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Uncritical critical geography?

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> Critical human geography: A diverse and rapidly changing set of ideas and practices within human geography linked by a shared commitment to emancipatory politics within and beyond the discipline, to the promotion of progressive social change and the development of a broad range of critical theories and their application in geographical research and political practice. (Painter, 2000: 126)
>
> [I]t's increasingly difficult to define what, substantively, it means to be a thinker of the Left. (Castree and Wright, 2005: 6)

1 We're all critical . . .

In the early 1990s, as a very junior faculty member, I was asked to prepare a course proposal for a senior level undergraduate class. This was at a time when the discipline of geography was in a political ferment, as the neo-Marxist analyses of the 1980s began to be supplemented and criticized by postmodern theory. The traditional banner of the Left, 'radical geography', was increasingly being supplanted by 'critical geography'. Attracted by this (though as one who'd been steeped in Marxist scholarship) I placed 'critical' in the title of my class.

At a faculty meeting, it was suggested by one senior colleague that the word 'critical' was redundant and be removed. As he put it, 'we're all critical'. What he meant, I think, was that all scholarship entailed critical thinking. However, if we consider the state of contemporary scholarship in geography and beyond, his comment may have come true in a second sense. For self-styled critical inquiry has become ubiquitous. There are well-developed and lively critical schools not only in fields such as sociology, law and anthropology, but also in more surprising places. So, for example, Yoo (2005) deploys critical theory to advance enlightenment and emancipation in the field of home economics. *Critical perspectives on accounting* aims to provide a forum 'for the growing number of accounting researchers and practitioners who realize that conventional theory and practice is ill-suited to the challenges of the modern environment and that accounting practices and corporate behaviour are inextricably connected with many allocative, distributive, social, and ecological problems of our era'.[1] And the critical mathematics educators group seeks to connect critical maths with grass roots movements to advance a "just, humane society", and, through education, aim to shatter prevailing social myths, to understand the effects of oppression, rebuild social structures and attitudes, and develop personal and collective empowerment' (Frankenstein, 2005).

Similarly, whereas 15 years ago critical geography felt itself to be unusual and beleaguered, it has now become hard to avoid, even being profiled in the *Village Voice* (Byles, 2001). A quick search of session titles for the 2005 Association of American

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Geographers conference in Denver, for example, reveals critical geographies of Canada and the United States, neighborhood effects (I–III), national borders, the Caribbean, urban political ecology, GIS, neoliberalism and pedagogy. Many political, economic, cultural and urban geographers, it seems, as well as scholars interested in GIS and pedagogy, have become 'critical'. We can interpret this in various ways. Traditionalists may worry at the dangers of a group think orthodoxy, premised on relativism, social construction and other forms of bad science. A more optimistic reading is to argue that the prevalence of critical geography attests to its intellectual and ethical strengths. For, at its best, critical scholarship can offer rigorous, compelling and persuasive social science. Yet even supportive commentators raise concerns at the ways in which critical geography has become normalized and institutionalized, worrying that this can blunt the political edge of critical scholarship (Hague, 2001; Waterstone, 2002). This is a theme to which I will return in subsequent reviews. More pressing, for my purposes, is the hunch that critical geography has become, in many quarters, a little too easy. At its least reflexive, it can veer dangerously close to a paint-by-numbers formula:

1) summon up righteous wrath at an oppressive relation (usually involving some clearly marked 'Other'),
2) demonstrate the way space/ideology produces 1,
3) deftly puncture dominant power relations (perhaps through an invocation of Lefebvre),
4) reveal the existence of resistance and opposition (albeit latent),
5) conclude by a pious appeal to progressive/emancipatory/liberatory alternatives, without specifying these in detail.

To the extent that critical geography becomes widespread, it is in danger of becoming uncritical. There is, consequently, an urgent need to reflect a little more carefully on what, precisely, critical geography is, how it manifests itself, and what it could become. This and two subsequent progress reports attempt such a reflection. This initial report attempts to situate critical geography within a larger stream of critical inquiry within the discipline and beyond, and then identify some of its contemporary characteristics. Subsequent reports will inquire more closely into the theoretical and political commitments of critical geography (what are we critical of, why, and how?) before looking more carefully at the ways space itself is written into critical geography in complicating, yet creative, ways. I do so, however, with at least two considerations. First, I consider myself a fellow traveler, committed to its promise. Critical geography can provide exciting, analytically incisive and politically engaged scholarship. Yet I worry that it can also be pompous, naïve and sloppy. Second, given my own training and experiences, I will draw largely from the world of Anglo-American human geography: in later reviews I hope to reflect more carefully on the rich traditions of critical geography outside the Anglophone world.

II Critical social science

Critical geography is one variant of a rich and long-standing tradition of critical inquiry in social science that echoes Marx's famous clarion call: 'Heretofore the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it' (in Fay, 1987: 4). Change, however, is not reformist but radical in orientation, directed both at contestation and liberation. Thus, Fay defines contemporary critical science as the 'attempt to understand in a rationally responsible manner the oppressive features of a society such that this understanding stimulates its audience to transform their society and thereby liberate themselves' (1987: 4). Blackwell *et al.* (2003) characterize critical social science as committed to 'a political stance that supports those who have been victimized by the various power-wielding elites who perpetuate various forms of social injustice ... Critical scholars should declare their solidarity with those who suffer most from social inequalities' (p. 25). Oppression

and liberation, it should be noted, are conceived of in broadly Leftist terms (that is, with an emphasis upon broadly collective/structural dimensions of power, a broadly utopic view of future social possibilities premised on social justice, a commitment to radical transformation, rather than liberal reform, and an optimistic faith in human agency and possibilities). While Frankfurt School critical theory is one expression of this impulse, contemporary critical social science is more diverse in its theoretical alignments.

Agger (1998) provides a more detailed dissection of critical social theory, as practiced in fields such as feminism, critical theory and cultural studies, arguing that it has the following features:

1) A rejection of positivist inquiry, in particular, its notion of value-free science and the notion of immutable social laws. All knowledge, it is argued, is perspectival, flowing from certain prior commitments. Social structures are to be seen as contingent and historical.
2) An endorsement of the possibility of progress, attained through concerted political and social action. Critical scholarship can further progressive change through consciousness-raising and informed insight and analysis.
3) An argument for the structural dynamics of domination, whether through the logic of material conditions, culture, or discourse.
4) The claim that domination is produced through forms of false consciousness, ideology and myth: critical science is tasked with contesting such beliefs in the service of transformation.
5) A faith in the agency of everyday change and a concomitant rejection of determinism; structure and agency are viewed as dialectically related.
6) A rejection of revolutionary expediency.

III Critical geography

Geography, of course, has a long tradition of critical dissent. While informed by this tradition, contemporary critical geography traces its roots, as well as its departures, to modern radical geography. Dick Peet (2000) provides one overview of this evolution. A stage of emergence in the early 1970s, he notes, saw radical geographers responding to pressing issues such as civil rights, pollution and war, in a movement that was 'anarchic and exuberant, naïve yet nuanced' (p. 951). A second stage, in the mid- to late 1970s saw swelling critiques of the quantitative revolution combine with the increasing adoption of Marxist analyses. The 1980s, he argues, saw fragmentation, with fissures between humanistic, feminist and Marxist radical streams, and a shift away from 'structural excess' (p. 953). Towards the end of the 1980s, critical geography begins to emerge. The label signaled the embrace of oppositional social theory that, while sympathetic to Marxist political economy, could not be reduced to a class-based analysis. An attention to questions of culture, representation and identity, as well as an alertness to the multiple and imbricated geographies through which oppression and domination are produced, became more widespread (see Longhurst, 2002, on critical feminist geography).

While critical and radical geography are close relations, then, they are not the same. Peet (2000) notes that the challenges of postmodern and poststructural philosophies occasioned sharp debates among Leftist geographers in the 1990s. Yet he sees a rapprochement between radical and critical geography, now that 'squabbles are finally finished, and issues demand confrontation' (p. 952). Others are less sanguine. Radical and critical geography, Castree (2000) insists, entail different commitments. The eclipse of radical geography reflects the professionalization and academicization of Left geography, he argues. While noting some potential gains, he worries at what is lost in the rise of critical geography, calling for a reclamation of the 'radical' tradition.

As noted, many contemporary geographers, informed by diverse theoretical

perspectives and empirical engagements, label themselves 'critical'. From my own experience, it used to be that the meaning of this label was a largely negative one, signaling that one was not positivist, not a GIS scholar or modeler, not 'reformist', not 'mainstream', not 'liberal' and, more subtly, not a 'doctrinaire' Marxist. However, as critical research has become more pervasive, and as some of the certainties of the negative position have eroded (one can be a critical GIS scholar, for example), critical geography's intellectual territory has become less certain. For critical geography, while everywhere invoked, is rarely nailed down. Those that attempt a definition are obliged to use loose and slippery categories. McDowell and Sharp (1999: 44), for example, define critical geography as 'a broad catch-all category for the diverse theoretical arguments emanating from feminist, Marxist, anti-racist, postcolonial and queer theory'. For Castree (2000: 956), critical geography is 'an homologous umbrella term for that plethora of antiracist, disabled, feminist, green, Marxist, postmodern, postcolonial, and queer geographies which now constitute the large, dynamic, and broad-based disciplinary Left'. For Hubbard *et al.* (2002) critical geography is diverse in its epistemology, ontology and methodology, and lacks a 'distinctive theoretical identity' (p. 62). In its diversity, they argue, it is different from the more homogeneous radical geography of the late 1960s and 1970s (although this, to me, is overly restrictive: radical geography was a lot more diverse in its preoccupations and voices).

Attempting a review of critical geography, then, is doubly challenging. Put simply, not only is it everywhere, but it is diverse and inchoate. Thus, my focus here is to try to identify the broad lineaments of critical geography. As well as a general immersion in the field, I chose as my focus the journal *Antipode*, a journal that publishes 'dissenting scholarship' in geography that seeks to 'challenge dominant and orthodox views of the world through debate, scholarship and politically committed research, creating new spaces and envisioning new futures'.[2] This is not to say, of course, that critical geography cannot be found elsewhere: indeed, the point is that it is hard not to do so. However, my working assumption was that the scholars who published in *Antipode* would self-identify with the critical/radical label. I focused, in particular, on the first-issue of 2005 (37, 1). While some common ground can be found, one is indeed struck by the diversity of styles, voices and concerns. Dense, theoretical argumentation rubs shoulders with accessible commentary; scholarly, impersonal prose abuts impassioned, first-person interventions. The 'critical' voice ranges from reformist to avowedly transformative. The target is not only dominant forms of oppression and injustice, but also the Left itself.

All consciously deploy theory of some form. In this, the articles reflect critical geography's commitment to theory and the rejection of empiricism. Yet, as noted above, they speak many conceptual languages, ranging from political economy (Pike, 2005), governmentality (Barnett *et al.*, 2005) and feminism (Fannin, 2005) to anti-racism and anti-imperialist invocations (Atia, 2005; Orzeck, 2005), as well as the attempt to put often opposed critical concepts to work simultaneously. A discussion in *Antipode* of Eric Mann's book *Dispatches from Durban*, for example, sees an exploration of the ways in which socialist and anti-imperialist analyses can be brought to bear in the forging of an internationalist alliance between oppressed peoples of colour, both within and without the United States. Goonewardena (2005) offers an explicit attempt at refining critical theory, juggling Althusser, Jameson and Lefebvre to produce a theoretical framework for the study of urban space, ideology and hegemony. Others are more modest in their theoretical ambitions: so, for example, Cumbers (2005) criticizes union-organizing strategies in the North Sea oil industry by drawing on recent meso-theoretical scholarship on scale.

While critical human geography deploys diverse theoretical tools, it is said to share a commitment to 'expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places' (Hubbard *et al.*, 2002: 62). 'Critical geography', it is argued, 'is united by a concerted and engaged encounter with issues of inequality, one that is increasingly recognizing multiple axes of power, with a commitment to emancipatory politics and social change' (p. 73). Daanish Mustafa's (2005) paper in *Antipode* offers an example of such an oppositional praxis. In an avowedly critical-geographical argument, he seeks to deploy the insights of an oppositional 'hazards geography' to bring both scholarly clarity and critical insight to US state policy around terrorism. Mustafa argues for the importance of concepts of place and scale, for example, in the definition of terrorism, and critiques dominant discourses of terror in pursuit of a more 'just, humane and therefore safer world' (p. 73). He urges that we shift our focus from the space of the nation state, which inevitably summons up militaristic responses, to the 'local-level life spaces of terror victims and the cross-scalar processes of neoliberal capitalism, globalization, racism and sexism, which go into producing these places and their specific geographies' (p. 81). In keeping with the critical impulse, he urges us to move beyond simplistic, even biblical analyses, and explore 'non-essentialist causal explanations' (p. 84) for terrorism.

In keeping with other critical analyses, Mustafa's concern is that dominant discourses of terrorism have been used to repressive ends. Hegemonic representational geographies (cf. Gregory, 2004) are thus deemed powerful devices, deployed by 'the politico-military elites of the world ... [t]o flog their real or imagined enemies' (p. 76). A similar claim that domination is sustained through representation (here named, more squarely, ideology) is given by Goonewardena (2005), in a dizzying and exuberant paper on Jameson's cognitive mapping: he refers to the urban sensorium, an ideological/aesthetic space dense with 'schizophrenic euphoria ... an intoxicating play of irreverent signs cut loose from irrelevant referents ... the postmodern opium of the people' (p. 51). This emphasis on representation as a site for domination and resistance is a recurrent theme in critical scholarship. Blackwell *et al.* (2003) emphasize the importance of ideology in sustaining prevailing cultures of prejudice, arguing that dominant forms of social science have sought to legitimate and naturalize such ideas, and related forms of oppression and injustice. In a useful resource book, they provide an instructive critique of an array of prevailing cultural myths such as 'justice is blind', 'feminism is no longer relevant', and so on. Yet let us not forget that representation is only one of a number of critical games worth playing. The power of liberal law, for example, rests in large part on its ability to represent the world to us: its hegemony turns, in many ways, on its imaginary geographies. Denaturalizing, contesting and altering such imaginaries, then, is vital critical work. Yet critical geography can also reveal the way law (as well as sites of power) works in more practical, embodied and mundane ways, enrolling and inscribing itself upon bodies, things and spaces.

Central to critical research is the claim that scholarship can be used to contest the hegemony of dominant representations. Critical geography, while clearly rejecting positivist 'value-free' science, nevertheless expresses a faith in rigorous, grounded and clear-eyed analysis (Agger, 1998: 180). Rational inquiry offers both analytical and political insight. This faith in analysis is nowhere better represented than in Mustafa's paper, in which ringing calls are made for the application of the 'accumulated experience, skills and insights' (2005: 73) of hazards research in contesting a 'militaristic dominant discourse' (p. 72). 'We as scholars are duty bound' (p. 84) he argues: 'our lack of critical engagement with the subject will be tantamount to shirking our job of providing intellectual insights to the society' (p. 88). Taken to its

extreme, this entails a striking double claim, for not only does critical geography have the power to undo dominant discourse, but it is also capable of providing transformative insights. In speaking truth to power, in other words, the scholar can undo domination, and free the oppressed. Dominant discourses can be dethroned and prevailing ideologies pierced. Implicit here is a remarkable confidence in the power of scholarship to reach the benighted, and in the transformative capacities of people to overcome alienation through reflexive self-education. These assumptions, though often less explicit, are a leitmotif of critical geography. Pike (2005), for example, calls for a 'clear understanding and progressive response' to plant closures in northern England. Arguing for a 'geographical political economy' analysis of plant closures, he concludes by arguing that a more informed analysis 'may offer some possibilities to ameliorate and/or challenge potentially damaging effects through a politics based upon progressive collective action and social agency' (p. 112).

Critical geographers point their intellectual armoury at different targets in attempting to achieve change. For Mustafa (2005), prevailing representations of the US state are to be challenged. Others in the volume take on targets closer to home, including unions (Pike, 2005; Wills, 2005), other scholars (Barnett *et al.*, 2005), or radical activists (Kobayashi, 2005). In some cases, the target and audience are one. Thus, for example, a discussion of the protest movement against neoliberal globalization takes both intellectuals and activists to task, while presuming that critical scholarship can play a formative role in producing emancipative politics (Brand and Wissen, 2005). However, often the audience for, and effect of, scholarly critique is less certain: for example, Barnett *et al.* (2005) focus their energies on a critique of ethical consumption, arguing that the prevailing scholarship draws from debilitating and incomplete conceptions of human agency, the effect of which is to obscure the ways in which ethical consumption – rather than a benign practice – can be thoroughly political, reproducing forms of social unevenness and individualized subjectivity. In place of a 'narrow sense of individualized, ethical responsibility' (p. 43), they offer a view of ethical consumption as 'a practice of collective, political responsibility' (p. 43). Yet here, and elsewhere, questions of the audience and intended effect of critical geography are bracketed. Barnett *et al.* (2005) make frequent reference to models of ethical responsibility and obligation, and the ways ethical consumption interpellates particular subjects, without noting the ways their own account presupposes similar subjects among its readers. They also criticize the stringencies inherent in dominant models of human agency, wherein knowledge is deemed the key factor motivating responsible conduct. Yet others have suggested that critical scholarship itself is similarly demanding in its conception of emancipatory knowledge and the reflexive self (Fay, 1987).

Critical geography seeks to effect change not only through transformative insight but also through forms of progressive praxis. Like 'applied' geographers, critical geographers want to make a difference. Rather than aiming to inform elites or engage in reformist tinkering, critical geographers claim common-cause with social movements and activists that promote far-reaching programs committed to social justice. This commitment to activism, combined with the self-conscious reflexivity of critical geographers, has raised an array of important issues concerning the relation between activism and the academy that will be explored in a later report. Suffice it to say, for now, that the *Antipode* papers, express, in various degrees, a scholarly commitment to, and interest in, activist engagement. The instructive paper by Brand and Wissen (2005) on recent protest movements against neoliberal globalization illustrates some of these critical geographic preoccupations. First, they seek to apply scholarly analysis to the analysis of such movements,

noting some of their characteristics and logic, as well as their diversity. Second, they argue for the importance of the critical intellectual to activism. Beyond observation and documentation, 'social-scientific research and theoretical advancements' (p. 17) can and should be integral to activist struggle itself, they insist. Critical intellectuals have played a crucial role in politicizing the contradictions and exclusionary logic of neoliberalism, they argue (although most of these, at least within western Europe, have been placed outside the academy). However, critical scholars can also play a role in midwifing alternative social possibilities by bringing 'certain contradictions to a political head without dictating the goals of emancipative politics', echoing Cornel West's (1991) model of the intellectual as a 'critical organic catalyst'. While Brand and Wissen are clearly skeptical of the role of academic elites in such a formulation, they still privilege intellectual insight as more or less detached and reflective, as well as appropriately directive.

While, perhaps, we should be cautious of such claims to privilege, we would also do well to remember the argument of Edward Said (1994) and others that the intellectual has politico-ethical responsibilities, attendant upon his or her privilege, relative freedom and social standing. At its best, critical geography takes this responsibility seriously. The results can be compelling; 'Dissentient thoughts and norm-challenging information can, as history shows, be as potent as armies given the right conditions' Castree and Wright (2005: 2) remind us in *Antipode*. 'The world cannot represent itself; it must be represented!' (p. 7), they insist. In a world of sharp injustice, engrained hierarchy and violent imperialism, the need 'to bring the undiscussed into discussion; to stray beyond established perimeters of opinion' and 'to render the familiar not only strange but, often-times unacceptable' (p. 2) remains urgent. Yet, if it is to do so, critical geography must be done well. This requires not only the careful, sober realism called for by Castree and Wright, but also a thoughtful appraisal of exactly *how* critical geography is both critical and geographic. It is to these questions that I hope to turn next.

Notes

1. http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home (last accessed 24 May 2005).
2. http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0066-4812 (last accessed 24 May 2005).

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