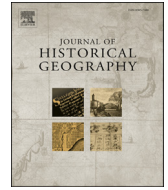




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Geography's relevance debates and new forms of scholar policy activism

Mark Boyle^{a, *}, Audrey Kobayashi^b^a Department of Geography, Maynooth University, County Kildare, Ireland^b Department of Geography, Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

In the context of class and culture wars over the social purpose of the university, it is time to revisit a pivotal question: to whom is the discipline of geography accountable and for what? In the spirit of looking back to look forward, we wonder to what extent and in what ways historiographies of geography that critically interrogate geographers' statements on the discipline's social mission might help and guide us at this hour? Specifically, we work to extract added value from the so-called relevance debates which animated anglophone geography in the 1970s. Characterising the present historical conjuncture as a Gramscian moment of interregnum when the 'old is dying and the new cannot be born', we tender the provocation that it is the responsibility of geographers to advance the cause of a 'progressive populism'. To prosecute this public mission, it will be necessary to recentre the discipline around the figure of the geographer as scholar policy activist, immersed in and a progenitor of a vigilant, contestatory democracy. We conclude that whilst the relevance debates failed to theorise, codify, professionalise and valorise such an academic identity, these debates did bequeath logics and legacies that can fast track this work now.

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At least in the anglophone world, battle for custody of the university has once again become rancorous if not downright noxious. Exposed to unrelenting waves of neoliberal reform and engulfed by bureaucracies arising from new public governance, management and administration models, universities are coming under added pressure to commit more categorically to serving what governments deem to be the national interest. Academics are expected to contribute solutions that governments deem to be efficacious for dealing with twenty first century social, economic and environmental problems. Not only are universities expected to 'provide the wherewithal and the ideas and the backup for corporate capital and big government', they are now being ordered by (neo)conservative critics to align with their revanchist backlash against left-liberal intersectional identity politics, which they disparagingly caricature as anti-democratic 'woke' postmodernism.¹ Given what is at stake, it is entirely unsurprising that many academics and students have been ill disposed to cede turf without a fight; alongside the

menacing spectre of a new McCarthyism, campuses have become electrified in ways not seen since the late 1960s.² The results have been bitter class and culture wars over the social purpose of the university in democratic societies and the future of academic freedom and its limits.³

Debates have focussed on the meaning and implications of this battle for the soul of the university – for the future of the university. Less attention has been paid to its meaning and implications for the future of particular academic subjects. And yet the response of disciplinary *chargés d'affaires* matters, not only for the wider struggle but also for the ongoing health and vibrancy of their fields. It would be disingenuous to imply that geographers have been silent in the face of recent regressive trends in higher education.⁴ But it is a source of concern that the discipline *in toto* has yet to grasp their full import for who gets to be a hired geographer and which geographers get to produce what geographies, where, why and

³ Chronicled and catalysed by provocateurs such as Alan Bloom, Craig Colhoun, Michael Burawoy, David Graeber, Henry Giroux, Jordan Peterson and Niall Ferguson.

⁴ Lawrence D. Berg, Edward H. Huijbens, and Henrik G. Larsen, 'Producing Anxiety in The Neoliberal University', *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 60 (2016) 168–180. Amanda Rogers, Christopher Bear, Mia Hunt, Sarah Mills, and Rebecca Sandover, 'Intervention: The Impact Agenda and Human Geography in UK Higher Education', *ACME: An International Journal For Critical Geographies* 13 (2014) 1–9; Jenny E. Goldstein, Kasia Paprocki, and Tracey Osborne 'A Manifesto for a Progressive Land-Grant Mission in an Authoritarian Populist Era', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109 (2019) 673–684.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mark.g.boyle@mu.ie (M. Boyle), kobayasi@queensu.ca (A. Kobayashi).

¹ David Harvey's Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: The Corporatization of Academia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnrXjyZ3S-A> last accessed 20 April 2023.

² David Harvey's Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: The Return of McCarthyism (Parts 1 and 2), <https://youtu.be/c9EjBOQvufs> and <https://youtu.be/FPdIV4FoP64> last accessed 13 September 2023.

with what consequences. It is time to think again about the social purpose of geographic thought. For if we do not take hold of our discipline and place its future development on a trajectory that is reflective of our values, a hoard of sectional interests stand ready to relieve us of the privilege.

For the record, the task is not to reclaim sovereignty over the development of geographic thought so that geographers and the geographies they produce can evade public scrutiny. The vast majority of faculty members recognise that questions of societal responsibility and accountability are deserving of unconstrained interrogation. But that being the case, these questions are simply too consequential to be surrendered to a conversation convened by sectional interests and limited to circumscribed registers. It is one thing to demand that geographers justify the value of their research to society, it is quite another to appoint oneself as the sole and final arbiter of what counts as useful and relevant research. Such an arrogation ignores and overrides the all-important question that we critically interrogate in this article: To whom is the discipline of geography accountable and for what?⁵

A significant challenge thus presents; how might we craft a proactive, confident and principled — and perhaps even an entrepreneurial, empowering, and enriching — response to this latest demand by our political sponsors to justify to them, and in their reckoning in consequence to wider society, the social value-added of our discipline?

For geographers, whilst the context may be original, the quandary is all too familiar. We have travelled this road many times in our past. Our history, marked as it has been by repeat cycles of political interference, in alliance with chronic self-doubt and status anxiety, has caused us to develop survival skills in the shadow of government dictates and surveillance, to harden our resolve in times of manufactured austerity and to acquire literacy in self-justification. Of course, it is blindingly obvious that we need to tread with care; the past is after all reputed to be a foreign country.⁶ But for reasons of economy and probity we have a duty to consider if past precedent might furnish us with wise counsel at this time. Might historiographies of geography, and the critical reappraisal of past encounters with questions of relevance, clarify our thinking and strengthen our hand at this moment? Are we unlocking enough value from our backstory? Could we be doing more? Should we be doing less?

Without prejudice to what other episodes in our past have to offer, arguably the very hardest of the thinking we need to do today begun substantially only in the 1970s with the so-called ‘relevance debates’ — a phrase used to denote debates on the societal usefulness of geography that played out in mainly anglophone journals.⁷ At least for anglophone geography, the decade of the 1970s was something of a *belle époque*, a period in which hitherto servile geographers finally awoke to the potential of their discipline. It took the subject a century to find its feet, but when it did, it burst into life with a profusion of flowers. A portion of the counsel embedded in this labour remains fossilised in strata long since overlain but more than a chunk continues to be active in the discipline. We benefit by being both forewarned and forearmed. But more than fifty years separate the 1970s from the 2020s, and without due critical

diligence, we run the risk of rehashing dated manifestos for geography, constricting our decision space and luring ourselves into a needless foreclose of options. It is with this in mind that we ask: To what extent and in what ways might the 1970s serve as a teachable decade?

We should be clear that this paper is written by anglophone geographers about debates in anglophone geography and that it is for the most part directed towards an anglophone audience concerned with the future of anglophone geography. The statements of social purpose that we critically interrogate are certainly parochial geographically, but they are also parochial historically. Our supposition is that alongside and complimenting postcolonial deconstructions of global North understandings of disciplinary ‘duty’, ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’, there is value in contextualising manifestos for geography in the sweep of history. The burden that now falls on the geographer is to achieve a greater awareness of and to take responsibility for, not only their location in space and its consequence for the geographies they are capable of conceiving but also for their emplacement in unfolding histories and its consequence for the geographical imaginations they have the ability to flex.

Our article is organised into three parts. In part one, we characterise the present historical conjuncture as a Gramscian moment of interregnum when the ‘old is dying and the new cannot be born’ and tender the provocation that the responsibility that falls on geographers at this hour is to sponsor something akin to a counter-hegemonic *progressive* populism committed to re-democratising democracy and re-politicising the economy for the betterment of the commonweal. In part two, we (re)acquaint the reader with anglophone geography in the 1970s and provide a concise history of the relevance debates which frothed during this decade. In part three, inspired by Gramsci’s rendering of the role of the intellectual in societal transformation, we place the figure of the geographer as scholar policy activist at the heart of a 2020s geography immersed in and progenitive of a vigilant, contestatory democracy. We conclude that whilst the relevance debates neglected and at times actively forbade such an academic identity, these debates did bequeath logics and legacies which can help us to fast track its enunciation now.

On the social purpose of geography in the 2020s: A provocation

The challenge of fashioning a statement of social purpose for geographic thought capable of meeting this moment is a daunting one. In the first instance it requires that we apprehend the contexts in which geographers now work. This presents a formidable analytical challenge. It also amounts to a fundamental political intervention, for who gets to decide which contexts matter? And this is before we even consider what a socially responsible geography might look like in these contexts! Cutting steps through such arduous terrain is a labour which lies beyond the scope of this paper. But we can offer an opening salvo by proposing what we hope will be a productively provocative provocation. We begin by asking, what is this intelligibility of this moment in the *longue durée*?

Writing Volume 1 of his *Quaderni Delcarcere* (Prison Notebooks) in 1929, whilst languishing in Benito Mussolini’s jails and clinics, after nearly a decade of fascist rule, amidst seismic shifts in the Comintern and as the Great Depression began to bite in Italy, Antonio Gramsci famously grasped the historical moment he found himself in as follows: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’.⁸ For Gramsci, the term

⁵ Richard L. Morrill, ‘The Responsibility of Geography’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984) 1–8.

⁶ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁷ See, in particular, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *The Professional Geographer* and the *Journal of Geography*, as well as new journals launched in the period, such as *Area* (1969), *Antipode* (1969), *Progress in Human Geography* (1977), and *Applied Geography* (1981).

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume 1* (1930), JA Buttigieg translation (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

interregnum signified a historical moment during which the existing hegemonic model loses its social license and capacity to command consent and is unable to rule effectively, but yet when there exists no credible alternative compelling enough to replace it.

We too are surely living through a moment of interregnum every bit as consequential as that which Gramsci lived through. A perfect storm of seemingly insoluble systematic weaknesses is bringing anglophone capitalism to the brink of collapse. Underperformance, risk, fragility, and shock are everywhere evident: boom and bust economics, disaster capitalism, a global climate and ecological emergency, widening social and spatial inequalities, a dislocation between representative democracy and popular sovereignty, re-emerging infectious disease, a crisis in mental health, warring imperial hegemony and even nervous chatter about nuclear war, to name but a few. Morbid symptoms too are aplenty, including but not limited to twenty first century culture wars, political pusillanimity, revanchist neoconservative eschatology, illiberal liberalism, illiberal populism, and post-truth politics.

Distinguishing between the politics of distribution and that of recognition, Nancy Fraser argues that for forty years the anglophone world has been dominated by both 'progressive neoliberalism' and 'reactionary neoliberalism'. Both were elite class projects but varied in their relationship to culture wars. Progressive neoliberalism blended market fundamentalism and an elite liberal identity politics, building its base around a globalised hyper-mobile 'creative class'; meanwhile reactionary neoliberalism welded neoconservative patriotism and heroic capitalism and celebrated a chauvinistic ethno-nationalist accumulation project. For Fraser, neoliberalism in both guises has now (virtually) exhausted its technical and social legitimacy, a collapse which has led to a pervasive sense that we exist at a hinge point in history.⁹ One result has been the rise of a regressive 'reactionary populism' platforming a sectarian class politics and rule by the majority for the majority. Whilst challenging the hegemony of both globalising and neoconservative neoliberalism, reactionary populism has worked to exclude cultural minorities who fall outside of the national narrative and has become itself more of a morbid symptom of interregnum than an exit strategy.

Gramsci formed the view that whilst progressive left movements had failed to register let alone adjust their politics to the exigencies of the times, regressive bourgeois nationalists and fascistic forces were not only alert to unfolding voids but adept at exploiting them as opportunities. So dangerous was the fascist threat that even if only for a transitional period, it was the duty of a multiplicity of counter-publics to set aside their differences and to work for a better system, within the system. The mission was to usurp the ruling asymmetry by committing to a passive, long 'war of position' bent on engaging 'bourgeois' parliamentary politics, convening a 'united front', replacing the corporate state with an 'integral state' and 'building back differently'.¹⁰ Endorsing and updating Gramsci's political project, for Fraser the task is to resolve both class and identity politics *together* by working for a 'progressive populism' even if only as a 'transitional waystation'; rule by all for all in the service of social justice, cohesion and emancipation.¹¹

We view the contemporary politics of the university as arising from this age of interregnum. For Gramsci, at the vanguard of any such war of position was the intellectual, fighting for control of

the institutional machinery which manufactures consent. To own the twenty first century, it will be necessary to own the university. For who owns the university will determine in no small way who owns the day after the last day of interregnum. And who owns the social sciences will determine the extent to which democracy is re-democratised, the economy is re-politicised, society is resocialised and the dominant culture left, liberal or conservative. That class and culture wars for custody of the university and its public mission have become so ferocious and filled with rage and vitriol is a sure sign that no single political wing has so far managed to capture the hallowed grounds of the campus.

Deploying Fraser's characterisation of the existing political field, we might argue that the academy sits at the nexus between progressive neoliberalism, reactionary neoliberalism, reactionary populism and progressive populism. For progressive neoliberals the university stands as an elite liberal project whose purpose is to underwrite borderless globalising capitalism; for reactionary neoliberals, an elite (neo)conservative project safeguarding traditional values and supporting national accumulation strategies; for regressive populists, a nativist patriotic project attending to sectarian working class interests, and; for progressive populists, a people's democratising project working for human flourishing and the commonweal. We should not exaggerate the possibilities of the moment. But there is no reason why the university of the future is destined to fall prey to regressive agendas and every reason to fight for its incarnation as a cultural interlocutor of progressive populism (Fig. 1).

Drawing these strands together, we advance the claim that the imperative to repurpose the social mission of geographic thought at this historical juncture arises from and is constitutive of a period of interregnum in which we now find ourselves. Rendered thus, we tender the provocation that the responsibility of the geographer is to support the ever-multiplying rainbow of anti-neoliberal and anti-nativist resistances to amalgamate into a united front and to wage a 'war of position' rooted in a progressive populism that works to scale and extract all the use values social democratic capitalism is capable of yielding. Core to this public mission must be the figure of the geographer as scholar policy activist, fully engaged in and actively giving shape to a state and an economy that works for people and not the other way around.

A concise history of anglophone geography's 'relevance debates'

Immersed in very particular mid-late twentieth century anglophone contexts, there emerged in the 1970s a suite of historically novel radical geographies with disruptive and dissenting ideas about what a truly relevant geography might look like. These radical geographies arose in opposition to the new geography that had been pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by theoretically inclined quantitative geographers bent on developing geography as a nomothetic spatial science. Meanwhile there were some who believed that 'geography is what geographers do' — what did it matter that geography was lacking a metaphysical and methodological core (perhaps beyond some vague weddedness to Deweyian pragmatism) so long as geographers were making contributions to building a better world?¹² The scene was set for a turf war over

⁹ Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019).

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, and Michael Rustin, *After Neoliberalism?: The Kilburn Manifesto* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2015).

¹¹ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² Jim H. Bird, 'Desiderata for a Definition; or is Geography what Geographers Do?', *Area* 5 (1973) 201–203.

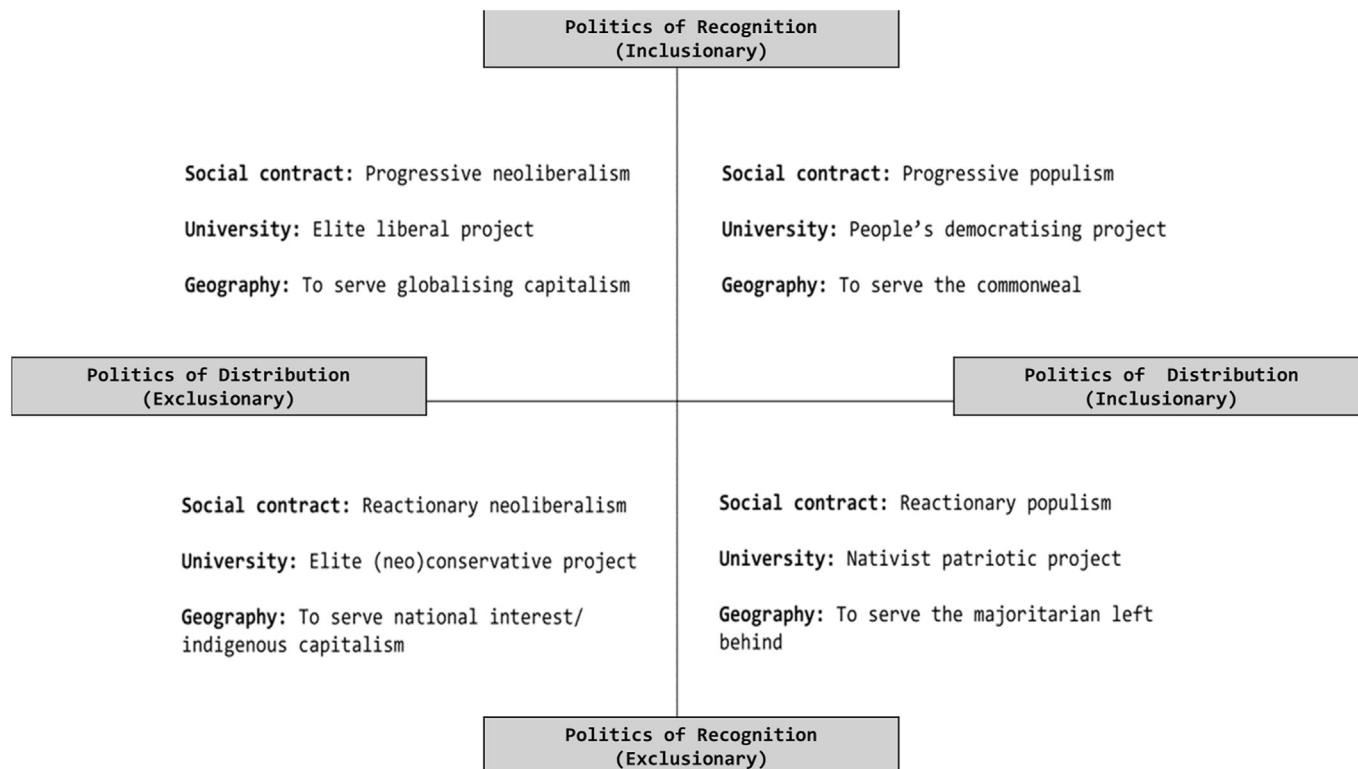


Fig. 1. The dynamics of interregnum politics: social compacts, universities, geographies. (Source by the author)

geography's identity, purpose and future — cue the relevance debates (Fig. 2).¹³

Delusions of grandeur? Geographers as spatial scientists

For British geographer L. Dudley Stamp, by the early 1960s geography had established itself as an academic discipline because it had taken ‘its place among the older disciplines of science, the social sciences and the liberal arts in every university of Britain’.¹⁴ Still, its quest for institutional recognition pivoted upon its applications more so than its theories. In a paper published in the journal *Nature* in 1960, and with reference to Stamp’s *Land Utilisation Survey of Britain* (1930s–1940s) and 1960 book *Applied Geography*, as well as the Polish Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Geography’s Anglo-Polish (1959, 1962 and 1967) and Polish-American (1964) seminars on *Problems in Applied Geography*, Robert Steel sought to raise awareness within the wider scientific community of geography’s applied credentials:

The application of geography to the study of a wide range of problems has made remarkable progress in recent years, partly during, and partly because of, the Second World War. Geography made a substantial contribution to the British War effort both in

the planning of campaigns and in the reorganization of the nation’s economy, and since the War geographers have been active in the field of planning.¹⁵

But deep-seated anxiety about the intellectual identity and coherence of the subject remained. Peter Gould may have been excessively cruel in declaring that before the advent of spatial science, it was ‘practically impossible to find a book in the field that one could put in the hands of a scholar in another discipline without feeling ashamed’, but certainly confidence in geography’s offer to the academy had been eroded by the closure of programmes at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford and the subject’s failure to acquire full membership status of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) until 1966.¹⁶ With excruciating honesty, Eugene Van Cleef disclosed the extent of the discipline’s insecurity in 1955:

Is the status of the science of geography so tenuous after the many centuries during which it has evolved that we must apologize for its condition? Is there something wrong with the science or with the specialists or is it conceivable that geography may still be in a primitive stage with a long road ahead before it attains that maturity which will provide stability and confidence in its tenets? Is it possible that geographers themselves are putting forth exaggerated claims for the worth of their science?¹⁷

¹³ The relevance debates feature in specific texts on radical geography, for example: Alison Blunt and Jane Wills, *Dissident Geographies: An Introduction to Radical Ideas and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000); *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?*, ed. by Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin (Vernon and Victoria, BC: Praxis (e)Press, 2004); *Spatial Histories of Radical Geography: North America and Beyond*, ed. by Trevor J. Barnes and Eric S. Sheppard (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019); *Placing Critical Geographies: Histories of Critical Geography around the Globe*, ed. by Lawrence D. Berg, Ulrich Best, Mary Gilmartin, and Henrik Gutzon Larsen (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁴ L. Dudley Stamp, *Applied Geography* (London: Pelican, 1960), p. 9.

¹⁵ Robert W. Steel, ‘Applied Geography’ *Nature* 192 (1961) 715–717 (p. 715).

¹⁶ Peter Gould, ‘Geography 1957–1977: The Augean Period’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (1979) 139–151 (p. 140–141).

¹⁷ Eugene Van Cleef, ‘Must Geographers Apologize?’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 45 (1955) 105–108 (p. 105). See also Eugene Van Cleef, ‘Whither Geography?’, *The Professional Geographer* 23 (1971) 344–346 (p. 345).

were giving way to slow or no growth, prolonged depression, a welfare state in distress and stalled improvements in the living wage. Contingent wounds such as the 1973 OPEC and 1979 Iranian oil crises cruelly exposed underlying structural weaknesses in the prevailing social contract. Concomitantly, beleaguered anglophone countries found themselves destabilised by globalisation, de-industrialisation, and labour unrest (especially in their blue-collar rustbelt regions) and burgeoning environmental justice, second-wave feminist and human rights movements. The last of Europe's large colonies were falling. Just as with the 1956 Suez Crisis in the case of Europe, the defeat of the United States in Indochina (to 1975) was shattering illusions of western omnipotence.

At least for some geographers, spatial science appeared to have little to say of consequence about the profound social, economic and environmental crises that were emerging all around them. Fiddling with abstract spatial geometries and locked away in computer labs with only oversized servers for company, spatial scientists were out of touch with the research problems that mattered most. New foci, philosophies and methodologies were needed to rescue geography from its self-authorised absence without leave from the concerns of the day and its detached, myopic, and indulgent self-referential 'pure' disciplinary preoccupations.

Dissenting voices: the rise of radical geographies

By all accounts, the 67th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) held in Boston in April 1971 was an affair to remember. In the immediate aftermath, the Institute of British Geographer's (IBG) journal *Area* published 'Two interpretations of American geography,' the first written by Hugh Prince, the second by David Smith. Comparing this meeting to the 1967 Annual Meeting in St Louis, Smith could not help but conclude that a disruptive revolution in geographical thought was afoot, radically exhilarating for some, profoundly discommoding for others. If the spirit of St. Louis was 'the urban whiz-kids from the leading mid-western schools, deftly demonstrating the latest number-crunching techniques', the 'avant-garde of the profession' in boisterous Boston now comprised radical scholars with 'longer hair and sideburns', lamenting the contribution of quantitative spatial science to remediating pressing social concerns and calling for a politicised and values-based geography, explicitly committed to social justice and equality.²³

Boston was to mark the start of what was to become a decade of animated and consequential relevance debates. Michael Chisholm caught the moment by asking whether geographers could agree on 'the criterion of usefulness'.²⁴ Evidently, they could not!

Having published *Explanation in Geography* in 1969, supporting calls for a quantitative positivist theoretical revolution, David Harvey, in a remarkable philosophical turnaround, published a provocation in *Antipode* in 1972, making the case for an alternative radical, revolutionary theory. Its mission was to challenge a counter-revolutionary liberal-humanistic geography which licensed 'the bleeding-heart liberal to pretend he is contributing to a solution when he in fact is not', 'moral masturbation of the sort which accompanies the masochistic assemblage of some huge dossier on the daily injustices to the populace of the ghetto, over which we beat our breasts, commiserate with each other, before retiring to our fireside comforts', and indulgent 'emotional

tourism which attracts us to live and work with the poor 'for a while' in the hope that we can really help them improve their lot'.²⁵ For Harvey:

The quantitative revolution has run its course and diminishing marginal returns are apparently setting in as yet another piece of factorial ecology, yet another attempt to measure the distance decay effect, yet another attempt to identify the range of a good, serve to tell us less and less about anything of great relevance ... There is an ecological problem, an urban problem, an international trade problem, and yet we seem incapable of saying anything of any depth or profundity about any of them. When we do say something, it appears trite and rather ludicrous.²⁶

In 1973 Harvey published his landmark book *Social Justice in the City* in which he accused 'reformist' spatial science of smuggling into geography a neoclassical social theory centred upon market logics such as homo-economicus and pareto-optimality.²⁷ Enduring fixes to tenacious spatial inequalities would not be found until spatial planning and development became properly political, doing more than employing Rawlsian formulations of social justice to compensate for the status quo.

For self-declared communist, and renowned hell-raiser 'wild' Bill Bunge, no internecine war was necessary; in fact, not only could the quantitative revolution and radical geography happily co-exist but the former was a condition of possibility for the latter. Bunge's innovative and pioneering book *Theoretical Geography*²⁸ was an especially celebrated exposition of spatial science. Just as important albeit often disparaged, was his publication in 1971 of *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution* and founding in 1968 of the 'people's geography' Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI) — in partnership with Fitzgerald activist Gwendolyn Warren.²⁹ For Bunge, social activism through quantitative analytical cartography in community with oppressed groupings constituted the essential mission for human geography. Bunge had little truck with bookish scholars, be they dogmatic spatial scientists or dogmatic Marxists (he dismissed the latter as a 'pain in the gluteus maximus') who failed to apply their work beyond the walls of the ivory tower. The point was to change the world but to do so in the name of a Marxist science, not a Marxist ideology:

Anyone else's description of myself always leaves me highly insulted. I recently have been described as the "conscience of geography," "the Billy Graham of geography," even "the Solzhenitsyn of geography," and all these "compliments" from well-meaning friends! I am a scientist. That is enough. I do not make value judgments in my work or worry about ethics or doing right (or wrong). I simply do science, geography.³⁰

For Steen Folke any radical geography had to be Marxist. Others disagreed. Reflecting upon geography's new encounter with Marxism, in 1978 Richard Muir cautioned that more attention needed to be given to non-Marxist radical geographies, 'if the

²⁵ David Harvey, 'Revolutionary and Counter Revolutionary Theory in Geography and the Problem of Ghetto Formation', *Antipode* 4 (1972) 1–113 (p. 10).

²⁶ Harvey, 'Revolutionary and Counter Revolutionary Theory', p. 6.

²⁷ David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University, 1973).

²⁸ William Bunge, *Theoretical Geography* (Lund: University of Lund, 1962).

²⁹ William Bunge, *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Mass, Schenkman, 1971).

³⁰ William Bunge, 'Perspective on Theoretical Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (1979) 169–174.

²³ David M. Smith, 'Radical Geography: The Next Revolution?', *Area* 3 (1971) 153–157 (p. 154).

²⁴ Michael Chisholm 'Geography and the Question of "Relevance"', *Area* 3 (1971) 65–68 (p. 67).

liberating influences of radicalism are not to be undermined by the intellectual tyranny of Marxist-Leninism'.³¹ But it would be erroneous to assume that the early currents of radical geography were confined to Marxism, Leninist or otherwise. Reflecting on the period, whilst recognising the blind spots which arose by dint of the demographic profile of radical geographers (white, male and purportedly heterosexual), Harvey opined:

The radical movement (which I became involved with in 1971) initially mixed together all manner of different political views and opinions – anarchist, Marxist, anti-imperialist, feminist, ecological, anti-racist, fourth-worldist, culturalist, and so on ... (all exploring) the hidden oppressive politics in the so-called “objective presentations” of geographical knowledge served up by the servants of capitalist, state, imperialist and patriarchal/racist power. In that mission we all made common cause, even as we argued fiercely about the details and alternatives ... We were a very diverse group, free to be radical in any way we wanted.³²

Likewise, in his review of the early editions of the radical journal *Antipode* (from its founding at Clark University in 1969–1974), Chris Philo presciently observes:

Many of us never knew about, have forgotten or were just inattentive to the sheer diversity of possibilities for a geographical radicalism which coursed through the early issues. Maybe I am just becoming an antiquarian obsessed with past traces of geographical knowledge in all its forms but I am actually of the strong conviction that there is much to be learned here; that these elements of geography's history have resonances with much that we are presently debating under a heading such as “critical geography” and that there are important implications to be drawn out from an engagement with the discipline's immediately “pre-Marxist” phase for what we might now make of entering a supposedly “post Marxist” phase.³³

Foreshadowing what was later to become known as intersectionality studies, geographers were interested in social justice based on multiple axes of difference. Along with Richard Morrill, Wilbur Zelinsky, Julian Wolpert, David Ley, Black geographers Harold Rose and Donald Deskins, advocated for more work on geographies of race and racism, not least in the academy itself.³⁴ Alas feminist geographies appeared more marginal, notwithstanding important contributions by Wilburn Zelinsky, Alison Hayward and later in the decade Susan Hanson, David Lee, Jacqueline Tivers, Janet Momsen, Jan Monk, and Linda McDowell.³⁵ Meanwhile Richard Peet, Myrna Breitbart, Bob Galois, Gary Dunbar, and David Stoddart wondered aloud about the potential of anarchist geographies in the traditions of Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin.³⁶ And whilst poring to be developing a strictly Marxist theory of imperialism

and underdevelopment, Jim Blaut's loud reflections on the Eurocentric ‘ethnoscience’ which undergirded the ‘colonisers model of the world’ signalled concerns that would later animate the vibrant tradition of postcolonial geography.³⁷

Fuelled by strands of phenomenology, existentialism, theology and idealism, there arose a parallel ‘humanistic’ radical tradition, interrogating the morals, values and ethics embedded in ostensibly value free ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ scientific geographies. With specific respect to planning and place-making for instance, Anne Buttimer, John Eyles, Ted Relph, Andrew Blowers (and vicariously Yi-Fu Tuan), all challenged conceptions of planning as a technocratic and bureaucratic science, insisting instead that as a social practice, land-use zoning and allocation was always saturated with value judgements and implicated in the production of just and unjust outcomes. Meanwhile, mentored by historical geographer and US government advisor Harland Barrows, invested in Quaker theology and service, and an important staff member in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Administration, Gilbert F. White argued passionately that geographers had a moral obligation to put their knowledge and expertise in the service of enhancing human welfare; in his case by working to improve human adjustment to floods, integrated river basin management, and hazard risk management. In *The Professional Geographer* in 1972, White set out his vision for a values-led, public service geography:

Let it not be said that geographers have become so habituated to talking about the world that they are reluctant to make themselves a vital instrument for changing the world. This position will no longer do for research, for teaching at the college level, or for teaching at the high school level. It can survive only at the peril of the society which permits its comfortable and encapsulated existence ... What shall it profit a profession if it fabricates a nifty discipline about the world while that world and the human spirit are degraded?³⁸

Remarkably, the seeds of a much more challenging species of radical geography, post-structuralism, were also evident in the early 1970s. Here, the limits of scientific rationality and other lexicons assenting to the status of truth and logic were surfaced to question the moral authority of those who intervene in the world in the name of reason. Rooted in the radical tradition but gifted with ‘a curiosity too urgent to be throttled’, Wilbur Zelinsky dedicated his 1974 AAG presidential address entitled ‘The demigods dilemma’ to a far-sighted critique of the ‘church of scientism’. In spatial science, geographers had applied a ‘fatally inappropriate model to the world of human beings, an utterly useless, even damaging way of thinking about it.’³⁹ Zelinsky's objective was not to reject spatial science *tout court* but to increase awareness of its deficiencies: ‘Essentially, my position is that of a passenger in a leaky rowboat who finds it necessary to tell his companions that they are using sieves to bail out the vessel.’⁴⁰ If Zelinsky's curiosity was too urgent to be throttled, Gunnar Olsson's was so curious that it was he who was doing the throttling. In strikingly original prose, Olsson questioned whether the ‘reasoning rules’ geographers used to understand why public problems became public problems (classic social scientific alethic logics) were sufficient to progress to ‘social engineering’

³¹ Steen Folke, ‘Why a Radical Geography must be Marxist’, *Antipode* 4 (1972) 13–18; Richard Muir, ‘Radical Geography or a New Orthodoxy?’, *Area* 11 (1979) 322–327 (p. 322).

³² David Harvey, ‘Listen, Anarchist!’ A Personal Response to Simon Springer's ‘Why a Radical Geography must be Anarchist’, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7 (2017) 233–250.

³³ Chris Philo, ‘Eclectic Radical Geographies: Revisiting the Early Antipodes’, (Unpublished paper, University of Glasgow, 1998) n.p.

³⁴ Audrey Kobayashi, ‘The Dialectic of Race and the Discipline of Geography’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104 (2014) 1101–1115.

³⁵ Wilbur Zelinsky, Janice Monk, and Susan Hanson, ‘Women and Geography: A Review and Prospectus’, *Progress in Human Geography* 6 (1982) 317–366.

³⁶ Simon Springer, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

³⁷ James M. Blaut, ‘Where was Capitalism Born?’, *Antipode* 8 (1976) 1–11.

³⁸ Gilbert F. White, ‘Geography and Public Policy’, *The Professional Geographer* 24 (1972) 101–103 (p. 103).

³⁹ Joseph S. Wood, ‘Wilbur Zelinsky, 1921–2013: “A Curiosity Too Urgent to Be Throttled”’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (2015) 1–7.

⁴⁰ Wilbur Zelinsky, ‘The Demigod's Dilemma’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65 (1975) 123–142 (p. 128).

(planning/policy).⁴¹ With what degree of confidence can we act on the world when the spatial vocabulary we have at our disposal to understand that world is so inadequate and inexact?

Debating 'relevance' in human geography

Amidst the effervescence of intellectual novelty, an old foe continued to stalk, the matter of the discipline's institutional security, status and future. With a new decade (1980s) came more fretting and self-doubt: *plus c'est la même chose*.⁴² Neither the new geography of the 1960s nor the radical geography of the 1970s, it was supposed, could secure for geography a future. Geography's survival was dependent upon exploiting its credentials as an applied problem-solving subject.⁴³ Oft-times demeaned as inferior scholarship, geographers should once again valorise applied geography and afford it the status it deserved. Applied geographers were pro-theory pure geographers too, insisting only that such intellectual labour be put to practical use. Without fear or favour to any sectional interest group, applied geographers were also strictly solutions oriented, if that entailed pursuing radical agendas so be it.⁴⁴

The holy grail of applied geography — the nexus between geography, planning and practice — was once again lauded as a key opportunity space.⁴⁵ But there was a wider canvas on which to paint. In 1978, John Frazier and Bart Epstein launched the celebrated and still vibrant annual Applied Geography Conference (AGC) and birthed a dedicated journal *Papers of the Applied Geography Conferences*, later retitled *Papers in Applied Geography*.⁴⁶ The AGC has since played a key role in building applied geography as a rigorous scholarly tradition centred upon bringing geographic insights and analysis to bear on:

all areas of society, including (but not limited to) applied climatology, business & economic geography, conservation, crime, economic development, energy, geographical information science, geomorphology, geospatial analysis, health & medical geography, military geography, population geography,

policy & planning, public safety, remote sensing, resource geography, sustainability, transportation and urban issue.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that applied geographers meandered unevenly within and between different strands of pure and radical geography, aligning and dis-aligning in often surprising ways,⁴⁸ a particular mission developed around placing computerised spatial data analytics in the service of status quo conservative public policy agendas. British by birth and economist by education, Brian Berry moved to the US in 1955 to study in Seattle with William Garrison. A prominent evangelist of quantitative applied liberal geography and orthodox technocratic spatial analytics and planning, Berry called for geographers to bring their problem-oriented approach to bear on pressing social problems by entering into a sustained dialogue with public policy communities. Failure to 'work with and on sources of power' and to become part of society's decision making, he famously warned, amounted to an abrogation of responsibility and act of disciplinary suicide:

I submit that, unless we develop the capacity to respond to such questions, we will find our personal alternatives vanishing as governmental support is shifted to those who can demonstrate the skill. I conclude that if we, as geographers, fail to perform in policy-relevant terms, we will cease to be called on to perform at all.⁴⁹

Practising what he preached, Berry became geography's most renumerated and furthest travelled policy consultant: a status that provoked both acclaim and ridicule.

Berry despised radical geography and became its critic in chief, dismissing the Boston AAG meeting as the 'relevance fiasco'.⁵⁰ His 1980 AAG presidential address entitled 'Creating future geographies', doubled down on his theological investment in the American dream and belief that geographers should root their theories with pride and not reticence in cherished American values and in particular (lightly) regulated economic freedoms.⁵¹ Berry took exception to radical scholarship (by, for example, Bill Bunge, Richard Morrill, Richard Peet and Harold Rose) which, in the wake of the Detroit race riots (1967) and publication of the Kerner report (1968), attributed the 'poor black ghetto' in the United States to racialised capitalism.⁵² In a critical review of Rose's 1972 book *Geography of the Ghetto: Perceptions, Problems and Alternatives*, Berry claimed (a claim that now looks foolish) that whilst racism was indeed a problem, 'considerable progress has and is being made as constraints have been removed and opportunities have

⁴¹ For example, Gunnar Olsson, 'On Reason and Reasoning, On Problems as Solutions and Solutions as Problems, But Mostly on the Silver-Tongued Devil and I', *Antipode* 4 (1972) 26–31.

⁴² Albert J. Petersen and Wayne L. Hoffman, 'The Status of Geography: An 'Attitude-Opinion' Survey of the AAG Membership', *The Professional Geographer* 24 (1972) 146–149; Briavel Holcomb, 'Geography in the Competitive Academic Market-Place', *Journal of Geography* 73 (1974) 40–43; Ron J. Johnston, 'On Geography and the Organisation of Education', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 1 (1977) 5–12; Thomas J. Wilbanks and Michael Libbee, 'Avoiding the Demise of Geography in the United States', *The Professional Geographer* 31 (1979) 1–7; Ronald F. Abler 'What Shall We Say? To Whom Shall We Speak?', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77 (1987) 511–524.

⁴³ John A. Dawson and John C. Doornkamp, *Evaluating the Human Environment: Essays in Applied Geography* (Edward Arnold, London, 1973); John T. Coppock and W.R. Derrick Sewell, *Spatial Dimensions of Public Policy* (Pergamon, Oxford, 1976); Gary S. Dunbar, 'What Was Applied Geography?', *The Professional Geographer* 30 (1978) 238–239; Bruce W. Smith and Joseph G. Spinelli 'A Development Program for Applied Geography: Planning in the Present for the Future', *Journal of Geography* 78 (1979) 45–47.

⁴⁴ Howard G. Roepke, 'Applied Geography: Should We, Must We, Can We?', *Geographical Review* 67 (1977) 481–482; Jan Buursink 'A Concept Between Theoretical and Applied Geography', *Tijdschrift Voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 66 (1975) 194–203.

⁴⁵ Good progress reports chronicling developments in 'Planning and Applied Geography' were provided by Paul J. Knox in *Progress in Human Geography* 8 (1984) 515–524; 9 (1985) 559–65; and 10 (1986) 564–571.

⁴⁶ John W. Frazier, 'On the Emergence of an Applied Geography', *The Professional Geographer* 30 (1978) 233–237; John W. Frazier and Bart J. Epstein, 'Progress in Applied Geography', *Geographical Review* 69 (1979) 350–352.

⁴⁷ See Stephen Gale's call for a 'heterodox geography' rooted in classical pragmatism: Stephen Gale, 'Ideological Man in a Nonideological Society', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67 (1975) 267–272.

⁴⁸ John W. Frazier, 'Applied Geography: Then and Now' *Papers in Applied Geography*, 1 (2015) 8–14.

⁴⁹ Brian L.J. Berry, 'The Geography of the United States in the Year 2000', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 51 (1970) 21–53 (p. 21).

⁵⁰ Brian L.J. Berry, 'More on Relevance and Policy Analysis', *Area* 4 (1972) 77–80.

⁵¹ Brian L.J. Berry, 'Creating Future Geographies', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980) 449–458.

⁵² Harold M. Rose, 'The Development of an Urban Subsystem: The Case of the Negro Ghetto', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60 (1970) 1–17; Richard Morrill, 'Socialism, Private Property, the Ghetto and Geographic Theory', *Antipode* 5 (1973) 84–85; Richard Peet, 'Poor, Hungry America', *The Professional Geographer* 23 (1971) 99–104; Richard Peet 'Inequality and Poverty: A Marxist-Geographic Theory', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65 (1973) 564–571; Richard Peet 'The Geography of Crime: A Political Critique', *The Professional Geographer* 27 (1975) 277–280.

been created for those willing and able to work within the system.⁵³

In a series of barbed exchanges which oft-times degenerated into an ugly brawl, Berry and Harvey traded insults on the merits of each other's books; Berry (1974) lamenting Harvey's 1973 *Social Justice in the City* and Harvey (1975) dismissing Berry's 1973 *The Human Experience of Urbanisation*.⁵⁴ An adversarial relationship was to persist across the decade. Berry revelled in 'goaded' radical geographers whom he believed were lacking in scholarly credentials and referred to as 'malcontents, freaks and drop-outs'.⁵⁵ Instead of striving to burn down the capitalist city, geographers should use their scholarship to reform such cities, securing progress through public policy intervention and the planning system. For Harvey, Berry's 'view from the Hilton ... spiced with some morsels from the library', 'provided dismal faire'. Berry embodied the figure of the 'policy-touting academic mandarin', suffering from 'naive optimism', and dogmatically attached to the partisan 'liberal virtue of objectivity' and to technocratic 'scientific solutions'.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, in his presidential address entitled 'Geography and public policy: challenges, opportunities and implications', delivered at the Annual IBG Conference in Norwich in January 1974, Terry Coppock echoed Berry in warning: 'If we do not seek to demonstrate our skills more actively ... we shall increasingly find that the opportunities are no longer open to us, that our best students will be attracted elsewhere and that other disciplines will fill the roles which we are well qualified to fill'.⁵⁷ Alert to the political winds being blown by the Rothschild report (1971), a report which advocated for commercial contract based research funding, Coppock advised geographers to become more savvy 'to changing university attitudes towards research and about the contributions which geographers could and should be making to policy- and problem-oriented research in fields of the environment and of the use of the earth's resources'.⁵⁸ He proposed disciplinary strategies to 'ensure that such contributions are both larger and of better quality than in the past'. The goal was to provide for students 'a training which will enable them to play a more effective role and meet the need for men and women who combine breadth of vision with technical competence and a skill in formulating and providing answers to the right questions'.⁵⁹ A prodigy of L. Dudley Stamp but with the spatial analytic interests of Ackerman and Berry, Coppock argued for placing quantitative GIS analytic cartography and spatial data analytics at the heart of a new, useful, policy facing geography centred upon environmental management.

In all of this, radical geography presented less as a solution to the debilitating irrelevance of spatial science and more as an impediment to the prospering of a relevant and thriving applied spatial science. Responding to Coppock's address, Harvey posed the question 'What kind of geography for what kind of public policy?' and warned against 'prostrating the discipline at the altar of

national priorities' and practising geography in bad faith with an 'Eichmann mentality'.⁶⁰ For Harvey, in the period 1930–1970 geography had tied its future to the ascendant corporate state, advocating on behalf of its sponsor only inept liberal-humanistic remedies to ingrained structural problems. The relevance debate was not about relevance per se but only about relevance to this state and its projects. For Harvey, the university remained a site where counter-hegemonic strategies could be brought to the boil:

The moral obligation of the geographer, qua geographer, is to confront the tension between the humanistic tradition and the pervasive needs of the corporate state directly, to raise our consciousness of the contradiction and thereby to learn how to exploit the contradiction within the corporate state structure itself.⁶¹

Aligned with their belief that control of the institutions of society would be required to change liberal-bourgeois society, radical geographers believed that control of the institutions of geography would be required to change liberal bourgeois geography. Prior to working 'with and on the sources of power', geographers first had work to do 'with and on their discipline'.⁶²

Responding to Gilbert White's call for the AAG to advocate for public service geographies, Glenn Trewartha protested:

While I do concur with White in his contention that the geographic method has a contribution to make to plans and programmes which seek to cope with societies maladies I must demur when he proposes that it should be a corporate responsibility of our professional society to become an instrument for social change. A crusading spirit in an individual is one thing, it is quite a different matter when it is sought for in a professional society.⁶³

In response to such sentiments, in May of 1974, Harvey joined with like-minded radical geographers (including Bill Bunge, Clark Akatiff, Jim Blaut, Dick Peet, Wilbur Zelinski, Michael Eliot-Hurst, Gunnar Olsson, and Ron Horvath) to found *The Union of Socialist Geographers* (USG). But continued engagement with the AAG provoked the ire of intemperate conservative members, including George Carter, who lamented the presence of Marxist geographers at AAG business meetings and their proposed resolutions, which he construed as seditious, mischievous and divisive. In a vulgar commentary published in *The Professional Geographer* in 1977 and entitled 'A Geographical Society should be a Geographical Society', Carter protested the appearance of 'various strange groups' at AAG meetings: 'Marxist geographers and gay geographers come to mind, and I wonder what next? Are we going to have a table for whores in geography and Russian Communist Geography'.⁶⁴ In reaction, Harvey invited Carter to reflect upon the ideological and partisan status of his supposedly politically neutral counsel.⁶⁵ Lacking the resources needed for self-preservation, the USG morphed into an official AAG Socialist Geography Specialty Group in 1981.

⁵³ Brian L.J. Berry, 'Review of Geography of the Ghetto, Perceptions, Problems and Alternatives', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64 (1974) 342–345.

⁵⁴ Brian L.J. Berry, 'Review of D Harvey's book Social justice and the city', *Antipode* 6 (1974) 142–149.

⁵⁵ Peter Halvorson and Bruce M Stave 'A Conversation with Brian J.L. Berry', *Journal of Urban History* 4 (1978) 209–238 (p. 223).

⁵⁶ David Harvey, 'Review of B.L.J. Berry's book The Human Consequences of Urbanisation', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 65 (1975) 99–103 (p. 100).

⁵⁷ John T. Coppock, 'Geography and Public Policy: Challenges, Opportunities and Implications', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 63 (1974) 1–16 (p. 15–16).

⁵⁸ Victor Rothschild V, 'Forty-Five Varieties of Research (and Development)' *Nature* 239 (1972) 373–378.

⁵⁹ All quotes in this paragraph are from Coppock, 'Geography and Public Policy' pp. 15–16.

⁶⁰ David Harvey, 'What Kind of Geography for What Kind of Public Policy?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 63 (1974) 18–24 (p.22).

⁶¹ Harvey, 'What Kind of Geography for What Kind of Public Policy?', p.24.

⁶² David M. Smith, "'Alternative' Relevant "Professional Roles", *Area* 5 (1973) 1–4.

⁶³ Glenn T. Trewartha, 'Commentary on Gilbert White's 'Geography and Public Policy', *The Professional Geographer* 25 (1973) 78–79 (p. 79).

⁶⁴ George F. Carter, 'Geographical Society Should Be a Geographical Society', *Professional Geographer* 29 (1977) 101–102.

⁶⁵ David Harvey, 'Communication on Recent Comments by Professor Carter', *Professional Geographer* 29 (1977) 405–407.

And so, we return to the second article published in *Area* reflecting upon the AAG meeting in Boston in 1972, this time penned by Hugh Prince. Adopting a sceptical and at times patronising tone, Prince wondered whether an out of touch radical geography, bent on revolution and mired in utopian flights of fancy, might in fact become geography's real relevance problem:

Beyond the talk that was going on within the high walls of the conference centre, many things were happening in the streets of Boston ... Businessmen, planners and administrators sat at their desks directing the rebuilding of sites around the tower and bulldozers pressed on heedlessly with their work of destruction and renewal ... And out in the streets, the citizens of Boston were oblivious to the fact that 1300 geographers were cooped in a concrete tower in the middle of their city ... It was as if no-one had paused to think what was happening outside his own narrow cell'.⁶⁶

Creating new forms of scholar policy activism alongside geography's relevance debates

The late Clive Barnett once asked bluntly: who needs the history of Geography? His objective was to call into question 'the value and relevance of expending energy studying the history of geography as a means of throwing light upon the state of the discipline today'.⁶⁷ Given the intellectual labour involved, greater understanding and appreciation of past geographical traditions was in itself insufficient remuneration. What mattered was what was then done with that knowledge. By this yardstick, historiographies of geography were failing. Too many were guilty of excavating past geographical traditions in splendid isolation from the only context that really matters, the present. The few that had sought to place past traditions in the service of navigating present challenges were lacking in critical self-awareness and insufficiently conscientised to the situated politics of giving new life to old ideas. Growing interest in geography's history risked becoming an impediment — rather than an aid — to disciplinary transformation and progress. Comprehensive amnesia would serve us better.

At least in the context of this article, Barnett's intervention works as an admonishment but not as a recommendation. The relevance debates may have petered out throughout the course of the 1980s but the intellectual resources these debates sponsored continued thereafter to bubble and froth in the discipline and to weigh on its lexicons, calculi and stratagems. Given the proximity of their concerns, it is inevitable that these resources will also bear on any search for a statement of social mission for geography fit for purpose for these times.⁶⁸ Whether we like it or not then, we are condemned to work with manifestos for geography scoped by forbears in the 1970s and the logics and legacies these manifestos bequeathed. It is doubly important in consequence that we demur to Barnett when he calls upon historians of the discipline to solicit, convene and gift futures to given pasts only after extended reflexivity. The relevance debates and the intellectual tools they cultivated must be stress tested anew and permitted to be progenitive on an ongoing basis only by design and not stealth.

The relevance debates articulated three centripetal forcefields for anglophone geography; a novel radical field envisioning geography to be a revolutionary intellectual project, in solidarity with the oppressed and committed to changing the world; a pure field invested in the intrinsic value of the geographic perspective and committed to advancing geography for the sake of advancing knowledge alone; and an applied field construing geography to be relevant only insofar as it proved useful to practitioners tackling public policy problems. Each gave rise to particular academic identities: the scholar activist engaged in theory-praxis and politicised advocacy; the professional specialist, advancing knowledge in the confines of the ivory tower and unsullied by secular distractions; and the practitioner-oriented, problem-focussed translational researcher, consultant and policy wonk. Notwithstanding the unequivocal and staunch department of some geographers, over time the three gravitational poles varied in the intensity of their magnetic pull. When debates were less polarised, each expanded, overlapped and intersected with the others, sponsoring alongside the three anchor identities an unclassifiable mongrel admixture of academic subjectivities — the 'scholactivist', the 'practivist', and the 'translationist' for example. These academic subjectivities persist today and have been further stratified through time (Fig. 3).

Is it too much of a stretch to expect these intellectual tools to do productive work for us at this time? To address this question we need first to understand exactly what work we need these tools to do. In the first part of this paper, drawing upon the scholarship of Antonio Gramsci and Nancy Fraser, we advanced the provocation that located as we are at the trough of an interregnum, it is the duty of the intellectual to sponsor a counter-hegemonic 'war of position' in support of a *progressive* populism. Pursuant of such a public mission we imagined a recentring in the discipline of the figure of the geographer as scholar policy activist — actively engaged in and constitutive of the institutions which govern and distribute resources, wealth and income. The question we face is the extent to which intellectual resources first laid down in the 1970s can help us to invigilate, impact and influence social democratic governance of anglophone capitalism in the 2020s. When the dust finally settles on this century, will our subject be known as a scholarly tradition that stepped up and played its part in scoping impactful solutions to global public problems and in steering humanity to safer shores?

David Harvey perhaps affords us a glimpse of the sorts of geographers and geographies we might need at this time. Erstwhile protagonist in chief of the radical camp, Harvey catches us somewhat flat footed when now arguing:

Capitalism is too big to fail ... a revolutionary overthrow of this capitalist economic system is not anything that's conceivable at the present time. It will not happen, and it cannot happen, and we have to make sure that it does not happen.⁶⁹

For Harvey, only a fool would ignore signs that austerity has returned us to the social conditions which bred fascism in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and that without evasive action it is entirely possible that World War III looms.⁷⁰ Given the period of interregnum through which we are living, it is our duty to govern the existing politico-economic model so that it survives (perhaps just survives) for the foreseeable future but in a form that extracts a

⁶⁶ Hugh Prince, 'Questions of Social Relevance', *Area* 3 (1972) 150–153 (p. 153).

⁶⁷ Clive Barnett, 'Awakening the Dead: Who Needs the History of Geography?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20 (1995) 417–419 (p. 417).

⁶⁸ Mark Boyle, Tim Hall, Shaun Lin, James D. Sidaway, and Michiel van Meeteren, 'Public Policy and Geography', *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* 2 (Boston: Elsevier, 2020): 93–101; Shaun Lin, James D. Sidaway, Michiel van Meeteren, Mark Boyle, and Tim Hall, 'Trajectories of Geography and Public Policy', *Space and Polity* 26 (2022) 77–87.

⁶⁹ David Harvey's Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: Global Unrest, <https://youtu.be/bv6RtBC44UE> last accessed 19 December 2023.

⁷⁰ David Harvey's Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: World War 3: The Resonance of Unwritten History, <https://youtu.be/k8Cxezx97Y8> last accessed 28 March 2024.

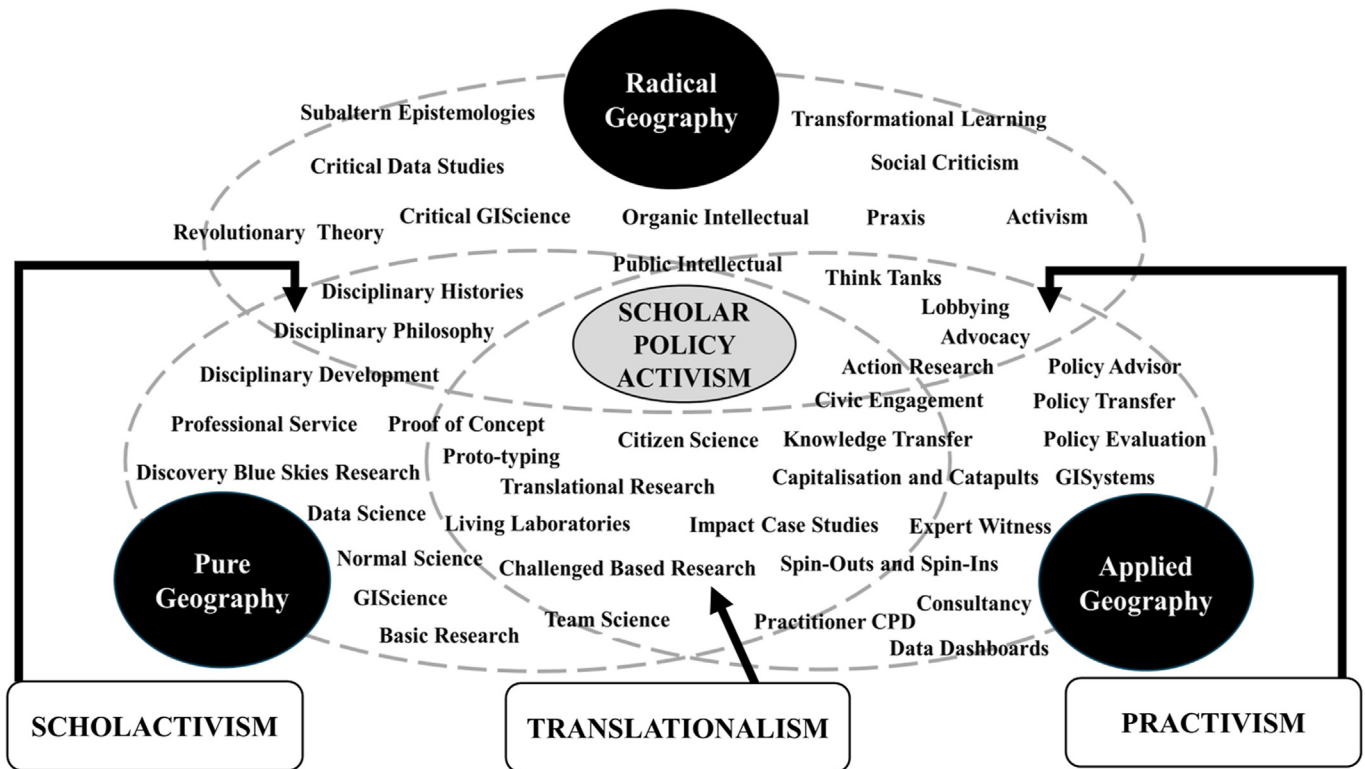


Fig. 3. An ever dividing field? Using the relevance debates to typologies the current academic division of labour. (Source by the author)

seismic scaling of use values and which prioritises universal *buen vivir* over growth:

A socialist program, or an anti-capitalist program, of the sort that I would want is one about trying to manage this capitalist system in such a way that we stop it being too monstrous to survive at the same time as we organize the capitalist system so that it becomes less and less dependent upon profitability and becomes more and more organized so that it delivers use values to the whole of the world’s population — so that the world’s population can reproduce in peace and tranquillity, rather than the way it’s going right now.⁷¹

Have manifestos for geography written fifty years ago lost their symbolic efficiency to the extent that permitting these manifestos to have a future risks doing more harm than good?⁷² Protagonists in the relevance debates after all toiled with questions of public purpose on the eve of the present interregnum, not in its eye. Then the demise of the Fordist-Keynesian model was interpreted as a fixable system error, not the start of an unravelling of the system. Then, democratic institutions still enjoyed a degree of public trust and truth continued to matter in public life. Then, the political common sense centred around varieties of state capitalism and welfare systems and talk of neoliberalism was ridiculed as a fringe oddity. Then globalisation was ascendant, not isolationist protectionism. Then growing wealth and income inequalities and the global climate and ecological crises were not as widely

appreciated. Then the university enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy from its political sponsors. Then, geography was a comparatively less secure academic enterprise, still trying to cipher its niche in the academic division of labour. We could go on.

What is missing for us is the centring figure of the Gramscian intellectual — which we translate and domesticate here using the trope of the ‘scholar policy activist’.

By scholar policy activism we have in mind activism rooted in intellectual inquiry and directed towards the genesis of public policy sensibilities. This activism should be immersed in the epistemic communities that enjoy dominion over the framing of public problems and the constitution of permissible public policy solutions. It would seek not only to impact and influence democratic institutions but to ground the workings of these institutions. It would engage public policy on the basis of being radically conscientised to the embroilment of such policy in power relations. It would strive to co-create policy institutions, policymaking technocracies, and policy Gestalts — not just policy itself.⁷³ It would work to effect a dramatic scaling of the public goods which social democratic capitalism has to give. It would be bent not on exploiting an Overton window to ‘build back better’, ‘fail forward’ or ‘emerge stronger’ but exploiting an interregnum to build back differently.

There will be those who will take issue with our diagnoses. Many geographers practice scholar policy activism without fanfare and as routine; can you not see the great work we are already doing! For sure many geographers did walk this talk in the 1970s and many more do so today. But our thesis is that the choice architecture with which we have been working has systematically

⁷¹ David Harvey’s *Anti-Capitalist Chronicles: Global Unrest*.

⁷² Boyle, Hall, Lin, Sidaway, and van Meeteren, ‘Public Policy and Geography’; Lin, Sidaway, van Meeteren, Boyle, and Hall, ‘Trajectories of geography and public policy’.

⁷³ Mark Boyle, ‘Why Engaged Critical Urban Research Must Place Scholar Policy Activism at its Core’, *Dialogues in Urban Research* 2 (2024) 22–31.

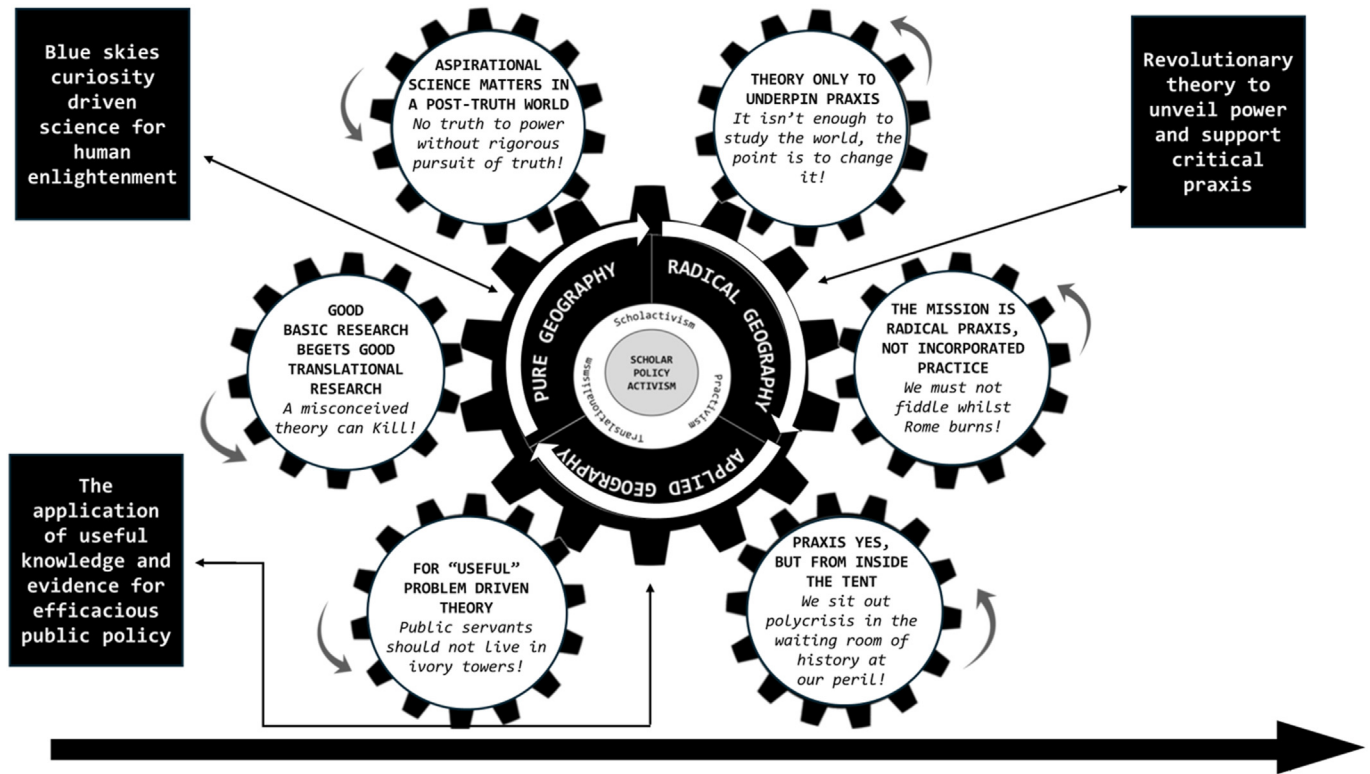


Fig. 4. Cogs powering the wheel? Using the relevance debates to keep scholar policy activism on point. (Source by the author)

denuded and frustrated our capacity to theorise, codify, professionalise, and valorise such an academic subject. Not only was scholar policy activism neglected as a worthy academic identity. It was actively subjugated and even on occasions forbade by the core academic identities enunciated by the relevance debates. For the pure geographer, the prescription was for scholastic non-engagement, for applied geographers, only pragmatic participation and for radical geographers, principled non-participation. Moreover, at best, this figure was only ever partially imagined and articulated in the border geographies that fell between these three stools.⁷⁴ The Gramscian intellectual is a difficulty figure to live up to and perhaps at present there is an insufficient pool of geographers who would be credible applicants for the job.

Nonetheless, it would be an error to jump to the conclusion that recent decades have witnessed a tectonic resetting of the mainstream social contract that has rendered the scholarship of geographers working in the 1970s entirely obsolete. We would be committing an extraordinary act of self-sabotage were we to confine the relevance debates to the dustbin of history. For whilst no longer a source of manifestos for geography acclimated to present exigencies, we conclude that the relevance debates and their antimonies can continue to play an indispensable role in keeping our scoping of scholar policy activism on point. In fact, much of the hard work that we might otherwise have had to do today has already been done for us and by dint of this labour we are in the privileged position of being able to fast track our ambition.

⁷⁴ The possibility of these interstitial geographies was discussed at the time. See Gordon Clark and Michael Dear, 'The Future of Radical Geography', *The Professional Geographer* 30 (1978) 356–359; Richard Peet, 'The Dialectics of Radical Geography: A Reply to Gordon Clark and Michael Dear', *The Professional Geographer* 30 (1978) 360–364.

We end by proposing that we redeploy the relevance debates as cogs to power the forward propulsion of the wheel of scholar policy activism (Fig. 4). Use of this cog and wheel pulley system will involve us in exploiting the productive tensions that emerged between protagonists in these debates. The pure camp reminds us of the importance of fundamental science, aspirational positivism and honest truth seeking in informed public debate; the applied tradition, of the importance of acquiring competencies in the technocracies of evidence-based public policy; and the radical camp of the warning that we are unlikely to make progress if we simply medicate ourselves on a barely modified status quo. But critiques of pure geography also alert us to the dangers of becoming too aloof and out of touch and unwittingly naturalising deeply political theoretical constructs: critiques of applied geography can prevent us from succumbing to naïve, intellectually denuded and compromised scholarship; and those of radical geography warn us of lapsing into uncritical critical geography and hopelessly utopian, partisan and ideological pet projects. Our task now is to find the sweet spot.

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