

## Critical Theory and Culture in the Practice of Historical Geography: A British Perspective

*Cheryl McEwan*

This commentary arises out of an invitation to participate as a panel discussant at the Practicing Historical Geography Sessions at the March 2002 AAG Annual Meeting in Los Angeles. The session organizers asked panelists to consider the different historiographic practices through which historical geography in North America and the United Kingdom has been defined. In this brief response, I wish to make three related points from the perspective of British historical geography, bearing in mind that these might not always be applicable to debates in the North American (or other) context(s). First, the incorporation of critical theory into historical geography continues to inspire suspicion from those who ascribe to more “traditional” approaches but this ignores the fact that historical geography has always been an interdisciplinary endeavor; second, the term “cultural historical geography” is problematic if used to signal the simplistic incorporation of a “cultural studies” approach rather than to connect the changes in historical geography to broad, fundamental changes in historical studies; and third, critical historiographies should not necessarily prevent normative statements about progress within historical geography.

### Critical Theory: Plus ça Change?

I have used both feminist and postcolonial theories/methodologies together in most of my work and, despite their often mutually oppositional and critical stances, I don't consider current concerns inspired by these approaches to be a complete break with previous critical or radical approaches or even necessarily with more “traditional” approaches. Rather, I am in agreement with Richard Schein<sup>1</sup> that these concerns represent a broadening of what constitutes historical geography and are really more

---

Cheryl McEwan is Professor in the School of Geography and Environmental Sciences at the University of Birmingham in Edgbaston, Birmingham, England. *Historical Geography* Volume 31(2003): 99-104. ©2003 Geoscience Publications.

of a “methodological turn.” There are clearly direct linkages between the utopian impulses of Marxist histories, for example, and those of feminism and postcolonialism. Just as postcolonialism is often oppositional to, but capable of, dialogue with feminism, so the different approaches in historical geography ought to be capable of dialogue.

What concerns me, however, is the apparent lack of dialogue within historical geography between those who do identify with and employ critical theory and those who do not. My sense is that this tends to be (but is certainly not always) generational and can be traced back to the schisms in historical geography between those who embraced and those who eschewed Marxist and other radical critiques in the 1970s. Subsequently, all forms of radical and/or critical approaches, be they Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, or postcolonial, seem to inspire suspicion in certain quarters. Writing anecdotally, I have wondered why, for example, an esteemed senior colleague in historical geography actively discourages graduate students from taking training modules in social and critical theory. What is it about theory and/or particular versions of historical geography that seems to generate this refusal of dialogue? As chair of the Historical Geography Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG), I have also heard mutterings that historical geography has been “colonized” by cultural geographers and I have often wondered why those who do embrace critical social theory are deemed not to be historical geographers.

This is not to argue, of course, that there is a simple binary divide of opinion within historical geography because there are also significant differences between historical materialists and those who adopt so-called “post-ist” approaches. So what is it that divides practitioners of critical historical geography? Certainly the language is different and, yes, the language of certain kinds of critical social theory can be obfuscatory. However, it is perhaps methodologies and, in particular, the use of deconstruction, especially in relation to the recovery of subaltern histories, that sets many critical theorists apart. This difference in methodology is perhaps most clearly revealed by the way in which historical geographers use and interpret archives (see, for example, Kurtz<sup>2</sup> and Gagen<sup>3</sup> for discussions of critical approaches to archives). As Derrida suggests, archives are not merely receptacles of the past; concepts of history themselves are shaped by archives. But are current concerns with displacing and deconstructing archives, to reveal absences and agencies in historical records and to critique the power of those who assemble and interpret archives, simply a different way of working critically with archives? The critiques of history by Gramsci and Derrida are really not that dissimilar, for example. But, where Gramsci<sup>4</sup> argues that there is no “history of the subaltern classes” because a lack of class consciousness means that “it never occurs to them that their history might have some possible importance, that there might be some value in leaving documentary evidence of it,” Derrida<sup>5</sup> ascribes a lack of subaltern

historical agency to archives themselves and the interpretive power of those who create them. The aim of deconstructivists like Derrida and Spivak in revealing “histories from below” are not that dissimilar to more materialist histories, except in the methodology used and the ways in which archives are interrogated. Derrida himself asserts that there is no such thing as poststructuralism, so perhaps we should be looking more for commonalities between the concerns of Marxist or other radical approaches and those of feminist and postcolonial approaches rather than constantly looking for oppositional stances.

Historical geography has always been a hybrid subdiscipline shaped by contemporaneous influences and it has always been adept at fostering dialogue with ideas from beyond its subdisciplinary boundaries, however these have been defined. As Catherine Nash and Brian Graham<sup>6</sup> point out, the tendency to bemoan the erosion of historical geography by other subdisciplines or its dilution through the influences of other disciplines ignores the fact that historical geography has always been, to some extent, an interdisciplinary endeavor. Economic and social history, ecology, and social theory have informed past historical geographies as much as feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural history inform the subdiscipline today. This brings me to the question of how we conceptualize the recent changes in historical geography and the terms we use to describe them.

### “New Historical Geography” or “Cultural Historical Geography”?

The refusal of the term “new historical geography” by those who have embraced critical theory is interesting and this may have arisen because of debates elsewhere (for example, in economic and cultural geographies). Clearly, there is a refusal of this term because it establishes a false binary between “old” and “new,” oversimplifies and homogenizes the “old,” diminishes what historical geography has been and overlooks continuities and connections. As I have suggested, the political aims of contemporary critical theory may in fact be more of a continuation of earlier radical critiques within historical studies. In addition, recognizing the importance of culture in history is nothing new and I am, therefore, somewhat wary about the term “cultural historical geography”<sup>7</sup> if it is used to signal theoretical shifts that are assumed to have their origins purely in cultural studies. Marx, E.P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams all emphasized the importance of cultural history, for example.

In the last decade or so, historical geography has begun to incorporate wider debates taking place in historical studies, to question versions of history constituted by the ideology of a dominant group seeking hegemonic power over what it regards as “other” to itself. The cultural integrity of those traditionally excluded from historical discourse (women, the formerly colonized, the materially dispossessed) is recognized, and cul-

tural politics are central to understanding the constant struggle for power. In addition, the source materials for researching historical geographies now include objects, discourses, and practices of popular cultures. Therefore, the term cultural historical geography would seem to be apt in this sense, but it should be considered in terms of connections to shifts in history and other related disciplines rather than simply an incorporation of a “cultural-studies” approach into historical geography. Postcolonial studies, for example, originated in historical studies and it is from here that historiographies of postcolonial approaches should be traced.

Historical geographies are arguably more cultural but this does not diminish their concerns with the materialities of places, spaces, landscapes, and people’s lives, or with history. Thus, as the authors of one recent textbook argue, “The opposition between an empirically grounded historical geography and a purely qualitative cultural geography is clearly reductive and redundant.”<sup>8</sup> In acknowledging the continuities and connections between different historical geographies and between historical geographies and related disciplines, rather than simply focusing on new directions or departures, exclusive and hierarchical historiographies can be avoided. A question related to this is how do we construct historiographies that are at once critical and allow space for the acknowledgement of progress?

### Progress Narratives and Historiographies?

While linear, Whiggish historiographies should be avoided, this should not disallow us from acknowledging progress where progress has been made for particular groups. Drawing on Richard Rorty’s<sup>9</sup> arguments, for example, feminism and the acknowledgement of women’s agency is progress for some groups, if not for others. So we can say there has been progress in all sorts of areas where cultural work has been done in historical geography, but this is about looking at particular struggles and putting them in their historical and institutional contexts. It is about avoiding universalizing statements of progress, but any kind of politics needs some notion of what progress is. If we take anti-sexism and anti-racism, for example, we need to be able to ask what would we like historical geography to look like and we also need progressive ideals and, perhaps at times, a strategic essentialism that allows us to make normative statements about progress.

Michael Storper’s<sup>10</sup> recent arguments are pertinent here. Storper asserts that postmodernism and postcolonialism on the theory side and multiculturalism and cultural politics in political practice were among the most important political developments of the twentieth century. However, he argues that there is a problem with ascribing progress to a supposed and recent turn away from modernism since this denies the significance of other radical versions of history (he discusses the fundamental insights into the rise of capitalism produced by Marxist historians). The “cultural turn” has been a significant—but not unique—contributor to

the production of excellent scholarship on the history of such topics as slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, or the contributions of subaltern groups to culture and science, histories, and cultures of indigenous peoples. In fact, these have done much to correct once distorted accounts of past and present and give dignity to people who were denied it by dominant accounts of history. Feminist and postcolonial approaches (dealing with identity, cultural politics, consumption, racism, sexism, and the relationships between power and knowledge) have had significant impacts over the last 20 years and have brought about change for the better. But, as Storper cautions, we should not ascribe all of the horrors of history to modernity and modernism's way of looking at the world.

In addition, in making these claims to progress, it is also useful to bear in mind Cindi Katz's<sup>11</sup> comments on "minor theory," that we should be more hesitant, we should ask more questions than give definitive judgments, and adopt less self-consciously important position statements. After all, one of the most important advances of the "cultural turn" has been in suggesting that all good social science should be based on some procedures of self-questioning and self-scrutiny, asking Where do our categories come from? Of what and whom are we speaking? In whose name? And giving a proper attentiveness to dialogue and difference, which, as Storper<sup>12</sup> argues, is about intellectual humility rather than relativism. If we do this, we do not close down dialogue with our peers.

## Notes

1. Richard H. Schein, "Practicing Historical Geography. Re-placing the Past?" *Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 7-13.
2. Matthew Kurtz, "Situating Practices: The Archive and the File Cabinet" *Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 26-37.
3. Elizabeth Gagen, "Representing Children's Agency in the Archives of Playground Reform" *Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 53-64.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. and trans. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
5. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1995]).
6. Catherine Nash and Brian Graham, "The Making of Modern Historical Geographies" in Brian Graham and Catherine Nash, eds., *Modern Historical Geographies* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). Nash and Graham are by no means the first to make these arguments; see, for example, Alan Baker. "Editorial: The Practice of Historical Geography" *Journal of Historical Geography* 13 (1987): 1-2 and Michael Heffernan, "Editorial: The Future of Historical Geography" *Journal of Historical Geography* 23 (1997): 1-2.
7. It is important to point out here that the ensuing discussion about the appendage "cultural" in relation to historical geography is written from a British perspective. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the very different trajectories of this relationship in North America. The excellent points that this reviewer made are worth summarizing here. Historical geography in the United States and, perhaps, to some extent Canada, was traditionally allied with Sauerian cultural geography. Many of the debates were genealogically related and many of the practitioners identified themselves as both historical and cultural geographers (for example, Wilbur Zelinsky and Donald Meinig). Cultural historical geography, therefore, has a very different historiography in North America in comparison with the British context. The critiques of Sauerian geography that were brought to bear on cultural geography also had

---

some influence on the shift towards critical historical geography and here, undoubtedly, the U.S. and British contexts come together in drawing on the same intellectual roots (Marxism, post-Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism). Similar points could also be made about historical geography in other contexts that are perhaps even more marginalized in Anglo-American historiographies (the rich traditions of French historical geography spring to mind).

8. Nash and Graham, "The Making of Modern Historical Geographies," 5.
9. Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
10. Michael Storper, "The Poverty of Radical Theory Today: From the False Promises of Marxism to the Mirage of the Cultural Turn," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25:1 (2001): 155-79. I am grateful to Jane Pollard for bringing this paper to my attention.
11. Cindi Katz, "Major/minor: Theory, Nature, Politics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85 (1995): 164-68.
12. *Ibid.*, 173.