Critical geography: anger and hope
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What is This?
Social criticism must be as old as society itself.
How can men and women ever have lived together without complaining about the circumstances of their common life. (Walzer, 1988: 3)

Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change. (Wallis, 2004: 203)

I Deradicalization?

Leftist academics in the Anglo-American world,¹ if we are to believe some commentators, have won. Observers on the Right, such as Roger Kimball (1991), warn against the rise of ‘tenured radicals’ within the American academy whose goal is ‘nothing less than the destruction of the values, methods, and goals of traditional humanistic study’ (p. xi). David Horowitz (1998) (author of a recent book on the 100 most dangerous US professors) argues that, despite appearances, the Left is not in retreat, but has seized control of the academy through a calculated 20-year assault designed ‘to politicize the curriculum and infuse it with left wing agendas’ (p. 34). Those Marxist scholars who lament their exclusion from current scholarship will be heartened to learn from Horowitz that ‘discredited Marxism still provides the paradigm for every current radical ideology from feminism to queer theory’ (p. 33). American politicians have begun to propose controls on such radicals, while websites (eg, uclaprofs.com) urge students and alumni to monitor left-leaning professors.

Some scholars on the left, meanwhile, worry that that the Left has become a victim of its own success. Eric Lott (2006) lambasts ‘boomer liberals’, such as Todd Gitlin, Russell Jacoby and Martha Nussbaum, who have, he claims, seized the political limelight and distorted leftist politics.² For Petras (2001), many left intellectuals have become instruments of bourgeois hegemony. He excoriates many leftist academics for legitimizing hegemony through an uncritical use of hegemonic concepts and categories, such as ‘globalization’ or the ‘information revolution’ (cf. Baeten, 2002). Once radical researchers now crave the symbols of bourgeois prestige (the Chairs, prizes, grants and so on), and tailor their radicalism in order to secure a successful career, allowing nostalgia for a distant radical past to become a substitute for serious analysis, for example, or embracing a form of ‘cocktail leftism’, where conventional research and teaching during work time is separated from after-hours radical chitchat. Put more bluntly, ‘it is . . . chic to be radical. But it usually
proves to be compatible with dominant tendencies’ (Brand and Wissen, 2005: 15).

Critical geography has also ‘made it’, becoming deeply entrenched within the academy. At the same time, many share Cloke’s (2002: 588) frustration with ‘our apparent inability to retain a critical political edge in human geography’. For Baeten (2002), urban geography (his focus) is ‘losing its political sting. It has been institutionalized, streamlined and finetuned … it now fails to crystallize in a convincing political project that would provide a credible alternative for the poverty-generating capitalist shaping of today’s city’ (p. 148).

Some point to structural factors by way of explanation. Sayer (2000) identifies several systemic changes at play, such as the collapse of traditional class politics and the rise of political movements around feminism, ecology, sexuality and the increasingly multicultural nature of many societies, all of which have foregrounded complex ethical and political issues that went beyond the traditional class and distributional agendas of the old Left. Others point to the absorptive capacities of the dominant society: the critic is supposed to be a maverick and outsider who ‘challenges friends and enemies alike; he [sic] is self-sentenced to intellectual and political solitude’ (Walzer, 1988: 12). Yet liberal culture ‘absorbs criticism, finds it interesting, even titillating … The angry and alienated social critic bangs his head against a rubber wall. He encounters infinite tolerance when what he would like is the respect of resistance’ (p. 16).

Castree (2000) notes the professionalization of the Anglo-American geographic left through dynamics of tenure, departmental and disciplinary socialization, the monopolization of knowledge and accreditation. As a result, ‘yesterday’s untenured “radicals” are today’s “critical” professors, fully integrated into the day-to-day structure of the tertiary sector’ (p. 961). He notes that this professionalization has its down side (notably in fostering a detached ‘academicism’), but refuses to characterize this as a sellout, noting that the arrival of the geographical Left has generated very real material benefits in terms of teaching, research, employment and publishing. As someone who remembers the institutionalized suspicion toward critical scholarship of the late 1980s, I take his point. Yet others view such institutionalization in a more jaundiced light. Euan Hague (2001) compares the first, self-confidently radical issues of Antipode with its later manifestation as ‘Antipode, Inc.’, lamenting the loss of the irreverence, optimism and creativity of earlier years of radical geography (cf. Waterstone, 2002).

On taking over the editorship of Antipode, Peck and Wills (2000) noted the changing landscape for radical geography, but concluded in more pragmatic terms: ‘Being radical in the late 1960s involved a very different cluster of beliefs, ideas and affiliations than might be expected today’. They note: ‘The optimism, excitement, and audacity of those times have been eroded, and radical geographers now often have more modest ambitions and expectations of change’ (p. 2). Yet Castree and Wright (2005), when they became editors, sounded a more affirmative note. Noting that ‘effective opposition to power’s multifarious operations seems to us notable for its paucity rather than its profusion’ (p. 1), and recognizing the irony and paradox that the journal burgeons at a time when, outside the academy, Left-wing ideas are marginal, at best, they still refuse a ‘glum defeatism’ (p. 7). They argue that the very incorporation of critical scholarship within the academy, while not without its attendant costs, creates a space for the left, protected by academic freedoms, to create new knowledge about the world that might make a difference: ‘Just because we cannot be certain how much what we say matters beyond the precincts of the university, we should not assume that our analyses and ideas count for nothing at all. Just because radical scholarship has now become a recognized currency in academic promotions does not mean it is nothing more than this’ (p. 6). This seems, to me, to be a point worth underscoring. While
academics are only one group of ‘meaning entrepreneurs’ (Baron, 2002), they are institutionally well placed. We must guard against a messianic and elitist view of the power of the academic to effect social change. Yet we can also recognize the transformative power of ideas, particularly when well written (Mitchell, 2006).4

Some attribute this deradicalization to the practice and epistemology of critical geography. Purcell (2003) laments the institutional divisions among critical geographers, the effect of which is to produce ‘islands of practice’, separate from one another: ‘scholars whose main focus is capitalism are too often intellectually and politically isolated from scholars of patriarchy, racism or heteronormativity’, he laments. ‘Similarly, those who investigate more global scale relations too rarely collaborate with scholars of local-scale processes’ (p. 319). Purcell calls for a more synthetic critical geography, predicated on collaboration across research traditions, allowing for the integration of diverse theoretical frames and analytical scales. Conversely, other observers worry that ‘critical geography’ has simply become too diffuse and open-ended (Urtibe-Ortega, 1998). In her survey of critical geographers, Wendy Gibbons (2001) reports that many respondents saw the ‘critical’ label as too diffuse and inclusive, preferring ‘radical’ as a personal badge.

For others, theory is to blame, some complaining at the dangers of overtheorization. As Gregory (2004: 249) reminds us: ‘The world does not exist in order to provide illustrations of our theories’. Others lament the Jesuitical tendencies of contemporary social theory. Waterstone (2002: 663) rhetorically asks whether ‘it is really necessary (and for whom or for what purposes) that we specify more carefully the exact articulations between Lefebvre and Nietzsche and Heidegger?’ (p. 663). Peet complains against ‘obscure topics dressed in weird philosophical clothing’ (2000: 952). The subtitle of Storper’s (2001) paper – ‘from the false promises of Marxism to the mirage of the cultural turn’ – suggests that he is taking few prisoners in his critique of the ‘poverty of radical theory’, although he concludes by suggesting something of a rapprochement between cultural-turn and political-economy radicals.5

Certainly, the rejection of the certainties of modernist theory where, ‘in the last analysis’, all can be attributed to an essential structural logic, has led to political drift within critical geography. Sayer (2007), however, provides a constructive response to the anti-essentialist critique. While we should reject determinism, he argues, and ideas that phenomena have fixed and invariant essences, it is the case that what any person or object can do is constrained and enabled – we make our history, but not under conditions of our own choosing. Anti-essentialism, if it ignores this, is in danger of losing its critical purchase (cf. Eagleton, 2006). While there are clear dangers in inappropriate universalistic claims, Sayer notes, we also need to identify some common human capacities for flourishing and suffering if we are to do critical social science. To argue that such capacities are always culturally relative or socially constructed is to forgo the use of ethical categories such as justice and oppression.

There is urgency to such arguments. Justice seems in short supply, in a world of sharpening and almost incomprehensible suffering. Yet given that most of us remain unastonished by the fact that ‘famines in the South are as routine as they are preventable; that Bill Gates earns more each hour than all the workers in Liberia do in a week; that sexism is rampant, despite the advances made by feminism; or that murderous discrimination remains so common worldwide as to seem a natural part of the human condition’, the Left has failed (Castree and Wright, 2005: 1): today’s radical geographers, perhaps, ‘have few objective reasons to be optimistic’ (p. 4). Yet it is also the case that our history, as Howard Zinn (2004) reminds us, has been one not only of cruelty, but of sacrifice, courage and
compassion: ‘There is a tendency to think
that what we see in the present moment will
continue. We forget how often . . . we have
been astonished by the sudden crumbling of
institutions, by extraordinary changes in
people’s thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of
rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick
collapse of systems of power that seemed
invincible’ (p. 70).

II Critical?

My dictionary defines critical as ‘censorious,
fault-finding’; ‘pertaining to a crisis, involving
risk or suspense’; and ‘marking a transition
from one state to another’. As I noted in an
earlier review (Blomley, 2006b), critical geog-
raphers are adept at the first task, but seem
more reluctant to take risks or imagine transi-
tions. In this review, which follows my prelim-
inary attempt at outlining the lineaments of
critical geography (Blomley, 2006b), I try to
take the latter task more seriously.

Social criticism, for Walzer (1988), entails
at least two tasks: to question the platitudes
and myths of a society, and to express the
aspirations of a people. Quoting Breytenbach,
the critic ‘holds his [sic] words up to us like
mirrors’. The view of society that is offered is
an unstinting and unsettling one, stripping the
veil from the reality: ‘The critic looks first and
then he forces the rest of us to look’ (p. 231).
Yet, Walzer argues, in mirroring the world,
the critic reveals the disjunction between an
ideal and an actual world: ‘[t]he point of hold-
ing up the mirror is to demonstrate that the
ideal world is not here, or we’re not there.
The stories that we tell ourselves about the
realization of freedom and equality are
untrue: one has only to look in the glass and
see’ (p. 231). The three tasks of the social
critic, for Walzer, are to expose the deceits
and illusions of his or her society, to give
expression to a people’s sense of how they
ought to live, and to insist that there are
‘other forms of falseness and other, equally
legitimate, hopes and aspirations’ (p. 232).

Effective criticism, for Walzer, must abandon
the mountaintop, as well as the wish to
command and direct. The goal is to make the
world visible, rather than making it over (cf.
Fay, 1987).

A number of critical geographers have
given to rethink the normative and the polit-
ical in more sustained and systematic ways
(Wills, 2007). This has prompted a number of
recent conversations concerning the future of
critical/left geography. In an opening salvo,
Thrift and Amin (2005) refuse to be nostalgic
for some imagined past, when the Left spoke
with one voice. They reject those who would
give Left geography marks for revolutionary
content (‘presumably 7/10 in the 1960s but
only 4/10 now’), and see no crisis in Left
geography (p. 221). They welcome the Left’s
current multiplicity of voices, arguing that
this produces an ‘unending, always-changing’
(p. 220) political conversation without any
ontological anchor. Rather than seeing the
pluralism and diversity of critical geography as
a problem, they embrace it as a basis for an
agonistic politics: ‘our disagreements’, they
argue, ‘can provide the basis for connection’
(p. 222). Through a survey of the changing
nature of political commitments and eco-
nomic and social conditions, they identify a
series of emergent forms of political engage-
ments that are sustained, they argue, by polit-
ical commitments that, they believe, provide a
basis for a ‘heterarchical Left’. These include
a democratic experimentalism, a ‘transversal’
politics, a refusal to privilege certain scales of
activism, and a belief in the constitutive and
productive power of disagreement. They
firmly reject both Marxism as a privileged
pivot point (see Hudson, 2006, in response),
and a ‘gate-keeper politics’ that seeks to regu-
late membership in the club of the Left. Yet
they similarly reject a ‘free-for-all Left polit-
ics’, insisting on the retention of certain
values of the Left (notably, an optimistic
engagement with politics; reflexivity; and a
‘necessary orientation to a critique of power
and exploitation’ (p. 221).

Amin and Thrift’s optimistic intervention
has, not surprisingly, come under scrutiny.
Watts (2005) also argues that a changing
world requires a changing Left: ‘If the Left is to mean something politically ... it needs fresh concepts, or, at the least, old concepts reworked mercilessly in the light of the present’ (p. 651). He does not offer an agenda, but a sketch of the brute realities to be confronted. While he cautiously accepts the need for a reflexive and self-critical Left, as argued for by Amin and Thrift, he insists that some of the old certainties must surely remain, notably a commitment to democracy, social justice, green politics, and internationalism, combined with a rejection of the solicitations of the market and its ‘commodification of everything’. Unlike Amin and Thrift, Watts holds to a class-centred Left: it is only from the ‘irreducible centrality of class, exploitation and the contradictory reproduction of capitalism as a dynamic and changing system that a sense of alternatives can emerge’ (p. 652). ‘A Left without apology and guarantees – from this side of the Atlantic – seems to me to now strike a great common accord’ he insists (p. 651).

N. Smith (2005) is far more damning of Amin and Thrift’s ‘neo-critical geography’, as he terms it. He laments the co-optation of the Left’s best ideas by neo-liberalism’s ideological ‘mulching machine’. The radical upsurge in geography, he notes, is not exempt. Amin and Thrift’s argument, for Smith, ‘represents a manifesto for a neo-critical geography that fits us all comfortably within the fold of a supposedly ‘ethical’ Blairite capitalism’ (p. 898). Their rejection of hierarchy and embrace of a ‘flatter world’ is, for Smith, too close to a liberal logic of pluralism:

It would indeed be nice if the world were flat and non-hierarchical. Many of us have long been struggling for just such a result ... But it is precisely the self-serving trick of neo-liberalism to assume that such a flat world is already there, hierarchy is gone, equality rules. The world may be flat for those who can afford a business class ticket to fly around it, gazing down on a seemingly flat surface … For those in Bombay shanties … the price of the same business class ticket to see the world as flat is ... prohibitive ... Insofar as neo-critical geographers see no hierarchy, then, they can show us no location of power that needs to be talked back to, challenged, or transformed’ (N. Smith, 2005: 894).

Despite their rejection of a gate-keeper politics, Smith condemns Amin and Thrift’s cursory dismissal of Marxism, and lambasts their ‘us and them’ division between an ‘hierarchical’ and heterarchical’ Left as an ‘intellectual and disciplinary embarrassment’ (p. 897). Despite their appeal for no more policing, Amin and Thrift do precisely that, Smith argues.

III Utopia

Smith notes that we cannot stop at critique: ‘we need a sense of how to put things together even in the insistent continuance of critique ... Eyes on the prize’ (N. Smith, 2005: 898–99). How to win the prize is one question. The exact nature of the prize, however, remains more elusive.

For Oscar Wilde, any map that did not have utopia on it was not worth looking at. Yet utopianism is regarded in many quarters with a good deal of suspicion. And with good reason: unitary totalizing blueprints have too often proved disastrous. Yet the utopian impulse remains omnipresent, and is no exclusive domain of the left. Capitalism, Ollman (2005) notes, is adept at turning human dreams and aspirations into lotteries and sporting events. For Harvey (2000) neoliberalism is a deeply utopian and teleological project, premised on process (individual liberties, realized through the market) and risk-taking. Other domains of science rely upon explorations of the imaginary (Baeten, 2002): sustainability, for example, is a deeply utopian concept.

In the mid-1970s, Zygmunt Bauman (1976) described socialism as intrinsically utopian. Contemporary critical geographers, however, are better at mapping current dystopias than imagining utopic alternatives. The demise of utopian thinking, however, can have debilitating effects, being ‘symptomatic of a closing down of the imaginative horizons of critical thinking and even a slide into a reactionary acquiescence to dominant
understandings and representations . . . and to the injustices of existing conditions’ (Pinder, 2002: 237). Gerry Pratt (2004) cites Meghan Morris, who worries that the tendency of critical scholars to retell the ‘same old story’ of capitalism, racism and patriarchy, can create the impression that nothing has, or can ever be otherwise. ‘The ethical, utopian, political impulse of feminism’, Morris argues, ‘is the belief that things – the systematic production of social difference – can and must be changed. Feminist theory is a limited resource if it lacks the subtlety not only to diagnose the specificity of this production, but the vitality to animate social change’ (p. 9). For Barnes (2001) ‘critique should be directed from a sense of what a better world would be like’ (p. 12).

Despite the battering that leftist utopian thinking has received, it has not been entirely abandoned in critical geography. The authoritarianism of high modernist utopianism, some note, can be abandoned without giving up the dream of better worlds. For Sayer (2000), utopias need not signal either the unattainable or an authoritarian blueprint, but can be thought of as a thought experiment in living otherwise. From a critical realist perspective, this does not amount to prediction or projection, given the contingency of social conditions; ‘what can reasonably be requested is that we explore as far as possible what the causal powers and liabilities of alternative forms of social organization are likely to be’ (p. 162). He cautions against extending principles appropriate to one social sphere to another, and urges careful judgement in thinking through normative standpoints. (Does it privilege a particular group? Is it feasible and desirable?)

For Harvey (2000: 17), ‘[t]he inability to find an ‘optimism of the intellect’ [rephrasing Gramsci] with which to work through alternatives has become one of the most serious barriers to progressive politics’. He seeks a dialectical utopianism that is spatiotemporal, drawing from the existent internal contradictions of capitalist society. Harvey aims to avoid either the constricted utopias of spatial form that treat space as a mere container for social action, or a purely processual utopia that evades closure. He embraces a dialectic that mediates between form and process, rooted in current realities yet pointing toward liberatory possibilities, identifying several interlinked ‘theatres of insurgency’, none of which is uniquely privileged, in which ‘human beings can think and act, though in radically different ways, as architects of their individual and collective fates’ (p. 234). The emphasis, as noted here, is on the transformative power of the ‘insurgent architect’, rather than on vanguardism and a radical revolutionary break. This, he notes wryly, is ‘a long revolution’ (p. 238).

The utopian possibilities of the city has also inspired critical geographers (Lees, 2004; Pile, 2005). Pinder (2002) identifies several strands of urbanism utopian thinking that coalesce around expressions of desire for a better way of being and living. Desire, for Pinder, works utopically in revealing the gap between present conditions and desired alternatives. Rather than a blueprint utopia, this ‘transgressive utopianism’ – found, for example, in the writings of Lefebvre and the situationists (cf. Merrifield, 2006), or more recently in Leonie Sandercock’s call for ‘cosmopolis’ – is resistant to closure and always in process, Pinder argues. As expressed in the writings of Iris Young, for example, it is fully conscious of the divide between that which is desired and the world as it exists, yet thinks of the former as an already incipient yet unrealized possibility, latent within current realities. Loretta Lees (2004) identifies a number of utopian strands within urban theory, such as scholarship that finds a form of emancipatory alienation in the shock of urban experience, or Benjamin’s transgressive readings of consumer culture. Contributors to her edited volume seek utopic and emancipatory geographies in many urban places, including film, planning and sex. Brown (2004), for example, brings together gay cruising and the Situationist-inspired ‘Reclaim the streets’
movement, to suggest that both ‘foster new forms of homoerotic communality that can potentially contribute to a re-evaluation of meaningful human interaction and community formation’ (p. 92). Such work also alerts us to the need to take seriously the remarkably creative work of ‘critical geographers’ outside the academy, actively engaged in a spatialized politics of anger and hope in the many sites of civil society. The recent exploration of the ‘right to the city’ is also utopian, insofar as it invites us to imagine a city structured according to more democratic and inclusive forms of copresence and possibility. Yet, to the extent that such accounts draw from Lefebvre’s grounded theorizations of space and the moment (Merrifield, 2006) they depart from blue-sky utopianism.

Utopia can be built, some geographers suggest, with the master’s tools: the most effective political moments, for Warren (2004), ‘take recognizable moments of the current world and refashion them in innovative – sometimes shocking – ways in order to transcend the complacency of the status quo’ (p. 10). She seizes upon the utopian potential of GIS, rejecting the technologically essentialist criticism of the technology as innately compromised, arguing that it can be understood as ‘part of the longer trajectory of people’s struggles with and against the machine within industrial capitalism’ (p. 5).

The ‘where’ of utopia varies: despite its name, utopia has a geography. As noted, many privilege the city as the crucial site. Others are much more localized: Pratt (2004) finds a utopian vitality, refreshingly, in ‘the good company of those who have committed their daily life to social change’ (p. 9): the activists of the Philippine Women’s Centre whose work she illuminates through feminist theory. This localization echoes Safford’s (2004) moving evocation of the ‘places of hope’, the little plots of ground (the congregation, classrooms, streets, factories) from which activism and optimism emerge. Others turn to the nation: effective criticism, for Walzer (1988), is rooted in a shared national discourse, rather than an appeal to class. Similarly, Unger and West’s (1998) utopic proposals are squarely American, resting on a radical extension of a national ‘religion of possibility’: ‘America – this monument to the genius of ordinary men and women, this place where hope becomes capacity, this long halting, turn of the no into the yes – needs citizens who love it enough to reimagine and remake it’ (p. 93), they claim.

A global utopia is evoked in the statement of purpose (Smith and Desbiens, 1999) of the International Critical Geography group, a loose network of like-minded geographers from Europe, Asia and North America. The manifesto’s title, ‘A world to win’, has a triple meaning: ‘It expresses our political ambition in geographical terms; it indicates the global breadth of that ambition; and it makes clear that changing the world requires a lot of work but that victory is there for the winning’. Internationalism is embraced ‘because we believe that for too long it has been possible to divide people with similar interests on the basis of national difference’ and ‘because the social systems and assumptions of exploitation and oppression, as expressed in the celebration of ‘globalization’, are international’. To be a ‘critical’ scholar, it is claimed, means, in part, ‘to demand and fight for social change aimed at dismantling prevalent systems of capitalist exploitation; oppression on the basis of gender, race and sexual preference; imperialism, national chauvinism, environmental destruction’. Critical scholarship refuses ‘the self-imposed isolation of much academic research, believing that social science belongs to the people and not the increasingly corporate universities’ and embraces ‘existing social movements outside the academy aimed at social change’. Programmatically ‘[w]e are critical because we seek to build an alternative kind of society which exalts social differences while disconnecting the economic and social prospects of individuals and groups from such difference’. Granted, such an utopian vision is sketchy at best, but then, manifestoes often are. Yet they can still be inspirational and world-making
There is, for me, something refreshing in the ICG’s affirmative and optimistic zeal. For too long, utopia has been the exclusive domain of a neoliberal capitalist ascendency. It is time to recover (or, more accurately, acknowledge the already existing) utopian impulse at the centre of critical scholarship.

IV Emergence

While not a geographer, Boaventura de Sousa Santos offers a compelling model of the engaged, critical scholar. For years he has worked in grounded, collaborative research with favela communities in Brazil, while producing sophisticated scholarship that grapples with questions of globalization, law and power. His work is also useful in pointing us beyond negative critique in a related, but distinctive way. In particular, he suggests that scholarship can assist in undoing dominant forms of knowledge that seek to render just and humane alternatives invisible, while also helping to reveal those alternatives already in our midst. In a discussion of neoliberal globalization, he notes the way the prevailing economic order ‘owes its hegemony to the credible way in which it discredits all rival knowledge . . . [through] discrediting, concealing and trivializing knowledges that inform counter-hegemonic practices and agents. Faced with rival knowledges, hegemonic scientific knowledge either turns them into raw material . . . or rejects them on the basis of their falsity or inefficency’ (Santos, 2004: 237). It becomes crucial, then, to learn from organizations such as the World Social Forum which, Santos suggests, recognize that ‘there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice’ (p. 238). Consequently, the WSF works to counter dominant logics of non-existence that work to disqualify, render invisible, unintelligible and discardable. What is needed, he argues, is a ‘sociology of emergences’ that can ‘disclose, and give credit to, the diversity and multiplicity of social practices in opposition to the exclusive credibility of hegemonic practices’ (p. 240).

A number of geographers have pursued related projects with powerful effect. J.K. Gibson-Graham notes the ways capitalism is made to appear as a singularity, without peer or equivalent. All other economic forms consequently appear as residual or marginal moments, compared to a capitalism that appears fully realized and self-sufficient. The effect is to discourage alternative economic projects, as they will ‘necessarily be marginal in the context of Capitalism’s exclusivity’ (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 258). In her more recent work (eg, Gibson-Graham, 2005) she has sought to reveal and nurture, if you will, the geographies of economic emergence by mapping the remarkable diversity of actually existing alternative economic spaces, and collaborating with activist organizations (eg, www.E2M.org) in order to revalorize and resubjectify such non-capitalist alternatives (Lawson, 2005). Related work (eg, Lee, 2000; Leyshon et al., 2003) on alternative economies seems to offer similarly liberating potential.

Such scholarship reflects a form of analysis that dispenses with some of the (perhaps self-important) rhetorical ornaments of ‘critique’ yet achieves small scale ‘demystifications’ of the social and political world, using theoretical languages to reveal discrepancies, contradictions, and failures. As David Delaney notes (personal communication, 2006), these analyses need not entail any coherent and articulated vision of the good, but rather may provide a means for the reader to think the unthinkable. And, with that in mind, why not rethink other axes of power? Why stop with the economy? Take, for example, property. Like the economic, property is another remarkably obdurate and apparently self-sufficient category, that calls out for an unpacking. Despite its appearance, property is diverse and contested. It is far from settled (Blomley, 2004). One intriguing task, in this regard, is the recovery of the commons as an analytical and ethical category. Prevailing conceptions of property have rendered the commons invisible or marginal at best, or
treated it in instrumental and narrowly self-interested terms. Yet a growing number of scholars have pointed to its contemporary relevance. Naomi Klein (2001) suggests that worldwide oppositional movements are inspired by ‘a radical reclaiming of the commons. As our communal spaces – town squares, streets, schools, farms, plants – are displaced by the ballooning market-place, a spirit of resistance is taking hold around the world’ (p. 82). James McCarthy (2005) documents proliferating calls to roll back privatization and create or reclaim commons of many kinds, at every scale, from the atmosphere to woodlots, to pharmaceuticals, water, culture, broadcast spectrum and cultural knowledge (cf. Boyle, 2003). David Harvey (2003) suggests that the features of so-called primitive accumulation identified by Marx remain powerfully present in contemporary capitalism. The continued displacement of peasant populations, the privatization of collective assets, and the conversion of collective (state and common) right into exclusive private property all attest to the presence of what he terms ‘accumulation by dispossession’. The defence of the commons against this appropriation provides a basis for the political project of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2004). Uncovering the commons in our midst, then, can become a powerful exercise (Blomley, 2006a).

Of course, only ‘uncovering’ the marginal, or contesting dominant, representations is inadequate. Hudson (2006) worries that the cultural turn in economic geography (and, one might add, other fields) is in danger of ignoring the deeply engrained and brutally operative realities of capitalism. Language games, while necessary, are insufficient. Private property, for example, is sustained by huge institutional and ideological social and political investments, and backed by massive force. A realistic recognition of such realities is needed. Similarly, as scholars like McCarthy (2005) point out, the commons can easily become exclusionary and antidemocratic, depending on the scale at which it is conceived. Entangled as it is with capitalism, the commons needs to be analysed in a clear-eyed and cautious way (McCann, 2005). Yet, the optimism of ‘emergence’ should not be summarily rejected, particularly when coupled with tactical forms of activism: for Santos (2004), the project ‘consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledge, practices and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the Not Yet) upon which it is possible to intervene so as to maximize the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration’ (p. 241).

V Ethics
Any utopian or ‘emergent’ project, as it moves from the ‘is’ to the ‘ought’ is, by definition, normative. Yet the normative is too often either left unacknowledged or actively suppressed in critical social science. As Sayer (2000) notes, this means that the standpoints from which the social world is evaluated by critical scholars are uncertain. Calls for ‘empowerment’, for example, can be annoyingly imprecise and unconsidered. Inconsistencies and disagreements amongst the critiques (implicit or explicit) are too often left unexplored. Yet any critical project, Sayer argues, must of necessity imply some sense of a better way of life. This does not mean, however, that a stronger focus on normativity will make things clearer, for deciding on the good is enormously challenging. Sayer (2000) also notes that conventional normative political and ethical theory tends to be sociologically and geographically naïve. He thus seeks a ‘normative theory which [is] more attuned to the patterning of social life, with its concrete geographies and histories’ (p. 187).

Geographers have gone some way toward articulating such spatialized theories, offering a normative grounding both for the critique of actually existing human geographies, and for the making of better futures. Such careful normative analysis may be useful in avoiding the excesses of critique, **tout court**, in which reform is rejected out of hand in place of a wholesale reconstruction (Corbridge, 2004),
allowing us to better evaluate the benefits of alternatives. Such ethical projects are also utopian and emergent, and can weave the commitments of disparate traditions. Recent explorations by geographers of the ethics of care, for example, offer intriguing examples of the intermingling of socialist and feminist morality. S.J. Smith (see Smith and Easterlow, 2004; S.J. Smith, 2005) draws on the socialist idealism that underpinned the formation of the European welfare state, predicated on an ethic of altruism, mutual responsibility, and reciprocity, and a feminist ethic of care, focused on the importance and value of the giving and receiving of care in the conduct of human life.\(^\text{11}\) She invites us to imagine an extension of both to the domain of the market (notably, the private housing sector). Given the dominance of an individualized logic, such a normative extension may appear a stretch. Smith argues, however that pre-existent policy languages, as well as the already existing normative valuations of private actors, make such a reformattting feasible (cf. Ettlinger, 2004; McDowell, 2004). Paul Cloke (2002) has also argued for the political value of certain strains of Christian ethics, such as \textit{agape}, both as ethical anchors and a basis for a committed form of engagement ‘for the other’ that is emotional, connected and committed.

So, to conclude, as Smith’s paper reveals, the normative turn, utopianism and the geographies of emergence are closely related. Utopianism ‘speaks of the need to articulate and promote alternatives, some of which exist in embryonic form \textit{within} capitalism’ (Watts, 2005: 652). Put the other way, the project of those such as Gibson-Graham is motivated not simply by an empirical recovery of non-capitalist alternatives, but by a utopian project of ‘extension’. Critical geography must also remain critical of the social and political realities of the present, but also alert to, and perhaps productive of, better futures. We need sharp, incisive critiques of existent geographies of power and violence, yet not at the expense of a careful, considered utopianism.

We need, in short, a critical geography animated by both anger and hope.

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**Notes**

1. My comments in this review concern Anglo-American critical geography. The experience of dissident academics in the other parts of the world, of course, is likely to differ, often radically.


3. Though Barnes (2001) is cautious about the argument that early forms of radical geography were more straightforward: ‘[b]oth then and now there is only the common difficult and halting task of offering social critique . . . This insistent task confronts the younger set and old geezers, critical and radical geographers, and you and me’ (p. 12).

4. I will return to the question of the appropriate location for critical geography (inside the academy, for example, or more externally oriented) in my final report.

5. Brown (1996) provides a snappy and relevant critique of critical anthropology. He worries at the ways in which ‘resistance’ has become a central theme in the study of social interaction: ‘If there is any hegemony today, it is the theoretical hegemony of resistance’ (p. 729). As a result, ‘the heteroglossia so passionately advocated’ by many contemporary authors ‘begins, in the aggregate, to look alarmingly like monoglossia’ (p. 729). Resistance, consequently, is to be attributed to such a dizzying array of often ephemeral social relations, he fears, that the term is in danger of losing any analytical and political utility.

6. The self-policing of the Left is often noted. So, for example, several respondents to a survey of critical human geographers identified
the internal surveillance and policing of what counts as critical geography as restrictive and circumscribing (Gibbons, 2001). That said, distinctions need to be drawn between authoritarian attempts to maintain the party line and a constructive dialogue concerning what is to count as critical, left, or progressive. While self-policing happens across the discipline (who is to be a ‘medical’ or a ‘health’ geographer, for example) the stakes are surely higher in critical geography by virtue of its self-declared politics. I am also conscious that these progress reports could constitute just such a policing. For example, I noted earlier (Blomley, 2006b) that critical geography can easily be a flag of convenience for shoddy and uncritical work. I would be glad to hear from others with different views of critical geography, and its future.

7. One discussion of the more vexed historical relation between utopianism and gender is that of Greenway (2002).

8. Briefly, these comprise the embodied person, the social construction of the self; the collective, militant particularism and political action, the production of built environments, translation and the identification of commonality, and the ‘moment of universality’ (meant here as the moment of judgment, commitment and praxis, rather than some form of existential closure). The full chapter (no. 12) in Spaces of hope deserves a closer reading than I can provide here.

9. Gibson-Graham is (are?) a composite author, produced through the collaboration of Julie Graham and Kathy Gibson. The collectivization of the solitary authorial voice is, itself, a politically intriguing departure from the individualizing norms of academic production. I hope to consider ‘critical’ forms of authorship, address and writing in a subsequent progress report.


11. The historical relationship between feminist and critical geography has been rather vexed with some feminists feeling, for good reason, excluded from ‘the project’. Some of the exchanges following the inaugural International Conference of Critical Geographers in Vancouver in 1997 (see Environment and Planning D, 16(3), 1998) suggest some important tensions. However, the theoretical diversification of both has brought something of a blurring of the distinction between them. Longhurst (2002) notes that feminist geography has moved away from an exclusive attention on gender as an axis of differentiation. In this, she suggests, the divide between critical and feminist geography has continued to dissolve (see also Brown and Staeheli, 2003). Dias and Blecha (2007) challenge such assumptions, which presume that feminist geography is no longer needed as a distinct analytical frame. It is not that feminist insights have been so fully incorporated into critical geography as to render them redundant, they argue, but rather that they have yet to fully receive their due.

References


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