Public geographies II – Being organic

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I Introduction

Duncan: To be honest in writing the first report on the 'rise' of public geographies, I struggled with the need to convey that public geographies are *simultaneously* 'part of the geographical furniture, a 'field' maybe, but not *just* a 'field', a tradition, what we *all* do, from 'where we are at' (of course)....' *and* 'tied… very firmly to the *present*, to developments occurring *now* or at least in very recent years across the social sciences, and to the future … becoming, not fully formed, different in some way from what has come before, promising'[1]. In part this related to their apparent diversity and breadth; with how these geographies are clearly 'multi-faceted, multiple, plural, engaged, engaging, amorphous, unbounded, and uncertain'.

However, the work of Michael Burawoy, developments in public sociology, and similar turns and trends across the social sciences, hinted at a number of points of potential clarity and agreement. First, the perceived value of such conversations has been encouraged by the perception of a widening gap between a Left-oriented, 'critical' academy and increasingly neoliberal and uncritical 'real world'. Second, and to fill this gap, at the heart of public geographies is the basic notion of being in conversation with publics (however defined and formed). Third, these conversations are both literal and metaphorical, encapsulating a wide range of possible approaches and styles of engagement, and underpinned by strategic thinking concerning how to ensure that they are 'overt, visible, authenticating, recognising, unrestrained, communicative, engaging, and necessarily outreaching'.

Finally, two main sub-forms of public geographies can be identified. The first of these is the 'traditional' form - written academic outputs that reach beyond the usual ivory tower audiences, e.g. newspaper articles, where the academic acts as catalyst in engendering (public) debate primarily *through and in their traditionally perceived role as 'an academic'*. In the second, less visible form, the academic as catalyst is *involved*, *connected*, *active*, and it is this more *organic* form and style of approach to public geographical work that is the focus of the second of these reports.

But most forms of public geographies are rarely categorisable as one or the other of the terms used above; rather than there being an either/or binary of style and form, what and how people 'do' public geographies is less clear cut, more liminal, and positioned somewhere more fluid on a continuum of engagement, with any

engagement with public(s) shifting about between the stereotype ivory tower knowledge producer distanced from the 'real world' and those who inhabit it, and the 'academic as public intellectual, activist, wearer of many hats…', teetering on the brink of going native and becoming a civilian.

Towards this latter end of the spectrum of engagement, though, there are different expectations of, and openness towards, a broader range of mechanisms of engagement in public geographical endeavour, with more emphasis on alternative media, strategies and styles that are seen to encourage and facilitate the more interactive, unrestrained, engaging conversations considered to underlie more organic approaches.   The examples that follow show there is much more to geographical engagements with publics than is visible, recognised, and valued by the mainstream vehicles and avenues of dissemination, calculation and accountancy (RAE, citation indexes, impact rankings…) that form part of the way in which academic selves, identities, and the knowledge they produce are constructed, framed and disciplined on a daily basis.

Kye: Tragically, that's as far as Duncan got in writing this article, dying unexpectedly in October 2008[2]. I inherited his work computer hard drive, on which the above words were filed, and public geographies related stuff from his office - piles of academic papers, pamphlets, flyers, DIY handbooks, community calendars, maps, printouts of webpages, newspapers clippings, handwritten notes … and a humorous object or two! I'm also fortunate to have spent many hours discussing both the first report and this one with him, as well as public geographies more broadly over a couple of years. So I have been sitting with these articles and memories, thinking about what he wanted to say. As he struggled to do the topic justice, so I struggle to do him justice, and I'm feeling a little more than unqualified to be writing this. Nevertheless, as Duncan used to say, here we go.

II Making geographies visible: into the ether

First and foremost, Duncan intended this report to be 'a shameless plug' for 'all that great stuff out there!'[3]. Through examples, he meant to highlight the diverse ways in which organic public geographies play out – to explore varied and 'unorthodox' engagements across academic-public spheres and what such engagements might mean for geography/ers. He believed that the internet is an increasingly important space for these activities, specifically *enabling conversations*, and intended to focus on how the phenomenal expansion of the world wide web has generated a range of

opportunities for (public) geographers. Websites, blogs, wikis, file-sharing sites, open access/source publishing, podcasting, videocasting, discussion forums, social networking sites and video-blogs … a whole range of 'tools in the public geographies arsenal'.

There are a range of potential positives to such a brave new (virtual) world, not least the democratization of knowledge production. And there are … thousands of examples! Box 1 (websites) and Box 2 (blogs/wikis) are compiled from addresses on the printouts Duncan had accumulated[4] … many of which he'd gleaned from a trawl of e-mail forum lists (CritGeog, LeftGeog, Pygywg[4], Antipode), themselves virtual forums for geography-related debate. Pertinently, there has been discussion on these lists regarding the utility/rigour/relevance of the 'blogosphere', some of which I draw on here (e.g. go to www.jiscmail.ac.uk, Critical Geography Forum, and search for 'Enthusiasm blog' in the message line).

To what extent do web-based activities constitute public geographies, though? Duncan problematized any simple binary between organic and traditional forms of public geographies in his introduction, and we'd had discussions about how there is an increasing diversity of 'dissemination' within that end of the scale considered more 'traditional', specifically through the internet. Box 3 has examples of academic endeavours that have been uploaded onto the web, but 'crucially, the degree, meaningfulness and quality of interaction, and the extent to which anyone might want to listen to what academics/geographers have to say, *and respond*' (Fuller 2008: 5, orig. emphasis) is critical here. These developments could partly be considered traditional dissemination via new technology, (here's my work, you can read/access it), but their intention can also be about *being open to* public interventions, being 'engagement-friendly', e.g. the RGS-IBG attempt for wider participation in its review process (Sir Prof. Conway's talk; see Box 3). At the least, Duncan believed that the internet makes academics more visible and accountable to people outside academia, rare when we publish in journals!

Indeed, many academics now have a personal website, wiki and/or blog to not only enable free access to written documents, but to open up their research interests/current projects to geographers, to the wider public and also to research participants. Critical and feminist geographers, in particular, are making their work relevant to audiences beyond academia in this way, and PhD students are increasingly turning to blogs to try out ideas, engage in debate, and think through

their research. Importantly, such sites can be useful sources for policy-makers; moreover, the internet offers the potential to generate all sorts of connections to future collaborators, sources of data, research projects, and debates going on in other disciplines – the latter is arguably arguably more accessible over the internet than through disciplinary-specific journals.

There are connected arguments here regarding making seminars/conferences/ events more (publically) accessible. Recent examples I've experienced include the first seminar in a series regarding 'public geographies'[5], in which talks/sessions were videoed and footage made available on-line, specifically to *prompt wider discussion* on a related wiki (see http://engaginggeography.wordpress.com/2-seminars/i-how-did-that-happen/), and an event in which speakers were audio-recorded and this material used as a catalyst for *virtual debate* (see http://multiculturality.wordpress.com/podcasts/), but people who run distance-learning courses around the world will have much more to say about this (see DiBiase, 2000; Martin & Treves, 2007). The central point here is that multiplicitous conversations rather than one-way dissemination are key to 'being organic'.

And 'public engagement' is often emphasised in 'impact of research' requirements of grant funding - with research councils' own websites posting research 'outcomes'. First, we need to think carefully about what exactly we mean/understand by these terms: dissemination of results to the public is not the same as involving publics in research dissemination, whether using the internet or not; while economic impact is very different from social change (cf. recent debate on CritGeog forum). Second, we need to be aware of exploiting our own labour here: it is almost expected that you will set-up an associated web-based something as part of research activity *in addition to* academic papers/chapters/conference presentations, which may be setting dangerous precedents for ourselves/future academics, requiring that we do this work on top of other pressures in a neoliberal academy demanding increasing productivity (Fuller & Askins, 2007; Bauder & Engel Di-Mauro, 2008). Thus 'website work' needs to be taken seriously alongside other audited/auditable fare, and this report adds to calls for 'public engagement' more broadly to be given validity within the quantifying of our roles.

We should also bring critical perspectives to bear regarding equality. We need to problematise the processes through which web-based interactions may be exclusionary and the extent to which the broader points raised in this report translate

across different geographies: far from everyone has access to a computer/internet connection, and there are issues around technical skill, literacy and physical ability. There are a range of social and environmental matters to consider, too, before we all 'turn on and tune in' to the dazzling potential of the internet for public geographies. Not least resource consumption and energy use issues, alongside questions of power relations – e.g. who owns/controls websites and the software that enables them? Utilising Rupert Murdoch's Facebook surely has parallel dilemmas for plenty of people who campaigned against the publisher Elsevier Reed's involvement in the arms trade (see Chatterton, 2008). The web references in boxes aren't edited from my own ethical/political perspective: 'veryspatial' appear to be sponsored by ESRI, who appear to have sponsored a 'Homeland Security Summit' summer 2009 in the USA, and I'm wondering their role in military mapping …?

There are ethical concerns, too, around safeguarding those involved in public geographies with us, especially children. As with any research, organic public geographies/ers need to carefully consider relationships with and responsibilities towards others in virtual space. This has long been a topic of academic consideration in the computer science, medical ethics, behavioural science and psychology fields (Morris, 1999; Hakken, 2000.) While geographers have been interrogating the virtual world *as* space and place for a while (eg. Crang et al., 1999; Kendall, 2002; Adams, 2005), we've spent less time on the ethics of engagement through such spaces (though see http://www.becta.org.uk/, a public resource regarding ethics/issues/good practice for online working with schools/schoolchildren).

Websites of all kinds, of course, should be carefully appraised regarding the reliability and rigour of material found there: the social construction of bloggers as opinionated individuals not restricted by academic concerns around research has some validity. The point is we need to retain criticality. Duncan, by his own admission, spent many hours per week 'surfing the T'interweb', and in writing this report I got properly sucked into the ether trail. I re-emerged after a week's 'research', somewhat dazed by the huge diversity and wealth of information. Such immersion in material isn't only the realm of the internet, we can get lost following trails of ideas in (paper) journals, too, but the effortless click onto the next page/next site/picture which then takes you on another thread … exacerbates such pursuit**.** Indeed, internet addiction is an emergent issue (and research topic - see Jay Sosa's entry on www.savageminds**,** 31 May 2009) to be aware and wary of.

The world wide web, then, surely has a central role in the 'new', organic, emergent, public geographies – both in making them visible and in making them happen. Debates about the internet are increasing for academics more broadly, not least the effects that open access journals may have on the academy, which links to several points raised above. There is a need to carefully reflect upon the virtual world as an enabling space, and what it may offer to or detract from public engagements around geographical issues. But organic public geographies also involve conversations with publics in the real as well as virtual sense, to which we now turn.

III Doing public geographies: process and praxis

Actual/real/physical … however you choose to define it, much of the organic public geographies Duncan attested to in his first report involve being together with others, 'working with area-based or single interest groups, in which the process itself might be the outcome' (Ward, 2006: 499). And it's the *being process-orientated* that lend organic public geographies to not only utilising the internet, but also to certain kinds of geographical endeavour. Duncan had made notes suggesting 'key themes' which fall into this emphasis on process: participatory (action) research; psychogeography; academic activism; teaching (we discussed widening participation initiatives and free universities alongside the 'usual' forms); and collaboration between geographers and the art world (examples of all are included in Boxes 1 and 2).

There is, importantly, the proviso that much organic public geography spans more than one theme, given that they are constituted through process, and I would add that any areas of work/geography may be publically engaged – e.g. see Caroline Bressey's archival research regarding the presence of black communities in Victorian era Britain (http://www.danacentre.org.uk/events/2007/10/16/162) and Divya Tolia-Kelly's recent exhibition exploring the cultural heritage of the North of England (http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/news/exhibition-to-explore-multicultural-hadrian-s-wall/).

Moreover, Duncan would often say that he 'didn't set out to be a public geographer'; that his own personal journey to public geographies followed an emergent path, through the doing of certain kinds of geography, networking and other activities, which led him to being involved in the Birmingham Public Geographies Working Group symposium outlined in his first report. And this ties in with a point that became central in the first of the 'public geographies' seminar series mentioned earlier[5] (see http://engaginggeography.wordpress.com/). Titled *'How did that happen?'*, the aim

was to explore occur: rather than 'what is public geography?', our question was 'how do geographers engage with publics?' What emerged was that often/in many cases, it is a *serendipitous process*. Indeed, Susan Buckingham used the term 'serendipity' in her opening talk as part of a panel discussion, and it was taken up and reflected upon by the other speakers as well as in wider debate across the participants … pivotal to many experiences/doings/journeys were somewhat 'lucky' happenstances, chance meetings, fortunate connections; unplanned moments leading to new paths, new involvements in or with organisations, communities, individuals, projects, research, actions, and/or teaching of a public flavour, as broadly defined in Duncan's first report.

There are two points to make here. The first is that not only public geographies result from serendipity or unplanned moments: all manner of academic/geographical enquiry can and does emerge from fortunate encounters, though these are rarely documented, and omitted from official dissemination/reports. What organic public geographies can/should do is foreground the necessarily unforeseeable processes involved *as a positive element of this work*, and argue for the value of such methodology/activity. Currently, it is difficult to find funding, time or space for 'unstructured' research of this nature: we need to build our case and argue that it has its own logic/structure, full of potential.

The second, and complicating the first, is that at some level, different degrees of agency are evident. Serendipity involves a 'being in the right place at the right time' but there is also the *'putting oneself in the right place at the right time'*. Serendipity might mean 'fortune' or 'chance', but there is maybe more to 'making the connections' (Hawkins *et al.*, forthcoming) than that. Just one case in point: at the 2009 annual RGS-IBG conference, the Participatory Geographies Working Group[4] hosted sessions outside formal conference space in a local community centre, open (and free) to everyone, in an effort to enable more participatory, public debate. All manner of conversations between all manner of people ensued, sparking potential new collaborations, connections and research.

This 'spatiality of serendipity' links to a well developed literature around praxis, positionality and 'relevance' regarding our place as geographers (covered in Duncan's first report) - having a certain politics, a 'geography of responsibility' (Massey, 2004) or 'caring geography' (Lawson, 2009), tying in our work/role as academics to our duty as citizens at a range of scales. It also connects to emerging

debates regarding the emotionality of motivation – we take up serendipitous encounters, follow up chance opportunities, because it *feels* right (Askins, 2009; Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Cope, 2008; Wright, 2008). For me, doing organic public geographies is grounded both in specific ways of thinking/seeing the world, alongside having *a will to* public geographies, an emotional connection to (feeling passionate about?) the subjects/issues/relationships involved (see Mitchell, 2008).

IV Onwards: beyond 'public geographies'?

I hope that this report has been useful in raising a few points/issues, and putting together in one place a range of potentially stimulating and relevant sites/blogs/wikis to explore. There are some amazing and inspiring projects, activities, reflections out there, many of them thoughtful, critical and (arguably) examples of emerging, organic public geographies. Which brings me to a final thought here: what about those people doing geography without us? Non-academics going around, as Duncan put it, 'a bunch of brilliant amateurs', doing projects/research/community engagement at the grassroots level, specifically geographically focussed … *Public, yes, but is it public geography?*

Knowledge production debates loom large here. If we take seriously the notion of academics as co-learners *together with publics* (Freire, 1972; Fals Borda, 2001; Giroux, 2005) in a two-way process - or rather, along multiple trajectories – then surely when academics are taken out of the equation, people retain the ability to think geographically, think critically about geographical matters, learn, and act upon their learning. This would suggest that organic public geographies happen regardless of academic involvement … In Duncan's words, 'that opens up a can of worms!', and is perhaps an uncomfortable issue. Given the potentially all-encompassing scope of geography, long recognised as a central paradox of our discipline (Johnston, 1984), there are a vast array of projects which could claim to be organic public geographies. What then is our role?

For a variety of reasons, there isn't going to be a third report to address this question, so I leave it hanging there. But I'm certain that debate around doing public geographies will continue … organically.

Notes

Acknowledgements

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