Responses to a Communifesto

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Welcoming a Communifesto
I am confronted by crisis, angst and disappointment.

I feel for distant colleagues in the land of my birth,
    embattled and staunch,
    needing this statement of solidarity and inspiration.

I am saddened by the loss that weeps out of its bounded rationality.
Its ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ borne, no doubt,
by years of individualisation and corporatisation.

Things are not so different here in the ‘other’ Antipode.
Neoliberalisms reach even into this fish’s mouth\textsuperscript{ii},
wrenching out the guts of those compelled
to prove their significance
and to compete for ever-decreasing resources.

Yet, here, the impacts wrought within our walls
have also been inflected by deeper seismic shifts\textsuperscript{iii}.

I hear of colleagues struggling
to teach in tents and
to defend their ‘studies’ as neoliberal agendas deem them
irrelevant
to projects of reconstruction.

Courageous,
they deal with repetitive aftershocks and chaos
as their cherished city and academia
lie in ruins.

And outside of our no-longer ivory towers,
too many, predominantly Maori and/or poor, children
attend school without food.

Hungry, unable to learn…\textsuperscript{iv}

Surrounded by such instability and injustice,
I wonder
where to put my energy,
how to find more energy?

I, like Doreen Massey, believe we are the struggle\textsuperscript{v}.
This informs my scholarship.
Yet when re-reading this Communifesto
I feel overwhelmed
and put it
aside.

A few days later
and the anniversary of Gandhi’s birth.
I return to my task with a
renewed conviction.

“Be the change you wish to see”, he reportedly saidvi.
So I persevere with this response
not sure where it will lead;
what or whom it might affect.

Re-engaging this Communifesto
I find myself again
   Unexpectedly
resisting what I thought I wanted.
Resisting what I have,
   in part,
   helped to createvii.

While empathetic, I am cautious.

I am tired.

I wonder if I am alone.
While collaboratively espousing, the ‘communiversity’ and ‘acadavism’,
I may be far too comfortable in my middle-class and middle-age.

After all, I’ve been in the job nearly 20 years.
I’m practically institutionalized.

Or (worse still, and perhaps because of this institutionalization),
I may have become too good a neoliberal subject:
   Enjoying the guilty pleasures and illusion of self-importance that
   long work-hours,
   never-ending demands
   and international citations paradoxically produce.

Reading the evidence of peer esteem in my ‘Evidence Portfolio’
may have gone to my head.

I don’t want to disrupt the fantasy of the coherent academic self
that speaks out from its pages.

Or perhaps (and more likely), this Communifesto
is a painful reminder that my work/life is
out of balance.

Giving birth to a PhD and two boys while meeting performance-targets has been demanding.

Most of my labour, birthing and activist, doesn’t ‘count’ (yet)\(^x\).

Except to those beyond these walls.

I don’t have much energy left over for the kinds of ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ advocated for here;

Even if I need them.

I put this Communifesto aside
Again.

A few more days later and more loss: Neil Smith is dead.

Web-based messages express sadness, gratitude, and memories of a geographer Warm, generous and inspiring\(^xi\).

I wonder how he would have responded to this Communifesto.

With an erudite analysis?

Or perhaps a song?
Re-reading ‘A Communifesto’
a call for relationality speaks louder to me now,

alongside loss.

Not replacing it,
But sketching more compassionate cartographies,

more affective encounters;
more playful possibilities

for academic life.

Fuller subjectivities perhaps?

I reflect on those who’ve taken time
to craft this Communifesto,
and on others whose contributions have

enabled these responses.
I feel appreciation and connection.

I am not alone.

I am more hopeful\textsuperscript{xii}.

\textbf{Endnotes}

\textsuperscript{i} I am a native of the West Midlands and have lived and worked outside of the United Kingdom since 1990, returning periodically for conferences and research leave.

\textsuperscript{ii} In the understanding of many Maori (Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand), the North Island (Aotearoa) of the country is a fish that was hooked up and brought above sea level by the ancestor Maui. Wellington or Te Whanganui a Tara, where I live and work has a
harbour, which is said to represent the mouth of that fish (Te Ara, Encyclopedia of New Zealand www.teara.govt.nz [last accessed 2 October 2012]).

iii In 2010 and 2011, Christchurch in the South Island was hit by large earthquakes and many aftershocks. Canterbury University and the city as a whole were badly affected. For a very insightful analysis of the personal, professional and public implications of this disaster, see Cupples J (2012) Boundary crossing and new striations: When disaster hits a neoliberalising campus. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 37(3):337-341


vi There is some debate about whether Mahatmah Gandhi did utter this phrase. See http://www.compassionatespirit.com/Be-the-Change.htm (last accessed 2 October 2012).

vii Since Rachel Pain, Mike Kesby and myself fielded the first call for papers for a session on participatory geographies at the Glasgow IGU in 2004, I have contributed remotely to the emergence of the Participatory Geographies Research Group (formerly Working Group), most recently offering some reflections on authorship and referencing associated with this Communifesto.


ix Earlier this year, I participated in the third iteration of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF), which required all academics to write a coherent narrative of their research labour over the previous six-year period. This narrative was titled an ‘Evidence Portfolio’ and consisted of entries under three categories: research outputs; peer esteem; and contributions to the research environment. Julie Cupples and Eric Pawson discuss the some of the disciplining effects of this exercise as well as some of the potentially radical effects it opens up - Cupples J and Pawson E (2012) Giving an account of oneself: The PBRF and the neoliberal university. New Zealand Geographer 68:14-23
