

Excavating the futures of geographical thought and praxis

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Over the past century, much has been written about the history of geographical thought (ANDRADE, 1977; DOMOSH, 1991; LIVINGSTONE, 1992; MOREIRA, 2008; NAYAK AND JEFFREY, 2011; GOMES, 2012; CRESSWELL, 2013). The basic premise of such scholarship – whether in the form of monumental, antiquarian, or critical histories of the discipline – is that an understanding of the past is crucial to grasping the geographies of the present.³ As a geographer trained in historical methods, I am broadly sympathetic to such a view, because it is indeed difficult to make sense of the contemporary moment without some knowledge of the circuitous routes and diverse trajectories that have shaped the “stories-so-far” of how we’ve gotten to where we’re at (MASSEY, 2005: 24).

The stories we tell ourselves and others about the history of geographical thought also play a crucial role in the process of academic subject-formation – that is, in constituting a collective “we” – in geography. This is in large part why narrating the history of geography as a discipline is not only an intellectual exercise but also a political praxis, since the historical narratives we draw upon to constitute our discipline are themselves directly implicated in *reproducing* the academic subject positions that they appear to merely describe. As a case in point, the repetitious retelling of Anglo-American narrations of the history of geographical thought is part and parcel of the reproduction of Anglo-American hegemony in the discipline and – whether consciously or not – reinforces “geography’s exclusions” in the academy more generally (CRESSWELL, 2013). This has led some to “carve out an epistemological elsewhere” that re-centers those voices which have been marginalized in order to “revolutionize the discipline and its worldly connections...[to] organize, mobilize and keep building an other geography” (OSWIN, 2020: 13-4).

As important as histories of geographical thought are to the discipline, there is also a danger in succumbing to what Nietzsche (1980 [1874]: 14) once called an “excess of history” that constrains our ability to imagine the radical possibilities of alternate futures. Put simply,

³ For a discussion of the distinctions between monumental, antiquarian, and critical history, see Nietzsche (1980 [1874]).

geography needs to understand its past to get its bearings in the present, but geographers also need to actively *unlearn* our past traditions if we are to enact hopeful futures that move beyond them. To do so requires a re-orientation toward excavating the possible futures of geographical thought and praxis.⁴ Such a project does not claim to predict the future directions of “progress” in geography, nor can it be based upon the teleological reasoning of a singular, linear trajectory of disciplinary history. That’s how the historiography of geography got stuck in the “tunnel of time” of Eurocentrism in the first place (BLAUT, 1993: 3; also, see CRUZ, 2017; ROSE-REDWOOD et al., 2020a). Instead, a modest yet radical alternative is to conceive of geography – past, present, and future – as a space constituted by “the contemporaneous existence of a plurality of trajectories” (MASSEY, 2005: 12), moving beyond geography’s colonialist legacies and toward what Milton Santos (1986 [1978]) called a “new geography.” Just as there is not a single history but many, so too will there be a multiplicity of futures of geographical thought and praxis, and the aim should therefore be to work toward enacting the “other worlds” we wish to inhabit (GIBSON-GRAHAM, 2008).

We are currently in the midst of the worst global public health crisis in a century, which has exacerbated the political, economic, and social crises of our time (ROSE-REDWOOD et al., 2020b). The Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) has eloquently described the current pandemic as “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” Yet, if viewed relationally, the pandemic is better understood as a series of gateways between a *multiplicity of worlds*, where the relations between worlds are constrained by structural power imbalances but also remain open to the potential for new modes of becoming. While we most certainly still need to engage in critical geographical analyses of structural inequalities and systemic injustices, it is also important to cultivate and nurture the possibilities for more hopeful geographies to emerge both locally and globally.

As a white, cis-gender, US-born geographer who has lived and worked in Canada for over a decade, I am all-too-aware that the privileged subject position which I presently occupy in the North American academy is an outcome of centuries of racial oppression, the dispossession of Indigenous lands, and the hegemonic influence of Anglophone discourses in “global” scholarship, all of which have come to privilege some racialized, gendered, and classed voices over others. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear to me that much of the most thought-provoking, courageous, and innovative geographical scholarship over the past decade has emerged from the fields of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous geographies as well

⁴ On the notion of “excavating the future,” see Davis (1990).

as geographical scholarship from the Global South (PULIDO, 2002; CRUZ and Oliveira, 2017; HAWTHORNE, 2019; HUNT, 2014; LUCCHESI, 2018; KING, 2019; RAMÍREZ, 2020). This scholarship prefiguratively enacts the futures that such scholars desire, which is transforming what will become the future histories of geographical thought and praxis in the process.

With that being said, the inertia of colonial legacies of “accumulation by dispossession” (HARVEY, 2003), and their ongoing effects of shaping geographical knowledge production in the present, continue to produce trajectories of geographical scholarship that privilege extractive forms of research and praxis – just as Canadian mining corporations continue to enrich themselves by extracting Latin American gold irrespective of its social and environmental costs (ARSENAULT, 2021). It is therefore not enough to celebrate the coexistence of a “plurality of trajectories,” because some of those trajectories are based upon the death, destruction, and erasure of others. Instead, we need to cultivate trajectories of geographical scholarship that value people over profits, mutual aid over neoliberal privatization, anti-racism over ethnonationalist essentialism, and environmental justice over ecological destruction.

The production of geographical knowledge is an inherently value-laden process since we do not stand perched at a God’s eye view above the fray of social and political life simply observing the affairs of the world as neutral bystanders. In a world of extreme inequalities and profound injustices, scholarly neutrality has the effect of legitimizing the status quo and reinforcing unequal power relations in society. I therefore believe that we as geographers have an ethical obligation to develop scholarly knowledge that can contribute toward alleviating socio-spatial injustices rather than further entrenching oppressive power hierarchies.

But those of you reading this in the Global South don’t need a scholar from the Global North to instruct you on the ethical virtues that should inform geographical scholarship. Your own lived experiences and relationships in academia and beyond will, no doubt, provide a basis to inform your ethical and political judgments with respect to your geographical research and praxis. Yet I am honored to have the opportunity to engage in dialogue between socio-cultural “worlds.” As the possibility of such inter-cultural dialogue suggests, our worlds are not as isolated from one another as we often suppose, since the plurality of our trajectories intersect in various ways. And it’s in those points of intersection that the stale hegemonies of the past can either be reproduced or contested.

The future is not set in stone, and the past need not be a straitjacket on our geographical imaginations. So let's build those other worlds and futures of geographical thought and praxis together.

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