

Reply

The politics of social justice in neoliberal times: a reply to Slater

Rachel Pain*, Mike Kesby** and Kye Askinst†

*Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE

Email: rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk

**School of Geography and Geosciences, University of St Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9AL

†Division of Geography, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST

Revised manuscript received 22 November 2011

We thank Tom Slater for his comments, acknowledging that much of his paper is in significant disagreement with our own. We agree with Slater that we are engaged in contestations over meaning, and united on the principle of social justice as a guiding force for critical geographers, but we differ over how we might contribute to its realisation. This debate over tactics reflects quite different conceptualisations of power, resistance, and what it is to be political as academics. We respect Slater's 'no', but question whether this mode of resistance is enough. Does it constitute a politics of *disobedience*? Are the politics of engagement and alliance between academics, community and social movements too messy and inevitably contradictory, as he implies, for us to adopt alternative practices of research and teaching in geography beyond the academy?

Among the interesting points that Slater makes, there are some errors in the portrayal of our argument that we wish to address. In particular, his inaccurate representation of the wider field of participatory geographies as largely engaged in collaborations with the state rather than grassroots organisations; and his suggestion that participatory geographies fit neatly with the impact agenda, rather than embodying an alternative. Our key focus remains the central question of what it is to be political as academics.

What, and where, are participatory geographies?

We want to be clear: we do not believe that participatory geographers' 'time has come' with the impact agenda (Slater, p 117). Rather, we argue for the potential of more participatory praxis to undermine neoliberal structures within the academy precisely through subverting notions

of 'impact' towards a social justice agenda. We highlighted clear disparities between the objectives and alliances of scholars associated with the growing field of participatory geographies, and the Research Excellence Framework's (REF) reproduction of elitism in the measurement of impact, particularly through the problematic scaling and construction of what constitutes 'impactful' research. As Williams (2012) suggests, the emphasis on metrics and output matrices unhelpfully disconnects the public diffusion of research (media interviews, newspaper articles, website hits) from the experience of collaboration and dissemination through workshops and discussion with participants in ongoing, informal relationships.

Participatory geographies should not be conflated with policy research, ESRC's user involvement statements or the impact agenda. We support Slater's critique of the type of policy research that bolsters both the neoliberal status quo and social injustice. But participation as deployed by the state itself is not the same as that enacted with radical grassroots alternatives. Participatory geographies have socialist, feminist and postcolonialist roots, its earliest protagonists involved in action that was clearly community based (for example, Breitbart 1995; Bunge 1971; Townsend *et al.* 1991). A contemporary and rapidly expanding literature also identifies that participatory geographers most often forge alliance with groups, organisations and movements who are contesting state policies and practices (see Askins 2009; Cahill *et al.* 2008; Cameron and Gibson 2005; Mason forthcoming; mrs c kinpaisby-hill 2011). That is not to say it is incompatible, or impossible, to conduct critical participatory geographies with policymakers, but such research utilises 'a paradigm far removed from one of policy-oriented research where "answers" are given to policy questions

posed by the state' (McGuirk and O'Neill forthcoming). We reiterate here our arguments about the lack of fit and shared intent between participatory geographies and the impact agenda.

We should also beware of slippage between 'participatory' and 'public' geographies. While some synergies exist, there can be significant differences in philosophies and practices across a wide continuum of engagement. We call for careful attention between initiatives deployed to shore up existing academic and institutional privilege, and activities that work to destabilise it (see Fuller and Askins 2010). Slater is right that the ESRC deploys the language of 'participation', 'empowerment' 'capacity building', as do major institutions of governance and finance and multinational corporations; this does not mean they own it, nor does it necessitate rejecting the concept of participation itself. Rather it points to the important political role academics can play in challenging such institutions on their deployment of participation, its meaning, practices and effects (Askins forthcoming; Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Who asks research questions?

Central to our understanding of participatory geographies is the disruption of knowledge hierarchies. This makes problematic Slater's assertion that 'for reasons of intellectual autonomy it is troubling to allow external collaborators . . . to be involved in setting questions' (p 118). The isolation of this 'intellectual autonomy' seems far more 'mysterious' than the identity of the users and participants involved in participatory geographies (p 118), who are decidedly real (for example, see Cahill *et al.* 2008; Hume-Cook *et al.* 2007). Drawing on feminist thought that positions all academic knowledge as situated, participatory approaches have demonstrated the liberatory potential of the co-production of knowledge, and the transformative effects on theory of 'having our ideas critiqued by social movements live and direct' (Mason, in High forthcoming). Participatory approaches cannot circumvent the paradoxes of power in research and representation (see Kesby 2007), but through closer integration of theory and practice, they extend the processes of theorising and knowing beyond campus spaces, explicitly recognising intellectual labour as a thoroughly social, rather than individual and autonomous, activity (mrs c. kinpaisby-hill 2011).

What politics for social justice?

We agree with Gregson *et al.*'s (2011) observation that the impact agenda may be both evidence of and an opportunity to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Our critique of opposition to the impact agenda was

a call to reflect on the degree to which the defence of 'blue skies' and 'autonomous' research is a defence of a particular expression of those values shaped by previous research assessment exercises (RAEs). Our intervention sought to reproduce audit in ways that support the agendas both we and Slater value, and to do this before the meaning of 'impact' solidifies and produces entirely neoliberal effects. Slater is right that there are dangers in a strategic, more positive engagement. Such tactics entail tensions and discomforts, leave us exposed, and their politics are unfinished and require continuous working through. We recognise that such resistance, through reworking meaning, runs the paradoxical risk of (re)circulating discourses that retain the potential to effect neoliberal agendas – even if we are successful in making them do other work as well. But a politics of refusal/non-engagement is precarious in ceding control over the meaning of key discourses to those who do not share a radical vision for the academy.

This is a hopeful but not naïve politics. Subverting academic governance is also about disrupting and revealing it as constructed and transmutable through engagement. In this vein, participatory geographers continue alternative traditions, such as collective naming as a response to academic individualism (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; mrs kinpaisby 2008) and pursuing direct action as means to research praxis (Mason forthcoming; Routledge 2011). Such examples, small and large, practice alternatives to saying 'no'.

Slater argues for having an impact and being political through teaching. We agree wholeheartedly. In answer to his question 'might we find innovative ways to get our students to "participate" too, with a view to contesting the institutional arrangements governing higher education?' (p 118), we point to participatory pedagogies: to undergraduate modules where geography students collaborate in research with local activists and community organisations (Kindon and Elwood 2009; Mountz *et al.* 2008; Pain *et al.* forthcoming); to academic geographers' support of student protests in the UK (Hopkins *et al.* 2011); to the burgeoning number of PhDs working with communities and grassroots organisations (come to any RGS-IBG Participatory Geographies Research Group event); and to attempts to engage school children to think critically about geography, drawing on their own knowledges of place (see <http://thegeographycollective.wordpress.com>). Participation in social justice movements can be integrated into all aspects of academic activities (see Leeds University's Masters programme in Activism and Social Change): teaching a politics of social justice in the classroom is just part of this. We agree that the separation between research and teaching engendered by RAE/REF reflects the logic of accountability rather than the experience of academic practice, and this is precisely why we

argue for a much broader conceptualisation of ‘impact’ that holds the potential for recognising that learning and teaching activities are interconnected with research.

We are all impacted

We share Slater’s hostility to the RAE/REF: we discussed ‘the institutional arrangements damaging British higher education’ (Slater p 117) in the opening pages of our paper, and have contributed to this critique for some time (for example, Askins 2008; mrs kinpaisby 2008; Pain and Bailey 2004). But the struggle in which we are all enmeshed is not as simple as Slater implies. Governments, technocrats and elite intellectuals do not simply hold power over ‘impacted’ academics: relations of power and resistance are rather more entangled (Sharp *et al.* 2000). To suggest otherwise not only absolves academics from implication in reproducing the audit-oriented academy, but also confers a coherence and stability to its circuits of power that is neither deserved nor helpful ‘scientifically [or] politically’ (cf Slater p 117). Many of those who really resist audit no longer hold academic posts, or find they are marginalised and immobile in current positions. Passionate opposition to the impact agenda amongst many academics has never been matched by opposition to the more significant disciplining push from RAE/REF to publish a particular form of scholarship, or to collect personal ‘esteem indicators’. These latter activities have become a naturalised part of our work as academics, and are far less often resisted. When undertaken in isolation from broader participatory and/or public engagements, the relationship of these activities to an expressed belief in furthering social justice can be hard to fathom.

From this perspective, Slater’s defence of ‘intellectual autonomy’ seems in danger of entrenching academics as privileged research technocrats. We should be wary that in critiquing audit we are not protecting our own privileges within the power/knowledge hierarchies that have given rise to the current form of the RAE/REF in the first place.

References

- Askins K** 2008 From enthusiasm to exhaustion, and back again: a day in the life of a geography lecturer *Ephemera: Journal of Politics and Organization* 8 Accessed 12 December 2011
- Askins K** 2009 ‘That’s just what I do’: placing emotion in academic activism *Emotion, Society and Space* 2 4–13
- Askins K** forthcoming Activists in **Dodds K, Kuus M and Sharp J** eds *The Ashgate companion to critical geopolitics* Ashgate, London
- Autonomous Geographies Collective** 2010 Beyond scholar activism: making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university *ACME: an International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 9 245–75
- Breitbart M M** 1995 Banners for the street: reclaiming space and designing change with urban youth *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 15 35–49
- Bunge W B** 1971 *Fitzgerald: geography of a revolution* Schenckman Publishing Co., Cambridge, MA
- Cahill C, Bradley M, Castañeda D, Esquivel L, Mohamed N, Organista J, Sandberg J, Valerio M and Winston K** 2008 ‘Represent’: reframing risk through participatory video research in **Downing M J and Tenney L J** eds *Video vision: changing the culture of social science research* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, MA 207–28
- Cameron J and Gibson K** 2005 Participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein *Geoforum* 36 315–31
- Fuller D and Askins K** 2010 Public geographies II – being organic *Progress in Human Geography* 34 654–67
- Gregson N, Watkins H, Broughton L, Mackenzie J and Shepherd J** 2011 Building bridges through performance and decision-making: schools, research and public engagement *Antipode* doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00839.x
- Hickey S and Mohan G** 2004 *Participation: from tyranny to transformation* Zed Books, London
- High C** forthcoming Academic Blockade video *ACME: an International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* (see also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW3E3IqNzfl>) Accessed 12 December 2011
- Hopkins P, Todd L and Newcastle Occupation** 2011 Occupying Newcastle University: student resistance to government spending cuts in England *The Geographical Journal* doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4959.2011.00436.x
- Hume-Cook G, Curtis T, Woods K, Potaka J, Tangaroa Wagner A and Kinson S** 2007 Uniting people with place through participatory video: a Ngaati Hauiti journey in **Kinson S, Pain R and Kesby M** eds *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place* Routledge, London 160–9
- Kesby M** 2007 Spatialising participatory approaches: the contribution of geography to a mature debate *Environment and Planning A* 39 2813–31
- Kinson S and Elwood S** 2009 Introduction: more than methods – reflections on participatory action research in geographic teaching, learning and research *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 33 19–32
- Mason K** forthcoming Academics and social movements: knowing our place, making our space *ACME: an International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*
- McGuirk P and O’Neill P** forthcoming Critical geographies with the state: the problem of social vulnerability and the politics of engaged research *Antipode*
- Mountz A, Moore E B and Brown L** 2008 Participatory action research as pedagogy: boundaries in Syracuse *ACME: an International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 7 214–38
- mrs kinpaisby** 2008 Taking stock of participatory geographies: envisioning the communiversity *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 292–9
- mrs c kinpaisby-hill** 2011 Participatory praxis and social justice: towards more fully social geographies in **Del Casino V, Thomas**

- M E, Cloke P and Panelli R** eds *A companion to social geography* Blackwell, Oxford 214–34
- Pain R and Bailey C** 2004 British social and cultural geography *Social and Cultural Geography* 5 319–29
- Pain R, Finn M, Bouveng R and Ngohe G** forthcoming Productive tensions: engaging geography students in participatory action research with communities *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*
- Routledge P** 2011 Sensuous solidarities: emotion, politics and performance in the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army *Antipode* doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00862.x
- Sharp J P, Routledge P, Philo C and Paddison R** 2000 *Entanglements of power: geographies of domination/resistance* Routledge, London
- Townsend J G, Arrevillaga U, Bain U, Cancino S, Frenk S F, Pacheco S and Pérez E** 1991 *Women's voices from the rainforest* Routledge, London
- Williams G** 2012 The disciplining effects of impact evaluation practices: negotiating the pressures of impact within an ESRC-DFID project *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* doi: 10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00494.x