeed, I have expressly followed this line of flight from a narrower human geography of old to one which today relishes an openness to other geographies. This is very obviously the case in my review article on rural geography entitled 'Neglected rural geographies' (Philo, 1992a), for instance, and I have just written a short piece in which I consider the marginal geographies of (chiefly) nineteenth-century tin-miners and their families in England's West Country (Philo, 1998). More significantly, though, this attentiveness to groupings who might be constructed as 'others' (or 'outsiders') early became a key reference point for my research on the geographies of those people suffering from mental health problems who become labelled as 'mad', 'lunatic', 'insane' or 'mentally ill' (Parr and Philo, 1995; Philo, 1992b). I do find incredible satisfaction in thinking about how we might pursue this sensitivity to other geographies, then, particularly in the substantive sense of tracking 'other others' - groupings beyond the obvious categories of otherness such as women, people of colour and the 'underclass' - to bring into the picture those even more obscure or subtle fragments of humanity which can be teased out and subjected to critical human-geographical attention. Hence, in my own studies I have striven to move beyond researching the more obvious categories of otherness to consider, say, rural Shakers (Philo, 1997), West Country tinnerns and maybe gricerns as well, and I guess that my concern for animals as an 'other' social grouping might be seen as marking a particularly extreme move in this connection (Philo, 1995).

A tourism of the other?

But I do also now start to recognise some unease with such an obsessive pursuit of other geographies, and the basic point of this short paper is to highlight and

to ponder upon such unease. A first remark is that the kind of position which I reach risks becoming a rather *uncritical* 'tourism of the other', to echo the phrase 'gender tourism' which Liz Bondi and Mona Domosh (1992), amongst others, have used to refer to male academics flitting in and out of studying the lives of women. Indeed, just as John Leighly (1937) complained many years ago about regional geographers simply rushing around the world encountering, studying and writing about regions (collecting region or country stickers on their luggage), with no real thought about why they were doing what they did, so it might be objected that some social-cultural geographers today (myself included) are doing much the same: simply cruising around the world encountering, studying and writing about 'others', with no real thought about why we might be doing what we do.

The critique might then be voiced more stridently, suggesting that the colonial mentality which seemingly allowed regional geographers to go region-collecting, never questioning their right to travel the globe, accessing all of its regions and (as it were) appropriating them to be represented in written treatises, is not wholly absent from the activities of social-cultural geographers looking around for new 'others' to paste up in the academic album. There is arguably a not entirely dissimilar arrogance: a failure to consider whether the researcher really has (or should have) the right to identify, isolate and depict all of these 'other others'. What real intellectual benefits accrue, beyond satisfying a Western academic taste for the 'exotic', even if an 'exotic other' close to home? What political benefits accrue, and in what sense are these 'other others' empowered or their lives materially improved by the process? And of course there is a further line of criticism - one rehearsed in the geographical literature by Gillian Rose (1993), Pam Shurmer-Smith (with Hannam, 1994) and others - that sees problems in the very binary and hierarchical structure of inquiries in this mode. Positioning the researcher as 'the same' to another who is 'other', and thereby positioning the researcher as a 'same' who, notwithstanding all the caveats, still seems to be regarded as superior, brighter, more knowing and of course more powerful: all of this merely serves to be complicit in the 'othering' of marginal and minority peoples who are duly relegated to 'other spaces' (intellectual, cultural, political, material, moral) conceptually and practically set apart from the spaces of the hegemonic mainstream.

A consultable record of othernesses

So, given these critical thoughts to which I am gradually becoming alert, how might I respond? How might I justify a continuing interest in "other others", a continuing concern to inquire into the social-cultural fragments, to continue searching for new fragments to bring into the picture? I have a strong sense that there is a justification to be found, and I am also concerned that a reaction against researching 'other others' could end up being counter-productive if it ends up once again narrowing the optic of human geography in terms of the people brought under study. I do not feel able to offer a fully developed argument here, but I do find myself returning in this context to the reasoning put forward by Clifford Geertz (and probably too by other anthropologists who, presumably, have often had to wrestle with the justification for their interest in other cultures in (very) other places). To put it simply, Geertz wishes to legitimate a cultural or interpretative anthropology designed to offer 'thick descriptions' of particular peoples, their cultural worlds and the 'local

knowledges' through which these worlds are interpreted and represented; and he clearly supposes that this should be an ongoing process of continually excavating such local cultures, the excitement of which is that these local cultures are 'other' to the those familiar to the researcher (even if found on his or her own doorstep). (Note that various scholars, including geographers such as Miles Richardson, Peter Jackson and Susan Smith, have effectively adopted a Geertzian position on conducting ethnographies of peoples both far away and nearby: see Jackson and Smith, 1984; Richardson, 1981.) Geertz justifies his position here by talking about wanting to enlarge the consultable record of human differences and possibilities; to ensure that a bland sameness is never allowed to become hegemonic because, through his anthropological stories, othernesses of all sorts, shapes and sizes are ceaselessly allowed to proliferate in what is talked about. These are not exactly Geertz's words, more Geertz read through the lens of Marcus Doel (eg. Doel, 1994), but what Geertz himself writes is something to the effect of urging cultural anthropologists to remain ever responsive to what can be learned about 'others, guarding other sheep in other valleys' (Geertz, 1973, p.30).

For me, this admittedly simple line of reasoning is utterly compelling, and I believe that - given a suitable geographical gloss about tracking other senses of space, place, environment and landscape - we have here a persuasive formula for insisting upon a continuing search for, a continuing careful probing of, other geographies (even those of peoples who we do not like). Now, there is still a danger of creating an anthropology or a human geography which is akin to stamp-collecting, particularly if it is accompanied by a museum curator's mentality (of collecting, preserving, labelling and stuffing), which then returns us to the criticisms voiced earlier. But such a danger can be circumvented by ensuring that the other geographies which we research are *not* seen as static, fixed, dying, frozen apart from the broader global cross-flow of economies, politics, societies and cultures; and, moreover, we should even accord such a respect to other geographies which we do know to be past (now to be the stuff of history rather than of the present). Such a view ends up scrambling the othernesses under scrutiny, since we must cease seeing them as somehow pure, coherent and locked into a domain of *absolute* otherness; and instead we must think more in terms of *relative* otherness, of varying types and degrees of otherness, of many different othernesses cross-cutting with both sameness and 'other othernesses', in a fashion that arguably elaborates upon the Geertzian line while retaining its basic logic (and here I am inspired by the ideas in Duncan and Sharp, 1993).

The notion of ever-expanding the consultable record of 'other geographies' can perhaps remain, then, although further questions immediately intrude to do with the character of this consultable record. If it is to have any meaning, does it indeed have to be something amounting to more than just the overall dispersion of relevant papers, reports, notes, videos and other documentary sources throughout all of the books, journals, libraries, archives and web-sites of the world? Is it something that should be more systematically collected, arranged and extended, and, if so, who is to have the responsibility for and the power over it? Who is to be in charge of archiving the documents, cataloguing them, indexing them, judging who should have access to them, and so on? And where is the record to be kept: as something physically warehoused somewhere, as something 'democratically' available across global web-space, as a plethora of sites and sources accessible both in person and by electronic means, or what? These may seem like entirely hypothetical questions, and yet in a

sense the overall consultable record *is* already a reality (a mass of detailed material is already produced and is 'out there' somewhere), and so we do need to be thinking in the present about an *already* existing politics of information bound up in decisions to do with storing, retrieving, accessing and using this multitudinous data on the lives, worlds and geographies of others. Whatever answers might be forthcoming to such teasing questions, it is nonetheless the case, so I would suggest, that the simple Geertzian notions rehearsed here do offer some justification for continuing to seek out the wonderful, strange, maybe disturbing geographies of folks such as the gricers.

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Note

- [1] I should note that Sibley is perfectly aware of difficulties attached to using the term 'gypsy', given the extent to which it has become imbued with racist meanings which lump together, and duly stereotype in a prejudicial fashion, many different kinds of 'traveller' people. Similar difficulties obviously attach to terms such as 'tinker', commonly used in the Irish case.

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