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THE PLACE OF PERSONAL POLITICS

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Over the past twenty years the shift to post-positivism across the social sciences has opened up space for new methods of social research. Once the orthodox model of research – based on a disembodied neutral observer collecting data from a world apart from themselves – had been rejected, scholars were able to make the case for alternative epistemologies and methods. We are now urged to reflect upon the nature of our engagement and position in the world, its influence on the data and knowledge produced, and its silences and partiality as well as its 'truth'. However, human geographers have been much better at addressing the internal politics of the research process than they have in exploring personal political issues, and in particular, the choices we make about what we study, how we do it and what it is for.

Our research is necessarily shaped by what Sayer (2005) has called 'lay normativity'. This involves the way in which our values and moral/ethical standards shape the way in which we look at the world, our selection of research topics, the conduct of our research and what we do with the findings. Yet despite the impact of post-positivism on both geography, and the politicization of the research process itself, surprisingly little has been said about our *motivations*, the way these affect what we do and the arguments that we might want to make. While it is now common to situate our research *subjects*, geographers have rarely turned the table on themselves: we have not located ourselves as researchers, highlighting the way in which we formulate and conduct research from our own very particular personal and political positions. Here, I reflect on my own experiences of doing and using research.

In doing so, I first explore the motivations for doing academic research within the context of calls that have been made for greater attention to the 'normative' (the *what should be)* in the discipline (Corbridge 1998; Sayer and Storper 1997). At least some of the recent disciplinary anxiety about the hazy connections between scholarship and activism and between research and public policy reflects the need to address the question of motivation. Given the collapse in left intellectualism in the academy, we need to be clearer about why we are doing what we do.

Second, I explore the ways that these issues have influenced my own research into trade union organization. Writing this chapter has forced me to think about my own motivations and interrogate why I believe that trade unions and the broader labour movement are important (and interestingly, how my views about the movement and its role have evolved in the fifteen years I have been working on them). In the process, I have also had to clarify what I am trying to do with the research, the relationships it has allowed me to create and the findings it has produced. In short, I have had to face up to my own 'lay normativity' and the personal politics of what I have been trying to do. At the end of this process, it strikes me as remarkable that as academics we are able to engage in the work of research and scholarship without having to acknowledge these questions, even to ourselves.

Thinking about why we do what we do

Over the past decade or so, there has been considerable collective anxiety within critical geography about our research motivations: exploring whether we should simultaneously be activists, working in and out of the classroom to change the world and the way people think (Blomley 1994, 1995; Castree 2000;Tickell 1995). Similarly, we have agonized about whether geographers can and should seek to influence the wider polity, and the formulation and implementation of public policy (Dorling and Shaw 2002; Martin 2001; Massey 2000, 2001; Peck 1999). Both sets of debates are focused on the role of the academy in studying, explaining and changing the world.

Such anxiety is perhaps not surprising given the structural conditions of academic life. In North America, young staff – arguably the most politically engaged – must publish according to clearly understood performance criteria to get tenure, while in much of the rest of the Anglophonic world, individuals and departments are routinely subject to external audit of 'quality'. In the UK, for example, the periodic Research Assessment Exercise judges the quality of research publications against a four-point scale, three of which are variations on internationally significant contributions. At a time when we need to publish in order to retain our jobs and make progress at work, and we all have material and psychological self-interests in publishing, it is harder than ever to step back and assess the motivations we have. While Doreen Massey (2001: 12) has recently argued that:'I do believe that your next article, or project, should derive from some passion greater than simply adding another item to your CV or to the Departmental Output Count'. The motivation for doing what we do is likely to be a complex, partially sub-conscious, mixture of factors, including (among other things) the pursuit of collegiality, enjoyment, fashion, knowledge, politics, power, recognition, respect, security, self-fulfilment and status.

At least part of our motivation will relate to our own 'lay normativity' – the values and moral/ethical standards that help shape what we think important, judge right and wrong, and feel ought to be done (Sayer 2005). Over the past decade or so, a growing chorus of voices have been calling for increased awareness of ethics in our research and for a renewed focus on normative questions in the social sciences (Corbridge 1998; Sayer and Storper 1997). Although more applied areas of human geography (such as environmentalism, or development) have long been concerned with the 'positive' (description and explanation) and the normative, the core theories, concepts and approaches of the discipline have not. Since the radical turn of the early 1970s, economic geography has been much stronger in excavating the impact of structural and systemic processes and their attendant power relations on the human landscape than in positing ways out of the mess. While we may be happy to explore the 'laws' of uneven development, spatial divisions of labour, agglomeration, competitiveness, inequality and the struggle to produce the scalar architecture of our world, collectively we have less to say about *how* to alleviate the resultant socio-economic injustice.

I do not believe that this reflects a lack of 'lay normativity' in human geography. The strength of the arguments made in print are testament to anger, frustration and hope about the current state and future of the world. Such sentiments come from knowing that things could be different, and arise from personal moral/ethical judgements about what is wrong with the present state of affairs. Yet this ‘lay normativity’ is rarely articulated and rarely manifest in a normative focus and/or argument arising from such research. As Sayer and Storper (1997: 1) suggested nearly a decade ago:

> Any social science claiming to be critical must have a standpoint from which its critique is made, whether it is directed at popular illusions which support inequality and relations of domination or at the causes of avoidable suffering and frustration of needs. But it is strange that this critical social science largely neglects to acknowledge and justify these standpoints.

We might, therefore, conclude that theoreticians of human geography have been better at identifying and explaining the ills of the world, than at identifying the standpoint from which they are making such claims, or what might be done in the future. I think this is, in part, due to the fact that during much of the latter part of the twentieth century, left/critical intellectuals shared a broad set of perspectives that included an understanding of the importance of class in capitalist society, the role of the state, the significance of race, gender and sexuality, and the need for a socialist political party (albeit possible to adopt a social democratic or revolutionary model of change). Broadly speaking, the left (in and out of academia) was on fairly secure ground and there was little need to articulate the particular position from which people spoke. However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the renewed vigour of political-economic processes of neo-liberal globalization, both social democratic and revolutionary routes to socialism have been largely discredited. The old orthodoxies of the left, bound up in categories like capital, state, party and class have withered away and left intellectuals are now rather marooned (Benton 2004). As Sayer and Storper (1997: 2) put it: ‘On the left, the years of complacency about alternatives and ethical positions are coming to an end.’

It is on this ground that Corbridge (1998) argues that Harvey’s *Justice, Nature and the Politics of Difference* (1996) is unsatisfactory because it is premised on the fact that the ‘end point’ of socialism will dissolve all of the problems we face. For Corbridge, the book fails to undertake the hard work of engaging in practical ideas about the reformation of capitalism and the need to challenge the pervasive ideas of the right. In this context, there is now a slow process of reformulation underway in which left intellectuals (including many of the leading thinkers in human geography) have started to rethink the ground from which interventions are made. Thus far, a number of responses have become evident in human geography, including a renewed interest in utopian thinking (Harvey 2000; Pinder 2002, 2005); the revival of interest in moral geographies (Proctor and Smith 1999; Smith, D. 2000); the use of post-structuralist tools in an attempt to validate the local and the micro as sites of political intervention (Gibson-Graham 1996); the use of religious principles in research and practice (Cloke 2002); a move towards political pragmatism and policy engagement (Martin 2001); and rethinking the political concepts and strategies of the past (Massey 2005).

Although there is a widespread resistance to normativity in the academy among Marxists (who often equate moral reasoning with powerful bourgeois interests and who have entrenched – if somewhat rhetorical – beliefs in the ‘end goal’ of socialism), and post-structuralists (who (usually) hold that normative reasoning will necessarily be particular and reflective of power relations), Sayer and Storper (1997) argue that careful normative thinking is a way forward for academic research. I fully concur with this view because whatever the risks (and history teaches that there are many) there are greater risks in failing to act. Yet we need to know more about the implications of undertaking more normatively-sensitive and focused research. Is it necessary to acknowledge who we are and our political positions when doing this kind of research? Are we able fully to identify our motivations for doing research even if we wanted to? How is our research shaped by our values and moral/ethical judgements, and how do we know? How political can we be about what we say and do with research? And, ultimately, would this approach actually make any difference to the practice and outcomes of research? Sadly, as I've written this chapter, I have come to realize that I have very few answers and many more questions. Here I hope to contribute to further debate and in the meantime, I reflect – in a very low-key way – on some of these issues through my own research and experience.

Research into trade union futures in the UK

Preamble

In March 1998 I started work on a proposal for a three-year research programme on trade union futures in the UK, for submission to the Economic and Social Research Council (the main funding body for academic social sciences in the UK).[1] I intended to explore the two main options for British unions at the time – partnership and organizing – in an atmosphere of renewed optimism associated with the election of the Labour government in May 1997. While partnership involved unions and managers working around an agenda of 'mutual gains', organizing was focused on workers' self-organization and action around collective concerns. I planned to illuminate the spatiality of these two strategies through in-depth empirical research: to look at how each strategy varied in its impact and implications across space; how each approach was affected by the particularities of place; how the two strategies were complementary and contradictory; and how these factors would, in turn, reshape national policy and debate. The project was formulated as a 'geography of' trade union renewal in the UK, framed in terms of previously published work of my own and others working in industrial relations, sociology and human geography and it highlighted the scope for disseminating the findings to trade unions, government bodies and non-academic organizations. In a very real sense, my aim was to extend academic knowledge and debate, in and beyond human geography, while also contributing to the policy development of the trade union movement itself.

Personally, I was excited by the move to organizing. The British trade unions had been managing decline since the early 1980s, responding to each political and economic assault as it came. The challenges of the privatization and 'marketization' of public services; the wholesale loss of manufacturing capacity and the concurrent explosion of employment in private services; intense global competition; the changing legal environment and numerous industrial defeats had left little time or energy with which to develop a strategy to stem and reverse the decline in trade union membership and political influence. The vague hope seemed to be that the eventual election of a Labour government would allow the unions to emerge from the bunker and maybe then, they could more confidently address the question of growth. However, by the mid-1990s, after three Conservative governments and in the face of barely disguised hostility on the part of *New* Labour (the moniker adopted by Tony Blair as a means of distancing his leadership from

Labour governments of the past, the trade union movement and left-wing elements of his party), a group of far-sighted union leaders began to proselytize the need for renewed attention to organizing, citing similar attempts underway in the USA and Australia. Eventually, what became the New Unionism project under John Monk's leadership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was established to:

> Promote organizing as the top priority and shift the unions towards an organizing culture.
> Increase investment in recruitment and organizing, strengthen lay organization and promote the use of dedicated organizers.
> Strengthen existing bases and break into new jobs and industries.
> Sharpen the appeal of trade unions to 'new' workers, including women, youth and those at the rough end of the labour market. (See Heery 1998; Wills 2005)

Although never formally articulated at the time, looking back, the research I planned to do was partly driven by my excitement at these developments and genuine curiosity to see what happened. Moreover, although I was most interested in the organizing agenda, I wasn't convinced by those on the left who simply rejected partnership as class collaboration, not least because all collective bargaining is founded on having a relationship with managers and the outcomes of all such relationships are shaped by the balance of power relations. I was also keen to use the research in order to assess genuinely what worked in practice – and the strengths and weaknesses of each approach – and feed this back to the trade unions to shape policy as it evolved. Finally, I was motivated by the wider political implications that a revitalized trade union movement would have for the UK. If workers were better organized, labour interests – broadly defined – could be more clearly articulated and defended in the national polity. As a mass membership organization with its own resources, the trade union movement could shape the political climate of the UK through its influence with government, employers and the wider public (as it had done before). Even now, the trade unions represent some 7 million workers and have assets and human resources worth millions of pounds. The future of the movement mattered to me and reflected my own values and moral/ethical standards concerning questions of justice, equality and mutual respect.

In the spirit of openness that I called for at the start of this chapter, this political perspective came from a mixture of involvement in Marxist politics from my late teens to mid-twenties, preceded by my upbringing in a Methodist home. Getting involved in socialist politics – after first entering the peace and women's movements – and then getting caught up in the miners' strike (1984–5) meant that it was just about plausible to join an organization that claimed the organized working class as the agent of the socialist dawn. The miners' strike dominated the news for at least a year of my time as an undergraduate. While I was avidly reading radical geography and Marxism, I watched the class war on television. The country was divided and, then at least, class did seem primary as a source of identity and political agency. Moreover, my few years as a political activist led me to get embroiled in the day-to-day politics of trade unionism and I learnt that more modest gains, such as improved working conditions, pay and benefits, or challenges to racism and sexism, were possible through collective organization at work.

Writing my research proposal more than a decade later, I had long-since recognized that the organized working class would not lead us to the socialist dawn, but retained a strong political attachment to the trade union movement. Part of my motivation for undertaking the project itself was probably to try to come to terms with questions of class and political agency. Deep down, I knew that I needed to clarify my own thoughts about the trade union movement, its role and its future in the UK.

Doing and using the research

Once underway from October 1999 it became clear that the research problematic was far more complex than I allowed for in my research proposal. The developing research programme depended strongly on negotiating access to key sources and developing research relationships, the art of the possible and a certain degree of good luck. In order to research the twin models of organizing and partnership, I needed access to the trade unions from the top down, to talk to those involved in the development of the New Unionism and partnership projects at the TUC and, in particular, I also needed access to those unions and leaders who were experimenting with the new approaches. Thus, I had to find people who were willing to enter into a research relationship, and from there, identify examples that were particularly worthy of further research. By definition, I had to contact trade unions known to be experimenting with partnership and organizing – and there weren't many of those at the time – and then find people who were open and willing to being involved in the research.

Furthermore, even if I was able to forge positive links, these relationships didn't always bear fruit. More than once, I started research work, or undertook a number of interviews, and then hit a dead end. This was partly because union personnel might move and their replacements were less favourable to doing research, or because particular organizing campaigns fizzled out on the ground, or because they stretched beyond the life-time of the research and into my subsequent maternity leave. In one instance, I completed some interviews on the geography of organizing activities with key unions for a document commissioned by one department at the TUC, only to find that those higher up in the organization chose not to publish my submitted report.

In the end, however, I developed relationships with a number of trade unionists in the UK, some of which lasted longer than others, and a number of which continue today.[2] The research developed its own momentum, based on these relationships and the activity of the organization, the balance between their needs and my interests, and what was possible in practice. Over time, I gained a better understanding of the strategies being deployed, their strengths and limitations, and greater knowledge about organizing workers in other parts of the world. Ongoing research in the USA, in particular, highlighted the need for unions to develop a new geographical imagination to reach low paid service workers such as janitors or hospitality workers. These researchers and activists argued that organizing at the workplace was no longer enough to win trade union organizing campaigns among these groups of workers, and my own experience of the limits of organizing campaigns among hotel and travel trade workers in Britain reinforced this for me (Wills 2005).

Despite this literature, and the impact of experience, the British unions have not grasped the full scale of this geographical challenge. In the main, the unions have focused on the workplace as the appropriate scale to launch and manage campaigns – in part, reinforced by the new legal entitlements to recognition introduced in the Employment Relations Act 1999. The unions have also largely failed to appreciate the way in which widening the scale of any organizing campaign can facilitate the identification of new allies (such as community and faith institutions, students and others interested in social justice) to add weight to their cause. Through the process of research, reading, thinking and talking, I began to realize that more should be done, and sought to develop a broader understanding of the geographical implications of organizing in the UK. Rather than simply doing a 'geography of' research project, as envisaged at the outset, I began to explore the geographical imaginations, structures and strategies of the trade unions in the UK.

By drawing on additional research with an international trade union body, looking at organizing in the hotel sector, and completing some research with the East London Communities Organization's (TELCO's) Living Wage campaign, I began to develop an argument about the need for unions to build networks with each other and their allies as part of an extra-workplace strategy for renewal. Seeing evidence of gains as a result of rescaling union practices, I was able to make a stronger argument about geography than originally anticipated. Echoing debates about scale that were exercising human geographers at the time, it was possible to argue that trade unions could not expect to organize workers without expanding the geographical ambition of their efforts. Rather than using traditional approaches to organize in the workplace, the private services sector in particular demands a labour-market approach. Workers move regularly, many work for subcontractors and it is easy for employers to resist local efforts to organize their workers. Moreover, in a market-dominated economy, the increased wages won by union members can erode the market share of their employers, making it necessary to organize across the whole labour market in sectors such as contract cleaning, catering, caring and hospitality.

Rather than simply cheerleading those advocating organizing, as might have been expected, I found myself able and willing to make a political argument about the need for unions to rethink their geographical imaginations, structures and strategies in order to reverse their decline. I published a number of non-academic articles in *Red Pepper* and *Unions Today*, and wrote a longer pamphlet for the Fabian Society, making this case (Wills 2002). In addition to undertaking an academic project, I was able to make a public argument about what I felt the unions needed to do. The pamphlet was launched at the TUC Annual Conference in Blackpool in 2002, and it has been picked up by a few individuals in different trade unions. It has also led to invitations to speak about community–union relationships to different groups of trade unionists. As academics, we have the time and resources to think and research issues in depth. If we then have something useful to say, we should say it. Indeed, it seems rather strange that so few academics publish in order to communicate beyond their own field.

Conclusion

This story might be helpful in thinking through the questions with which I began this chapter.

On reflection, I have realized that I was engaged in normative – or action – research (and for more on this, see Wills with Hurley 2005). My 'lay normativity' prompted me to explore trade union futures in the first place, the research was then driven by my own need for answers about strategy and practice, and I used the findings to make a political (normative) argument about what the unions needed to do. Significantly, I finished the project with less political confidence in the organized working class than when I began. The scale of the problems faced and the weakness of the tools being used to respond made me question the very future of what we call trade union organization. The research also blew away residual ideological cobwebs of my own about trade unions, collectivity and political agency. Writing this chapter has clarified this further, and it strikes me as odd that I have never been challenged to do this before.

My realization about the scale of the challenges and the weakness of the trade unions in Britain helped to fuel my research and my use of the results. It drove me to try to articulate what I thought ought to be done. I did this on the basis of genuinely fresh thinking on my part: I had not found what I expected to find, and I had identified a much stronger argument for geography than I would have thought possible. Too often, we are constrained by the belief that political engagement compromises our academic detachment and rigour. Thus, even though the post-positivist environment highlights the politics of the research encounter, the dilemmas of representation and the partiality of our accounts, we rarely talk about our own political motives and passions in doing research. This helps to explain the rather anguished debates about scholarship and activism, research and policy. There is a thirst for politics and passion about what we do. However, it is also significant that in all the debates about scholarship and activism, research and policy, contributors have focused on the way in which we might work with others as activists/action researchers, use research to help others, feed ideas into policy development, and/or mobilize ideas in the classroom rather than make our own arguments. With the luxury of three years of research on trade union organization in the UK, I was able to stand back, reflect on my findings, reading, thinking and talking, and make a political argument that the movement needed to take its geography more seriously. The short pamphlet I wrote for the Fabian Society is out in the public domain, and, even though it is rather thin and not widely read, it provides a way to reach those in a position to act.

NOTES

1 Geographies of Organized Labour: The Reinvention of Trade Unionism in Millennial Britain (ESRC R000271020).

2 Some of these relationships have been sustained through research studentships and include work with the regional TUC (Holgate 2004), the Citizen's Organizing Foundation (Jamoul 2006) Paula Hamilton and the International Transport Workers' Federation.