

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Intervention Symposium

Did We Accomplish the Revolution in Geographic Thought?

The Need For Radical Geographical *Action*

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We owe a great deal to those academics who radically enlivened the discipline in the 1970s. The idea that capitalism is a structural process that underpins most of the contemporary problems the world faces is accepted by many geographers and without, often Marxist and Anarchist, geographers working to make visible the consequences of capitalism many of us would not be doing the research or teaching in the way that we do now. Indeed, surely one of the biggest achievements in recent decades in the discipline of geography has been the continued emphasis on analytically explaining, across scales, why the world is the way it is *as a way* to identify solutions and alternatives.

If we look back at the last few decades in the discipline there have been many necessary, important and productive shifts. Marxism helped deliver a new geographical paradigm and shifted what questions we ask of the world, but did it really provide the alternatives it promised? Geography is now full of critiques of capitalism. We have diversified the perspectives being used, the voices being included and heard, and this has allowed us to identify different “objective social conditions” that require our attention. Through feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory and critical race studies we are now asking different questions (Bondi 1990).

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Yet geographers still seem reluctant to commit to implementing the solutions or alternatives we identify. We are great at pinpointing the problems in society and their causes. We are good at finding, evaluating and critiquing alternatives (the plethora of papers on food justice, housing commons and post-capitalism in *Antipode* attest to that). Yet few geographers take the final step and turn radical geographical thought into action.

This requires more than critiquing capitalism, neoliberalism and colonialism. It also requires more than celebrating those projects that do things differently. While it is important to explore how many people are already building and living post-capitalist lives, and there is a need for geographers to critically engage with the many prefigurative projects that are sidestepping the state and capitalism to develop optimistic and creative alternatives, there is considerably more work to be done.

How can geographers' work help these projects? How does geographical theory not just help *us* understand the meaning and possibilities of these alternative endeavours but enable and support different forms of action? I remain concerned that geographers translate interesting, inspirational and promising alternatives into critical language-heavy journal articles that we might all find very interesting within the discipline, but which are of little use to the people building a different society (Pickerill 2008). We should not rely on others to translate our work and its intents into action. We should be concerned with, and discussing, geographic *action* much more. What are we doing to make the world a better place, not just what we are thinking?

If we start with asking what do we need to *do*, not just what do we need to *know*, then our research questions and outputs shift to different starting points (Pain et al. 2011). Of course knowing and doing are intractably linked and as academics we need robust knowledge to inform our actions. But geographical thought alone is not enough. Many of us are driven by curiosity and are trained to identify knowledge gaps to fill. We are encouraged to write theoretically abstract work for research assessment exercises and to ride the wave of the latest trend, or political and popular outrage, to secure grant funding. But what is the ultimate intent of our work? While doubtless some of us work for glory, money or security, many

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geographers claim to be politically, socially and/or justice driven. How do these values shape our research? What research needs to be done? What is missing from our research? What do you hope your research achieves?

Answering this question seems particularly troublesome and difficult and that is why we must keep asking it of ourselves. It is not enough to critique society or others' efforts to change it. Why amass all this knowledge and not put it into action? Harvey, and many others, articulated over 40 years ago that how we define what the big problems are in the world is intimately shaped by those with power. How then do geographers define what the big problems are? Whose voices are we listening to? Despite great progress in opening up geographical thought to diverse perspectives, much of our scholarship is still crafted by white men in the Global North. We need to move away from believing that one theoretical framework will explain all, be open to different perspectives, and continue to self-reflect on how often we speak on behalf of others rather than working *with* them as equals. We still subordinate and oppress non-Western knowledges, we still fail to treat equally, for example, indigenous understandings of the world. We still need to value "other" knowledges and ways of thinking about and interrogating the world so that we can take better-informed action. Recent work by the Bawaka Country et al. (2016) explores Indigenous Australian understandings of place and space. Valuing this knowledge enables geographers to actively support Indigenous claims to land, sacred places, and resources. For example, the way that certain landscapes and biodiversity is valued, especially by environmental groups in Australia, prioritises those places deemed unique or special according to Western science and settler concepts of landscape beauty. This approach often ignores areas which are culturally rich and of heritage value according to Indigenous knowledge. Starting from a point of valuing Indigenous understandings of place means valuing these different places, even if that value might not be immediately obvious or understandable. It would require inherently valuing Indigenous knowledge and respecting that non-Indigenous knowledge might remain partial and incomplete: this shift in thought then facilitates different forms of action.

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This action is important not just for our research, but crucially in our daily practices. Navigating and sustaining oneself in academia is increasingly complex and challenging. We need to pay attention to the current crises in academia and care for one another (Lawson 2009). We have radically changing funding streams, increased casualization of academic staff, increased fees for students and increased monitoring, and narrow measures of value being applied to our work (Smith 2000). Sometimes we focus so much on the big picture “out there” in the world that we fail to enact any kind of revolution within academia. To do so would require changing not just how we write but how we act within the academy—to enact solidarity with colleagues, to support future generations of geographers, and to *act for* each other.

What this action looks like will of course be different for each person (Mitchell 2011). It might never be ultimately achievable, but it is the intent here that is important—the intent to turn knowledge into action. At its most basic it requires geographers to personally act in line with their academic arguments, be that minimising environmental destruction, rejecting oppression of all forms, supporting social justice campaigns, etc. Beyond “walking the talk” our research should intend to change practices, support those involved in prefigurative projects, or help build new solutions. In our workplaces it requires attuning to how colleagues are feeling, how staff are hired and on what contracts, and identifying possibilities to resist the devaluing of our research, teaching and time.

This call for action is not new. In geography we have long had debates about relevance, utility, purpose and impact. We have accomplished a particular ideological revolution in geographic thought in the last 40 years. But now we need to enable more diverse, plural and inclusive forms of geographic action. We still allow others to discipline us in what the academy should look like and what it is for. We still restrict our imaginations of what a geographer should be and how we act. Now is the time to more assertively turn radical geographical knowledge into radical geographical action.

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