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'Critical of What?': Past and Current Issues in Critical Human Geography¹

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Abstract

The paper examines how agendas of social change and emancipatory politics have and continue to influence the evolution of intellectual traditions in academia. The paper focuses on critical human geography, which is currently experiencing unprecedented institutional acceptance. In this context, the paper asks two questions: First, what role have agendas of social change played in the historical development of critical human geography? And second, what are some of the issues currently facing its practitioners? Part one of the paper provides the socio-historical context to the evolution of critical human geography. Part two explores issues currently facing critical human geographers by presenting excerpts from the results of a questionnaire on critical geography that was distributed by the author to human geographers during the months of March and April 2001. Issues explored by respondents include the politics of self-identification, activism and the academy, and the policing of what counts as critical and perceived scholarly legitimacy.

Introduction

The past century has witnessed growing scepticism over what has historically been claimed as geographical knowledge. Sensitivity to the connections between place, identity, and landscape has resulted in a re-mapping of the intellectual terrain of geographical thought. This shift has contributed to the emergence of critical human geography, a diverse set of ideas and practices within human geography² linked by “a shared commitment to emancipatory politics within and beyond the discipline, to the promotion of progressive social change and to the development of a broad range of critical theories and their application in geographical research and political practice” (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 126). Critical human geography is not homogenous in its composition, nor is it a dominant component of the discipline as a whole. In fact, it was not until the interwar period of the twentieth century that a decisive division between human and physical geography took place. It took an additional twenty years for critical geography to evolve and show its presence in any concerted way in North America and Western Europe.³ However, the past decade reveals a notable shift in the status of critical human geography as an intellectual endeavour and a political practice culminating in a recent conference in British Columbia, Canada. The conference is regarded by a number of scholars as a discernible ‘moment’ of crystallization for critical geography. Of this shift, geographer Noel Castree writes: “Critical geography’ has become the privileged descriptor for Left geographical work. Indeed, it was given a certain institutional weight and legitimation in the form of

the Inaugural International Conference of Critical Geographers (IICCG) in Vancouver in August 1997” (Castree 2000, 956).

Castree is not the only one who identifies the IICCG as a significant turning point in the discipline. Reflecting on the imminence of the second International Conference on Critical Geography held in South Korea in August 2000, geographers Caroline Desbiens and Neil Smith wrote:

In geographical circles, 1997 may turn out to be significant for other reasons: it was the year in which a very different vision of global geography was launched, one which puts a radical twist on [Casper] Weinberger’s assertion of the importance of geography. In August ... approximately 300 geographers, activists, and academics from 30 different countries and five continents came together in Vancouver for the [conference] organized by faculty and graduate students at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia. (Desbiens and Smith 1999, 379)

Since 1997, a growing wave of conferences, listserves, organizations, and scholarly journals reveal a continued interest in and concern about the place of critical perspectives in geography. Conferences organized around the theme of critical geography include *Beyond the Academy: Critical Geographies in Action*, held at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UK) in September, 2001. Listserves include the crit-geog forum. Groups and organizations include the International Critical Geography Group and The People’s Geography Project. Journals include *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*. Although there appears to be a great deal of commonality in the general goals of critical geography, there is also much debate surrounding fundamental premises and practices. Among the more pressing concerns is the very meaning of “critical human geography”: Who decides what is critical? Critical of what? For whom is it critical? In the context of rapidly changing institutional cultures, shifting academic expectations and the phasing out of some geography departments altogether, these questions are acutely relevant, not just in geography, but equally in other intellectual traditions where critical perspectives play a part.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of agendas of social change and emancipatory politics in influencing the evolution of intellectual traditions within academia. Focussing on critical human geography, the paper explores emergent issues and aims to stimulate further debate about critical ideas and practices in the discipline at a time when critical human geography is enjoying unprecedented institutional acceptance. In this way, critical human geography can be taken as a illustrative tool to reflect on similar questions in other academic contexts. In part one of the paper, I present a sketch of the evolution of critical human geography in the Anglo-American world and point to some of the catalysts that influenced its development. The aim of the overview is not to provide a comprehensive review of the history of the discipline, nor is it intended to imply a timeless essence of geography which, like the places and people that fell under the scrutiny of geographers in past eras, was assumed to lay in wait for its necessary development into what it “ought” to be. This would be to reproduce what geographer Robert J. Mayhew describes as the process of “justifying [geography’s] status as an independent discipline in the modern division of knowledge ... [by producing an] essentialist historiography [that] teleologically locates geography’s historical identity in an institutional framework” (Mayhew 2001, 394). Rather, the purpose and value of providing a socio-historical context to the evolution of critical human geography is that it contributes to a better understanding of the complex interweaving of social movements and political ideas with a still-shifting intellectual tradition. In part two of the paper, I explore some issues currently facing human geographers by presenting excerpts from the results of a questionnaire on critical geography that was distributed by the author to human geographers during the months of March and April 2001.⁴ The front line narratives provided by human geographers reveal aspects of the internal tensions and external pressures that continue to shape the discipline.

Part One

Characteristics of Early Geographical Knowledge and Practice

Geography as a body of knowledge, concerned with a particular spatial scale (the earth as a whole), can be traced back as far as the second century AD, with Ptolemy's *Geography* as a key text. Geography's "early modern period" has been traced to the Renaissance, with the humanists' renewed interest in early geographical texts such as those of Ptolemy, and the "discovery" of the Americas (Mayhew 2001, 387). During this era, a decidedly modern shift in power and geographical knowledge occurred in which an emphasis on visualization and scientific truth gained central importance. Scholars have traced this shift, if only metaphorically, to Captain Cook's navigation of the Pacific Ocean. It was during Cook's voyages that the quest for observable, scientifically-derived truth became the central criterion of discovery. While first-hand encounters with "undiscovered" places and people had always been the *modus operandi* of discovery voyages, what changed during this era were the methods of representing and legitimating beliefs about what was "found" (Gregory 1994, 5).

Specifically, the European scientific revolutions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries introduced new methods of direct observation, classification, and comparison based on reason and rationality. Landscapes, flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples were all subjected to new regimes of truth-gathering. These classifications came to be explained through a series of oppositions between the West (rational, mature) and the Other (irrational, backward). It is here that the importance of the visual gained so much sway. For these reasons, many human geographers speak not of geographical knowledge production, but rather of geographical imaginations:

The process of exploration did not merely overcome distance; it created "imaginative geographies." The explorers "conquered" truth not because they exposed the inner secrets of the regions in which they travelled, but rather because they established particular ways of reading these landscapes. (Driver 1992, 31)

Representations of conquered landscapes, its indigenous populations, and their conquerors were woven together to produce new regimes of truth, traces of which remain fixed in global political, social and economic arrangements. During this time, cartography became a dominant form of representation for capturing knowledge about distant landscapes and people (Harley 1992; Huggan 1989). The legacy of cartography as a powerful textual medium can be seen in the current popularity of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a computerized map-making tool. GIS continues to hold a privileged place in geographical scholarship, although the past decade has seen increasingly inventive applications by neighbourhood groups, First Nations communities, and environmentalists.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new imperial age of exploration was underway in the West. This was a time when a scarcity of "undiscovered" spaces on the globe lay in tension with rapidly expanding global ambition. This phase in the history of geographical knowledge coincided with rampant industrialization in Europe and America. Parallels have been drawn between the birth of the discipline of geography and the emergence of this new phase of capitalist imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Driver 1992, 27). Up until this point, geography was not understood in concept or popular practice to be a construct of institutions, but a mode of writing, or a genre (Mayhew 2001). Of geography's task and textual format in the early modern era, Robert Mayhew writes: "Geography books were essentially gazetteers, with headed paragraphs for conveying information about the nations of the world, starting with mathematical location before moving on to descriptive geography" (388).

The institutionalization of geography as an academic discipline is often associated with a number of “founding fathers.” Although the scope of the paper does not permit an overview of their respective contributions to the formative discipline, important figures include Halford Mackinder, the first reader in geography at Oxford (Mayhew 2001, 389), and early American geographer, Carl Sauer, commonly associated with the Berkeley School of geographical thought (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 45). The first separate department of geography offering graduate work in the United States was founded in 1903 in Chicago. In 1904, the major professional organization, the Association of American Geographers, was established (Cox 1976, 185). Geography as an academic discipline in Britain has just recently entered its second century, with Oxford University’s recent celebration of its first one hundred years (Mayhew 2001, 383). Early twentieth-century geography in North America and Western Europe concerned itself largely with examining regional variations in human-environment interrelationships. The 1920s and 1930s saw more specialization in either human or physical geography (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 353-354). As geography became institutionalized in academic settings, its origins as “a thoroughly practical and deeply politicized discourse” (Gregory 1994, 8) made the development of critical perspectives under its auspices particularly intriguing.

Post-War Geography: “The Quantitative Revolution,” “Radical Geography,” and Beyond

Anglo-American geography underwent a series of significant transformations during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, the so-called quantitative revolution confirmed geography’s “longstanding commitment to positivism” (Johnston 2000, 980). The engine of the quantitative revolution was spatial science, a positivist approach to solving geographical problems, which aimed to produce spatial generalizations based on precise calculation (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 580). The social and political upheavals of the 1960s inspired the launch of radical geography, a response to the social and political events of the 1960s and 1970s, which transformed the discipline in the Anglo-American world. Radical geography was as much a response to changes in society as it was a criticism of prevailing assumptions in academic geography. In particular, radical geography emerged just as the quantitative revolution seemed to have achieved near-hegemonic status (Johnston 2000, 980). Radical geographers rejected the spatial determinism implicit in spatial science, instead seeking to place questions of geography within broader social and political contexts. They emphasized context and relationships between places and people and broadened the geographical research agenda by considering previously neglected issues including poverty, hunger, urban decay, and social inequality.

Radical geography soon extended to privilege Marxist analyses in relation to geographical problems. Radical and Marxist geographies became concurrent schools of thought, the former being concerned with general critiques of mainstream geography and under-examined geographical problems, while the latter emphasized links between the geography of capitalism and political and economic processes in the wider society. By the late 1970s, Marxist geography had come to govern radical approaches to geography. A decade later, however, cracks were beginning to show in the dominance of Marxist geography. The notion of a common left politics pivoting exclusively around class-based concerns became less and less palatable to a range of other critical geographies that began to gain ascendance during this time. Two notable additions to the agenda of left geography were feminist geography and postcolonial geography.

Feminist geography dates from the mid-1970s, but its origins are clearly linked to the American women’s movements and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Among the early concerns of feminist geographers was the role of women in geographic professions and as objects of geographical study. Early feminist geographers challenged the orthodoxies of traditional Western geographical practices, arguing that these concerned themselves primarily with the experiences of men. The geographies of women, as assessed by women themselves, focused attention on the specificities of women’s experiences of space and place while seeking transformations not only to geography as a discipline, but also to gender relations in the wider society

(Bondi 1990, 438). A particularly important text was *Geography and Gender* (Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG [Institute of British Geographers] 1984). Widely held as a ground-breaking collection, the book astutely captured issues that had been long ignored within the discipline, while at the same time foreshadowing issues of future significance in geography. Feminist geography continues to flourish as a rich and heterogeneous field of human geography in its own right.

Although it continues to share many of the concerns of feminist geography, in particular, a commitment to challenging unequal social relations, postcolonial geography began primarily as a move to address the impacts of imperialism on non-western cultures. Postcolonial geography aimed to expose the complicity of geography in imperial and colonial projects dating back hundreds of years to the European eras of exploration. Particularly significant for geographers who adopt a postcolonial analysis are the ways that indigenous peoples became subject to the same systems of classification and truth-gathering regimes as landscapes, flora, and fauna. The ensuing oppositions between the West (rational, civilized) and colonized peoples (irrational, backward, depraved) are dichotomies that postcolonial geography seeks to break down, and which, it is argued, remain fixed in modern imaginations.

By the end of the 1980s, left geography had arguably moved towards the mainstream. What began as an action-oriented, grassroots, anti-establishment movement in the 1960s had by the late 1980s become institutionalized into the wider discipline. Geographer Noel Castree argues that, by the turn of the twenty-first century, a comprehensive “professionalisation and academicisation” of leftist geography was complete (Castree 2000, 956). Today, the agenda of critical geography is seemingly limitless. Characterized by internal specialization and philosophical pluralism, it includes geographies of gender, disability, sexuality, environment, youth, sub-cultures, new-age religion, and more. The so-called “cultural turn” in geography, referring to the intellectual shift that has brought questions of culture to the forefront of contemporary debates in human geography and beyond, is thoroughly evident (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 141).

The Socio-Historical Context for the Development of Critical Human Geography

If we take the post-war period in North America and Europe as the starting point for the emergence of critical human geography in the West, some general observations can be made about the role that agendas of social change have played in its development. First, sweeping societal changes beginning in the 1960s inspired a host of new social movements including civil rights, feminism, and anti-poverty movements. This social agitation produced a number of possibilities for change in many different contexts. Second, because universities were not immune from the pressures exerted by the broader society, institutional reforms ensued. These included, in particular, systematic questioning of existing disciplinary structures and organizational logic as they pertained to the framing and validation of knowledge. In the case of geography, this meant challenging the exclusionary legacies of geographical research and practice. Third, in addition to the societal and institutional catalysts listed above, methodological changes were also afoot. Fundamental changes in the social order of knowledge production stemming from both of the above factors meant that geographers began to adopt critical perspectives in their research with increasing frequency. For critical geographers, this meant integrating a sensitivity to constellations of power/knowledge and human subjectivities into geographical problems relating to place and landscape. Feminist theory, critiques of knowledge production (particularly scientific knowledge), postmodernism, and identity politics played an important role in this regard. Geographer Ron Johnston notes that this was a time when “geographers explored other disciplines widely, much more so than the members of other disciplines explored geography” (Johnston 2000, 980).

The practices and assumptions fundamental to critical human geography continue to evolve, re-shaping not only critical geography but also human geography generally. The value of providing a socio-historical

context to the evolution of critical human geography is that it contributes to a better understanding of how agendas of social change have and continue to influence intellectual traditions within academia. Another benefit, as the second part of the paper will show, is that it helps shed light on some of the issues currently facing human geographers. Part two explores issues currently facing critical human geographers by presenting excerpts from the results of a questionnaire on critical geography that was distributed by the author to human geographers during the months of March and April 2001. This part of the paper evokes more questions than it does answers but succeeds in pointing to new avenues for research on this topic.

Part Two

Current Issues in Critical Human Geography

When geographer Doreen Massey delivered the 2001 Progress in Human Geography lecture entitled, "Geography on the Agenda," she urged geographers to reflect on the discipline's potential social role and current popular image. In the lecture, Massey argues that the discipline of geography should be more confident of its own specificity, and its role in addressing some of the most critical global issues of our time:

Some of the biggest and most pressing issues of our era are, not solely but none the less absolutely inherently, geographical. Whether it be globalization, the rapidly shifting mappings between society and place, or the relationship between (and questioning the mutual conceptualization of) society and nature. Space, place and nature. Each of them is at the heart of major questions of our time and each of them is in need of, and indeed is in the process of, being reimagined. (2001, 8)

Clearly the issues currently facing practitioners of academic geography are numerous and diverse, but it would be difficult, if not impossible to imagine them apart from a host of unprecedented social, economic, environmental, and political global changes. Of these still unfolding circumstances, geographers Caroline Desbiens and Neil Smith (1999) write:

Where geographical difference is increasingly catered in prepackaged form, the message is that the spatial configurations of race and gender, sexuality and class, nationality and religion, are either irrelevant or inimical to global oneness, as are the social theory and political activism that have brought them to the forefront. And yet the defense and assertion of local difference is at times equally violent and reactionary...Globalization is not beyond geography but is instead an intensely geographical project. (1)

The motivation for circulating the questionnaire on critical human geography is largely bound up with the tensions and global developments to which Massey (1995, 2001), and Desbiens and Smith (1999) refer. Just as past conditions infused the discipline of geography with new practices and assumptions, current social and political arrangements (combined with past legacies) are producing new configurations of the relations between human geography and agendas of social change. In presenting excerpts of the questionnaire results, the intention is not to suggest universality in the issues and concerns raised by academic geographers. Rather, the purpose is to add nuance and texture to far-reaching questions by examining the perceptions of a relatively small number of human geographers. In this sense, the following discussion is far more suggestive than it is conclusive. In summarizing emergent issues, I have presented those questions which address the following broad issues in particular: the politics of self-identification, the nature of critical perspectives, and

activism and the academy. The full questionnaire encompassed a number of other issues that fall beyond the scope of this paper.

Methodology

The questionnaire was distributed during the months of March and April 2001 and was comprised of eighteen structured and semi-structured questions. The method of distribution of the questionnaires was informal, relying on a network of contacts known to me, or referred by geographers known to me. An introductory letter was emailed to each potential respondent. If he or she agreed to participate in the study, the questionnaire was then emailed as a file attachment. Completed questionnaires were returned by email or surface mail.

Some level of sympathy to critical geography on the part of respondents can be assumed. It is not the goal of the paper to examine the views of “mainstream” geographers—for lack of a better term—or the views of geographers who object to critical geography. The motivation for the questionnaire was to begin to unravel some of the complexities that surface within the practices and philosophies of a group of scholars, many of whom I would argue share a basic level of commitment to critically oriented geography.

Of the eighteen geographers whom I invited to participate in the study, thirteen agreed. Of the thirteen, six are based in Canada, three in the U.K., two in the U.S.A., one in Germany, and one in Austria. The academic positions of the respondents include Ph.D. students (three), a post-doctoral researcher (one), lecturers (four), professors (three) and research associates (two). Some respondents hold two or more of these positions concurrently. Of the thirteen respondents, nine are female and four are male.⁵ Selected aspects of the findings are presented thematically mirroring the questions that were asked of respondents. The questions appear in bolded, italicized text.

Questionnaire Responses and Discussion

- *Please describe the focus of your research and/or teaching*

Because of my interest in geographies of the city, I wanted to contact geographers whom I knew, personally or by reputation, to be engaged in research relating to urban problems. What I found was that the network of respondents quickly expanded to include geographers with a varying range of research interests relating to human geography. I found that even those geographers whose primary area of focus was reported to be city-based, generally responded to the questions in a way that reflected broader issues in critical geography as a whole. The list of research and teaching interests of respondents includes:

- Feminist geography and race
- Economic Development and Southeast Asian Studies
- Urban food-systems, labour organizing and gender issues
- Urban social geography, urban planning
- Regional systems of knowledge-intensive collaboration in developed and developing countries. City centre-periphery interactions
- Feminist geographies, gender and urban change
- Place and the politics of identity, especially in relation to cities
- Eastern European cities
- World regional geography, urban geography, geographic thought, feminist geographies
- Geographies of gender and sexuality in the city and beyond

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- Political activism, feminism, democracy, citizenship, immigration
- Political economy of urban change, feminist geography, struggles to empower disadvantaged communities, state policy and law/legal rights, disability issues, barriers to disabled women's activism
- Development and political geographies
- Urban and cultural geography with a focus on fringe, youth and nightlife activity
- Mobility as metaphor and practice

The range of research and teaching interests reported by respondents is significant for at least two reasons: First, it gives a sense of the scope and variety of topics that fall under the umbrella of human geography. Second, it shows a clear interest in issues of social justice such as feminism, activism, disability rights, gender and sexuality, identity politics, labour organizing, and race. What may seem like an obvious fit with what could be considered to fall under the banner 'critical human geography' was proven to be less than straightforward when the geographers were asked about their self-identification.

- *Do you identify yourself as a critical human geographer? Why or why not?*

These are pivotal questions, the responses to which reveal intriguing aspects about the ways that the respondents perceive and position themselves *vis-à-vis* the wider discipline. Only six out of thirteen respondents replied with an unequivocal "yes" to the question. The other respondents indicated a range of sentiments that ranged from "yes and no" to "not really" and "no." When asked "why or why not?" some themes emerged that may explain the ambivalence toward the label "critical human geographer" and the practice of critical human geography.

The Proliferation of What Counts as Critical

Modern critical geography may be feeling the pressure of its own success in gaining wider acceptability and institutional legitimacy. In a series of letter exchanges written after the IICCG conference and published as the leading editorial in an international geography journal in 1998, one of the resounding concerns with the state of critical geography was that, if everything can be called "critical," then it becomes "nothing" (Uribe-Ortega 1998, 266). Four years later, as critical geography has settled into an even more comfortable niche in the wider discipline, this concern seems to have grown even more acute. Respondents suggest that the explosion of academic work being introduced under the banner "critical geography" risks diluting the fundamental goal of doing geography differently. The following responses reveal a concern with context and specificity that some respondents seem to feel is lacking.

I am not sure about the meaning of the term critical. Critical of what and critical of whom?
Respondent G

I identify myself quite strongly as a critical human geographer. However, I often wonder who doesn't. My guess is that most human geographers recognize their work as critical in some capacity. Respondent M

All designations—urban geography, cultural geography, critical human geography—mean different things in different circumstances. I rarely find that these labels work and I hardly ever use designations unless describing what I do in the broadest possible terms. For most people that you might use a label for, "critical human geography" doesn't mean anything, so I'd usually describe myself as an urban geographer—because my current work is on cities. Respondent F

Significantly, one respondent reported an inability to differentiate between critical geography and the wider discipline.

I do not know what distinguishes critical human geography from human geography. And from having been at the inaugural ICCG in Vancouver it appears to me that not many geographers do know or would be able to define the difference. Respondent C

Some respondents took this objection even further by indicating that the new critical project has become depoliticized particularly compared to earlier oppositional geographies such as feminist, radical, and Marxist geographies. Respondents wrote:

I identify as a feminist. That has more “content” associated with it than critical, which I interpret as not quite radical and as a catchall term. Respondent I

I personally find “critical” a term used rather loosely in the discipline and lately have returned to thinking of myself first and foremost as a radical and feminist geographer. Respondent J

I have two problems with “critical”—it is both too inclusive (don’t all academics claim to be “critical”) and it is too limited.... I find it interesting that a left-leaning, anti-positivist strand within geography relinquished the adjective “radical” and took up “critical.” I think the latter is “weaker” and “safer.” Respondent E

Is a “weaker and safer” critical geography the price being paid for mainstream acceptability? If so, what are the reasons for this political positioning? One possibility relates to the apparent need for disciplines to prove their relevance and “earning power” as contemporary university systems move toward a business model of operation. Weingart and Stehr call this the “mediation between knowledge production and knowledge markets” (Weingart and Stehr 2000, xiv). Increased pressure to attract external research dollars, cope with fiscally conservative funding environments, attract and retain top graduate students and scholars, and demonstrate a “practical” application in the wider society has required academic disciplines to shift and adapt in order to survive. Some disciplines have fared better than others. At the risk of generalizing, those disciplines that produce knowledge considered to yield measurable results have fared better than disciplines whose work is considered to produce “softer” results, to say nothing of scholarly work that seeks radical social change by questioning hegemonic values. In this sense, the current incarnation of critical geography may be organized, consciously or not, to adhere at least superficially to external funding structures, shifting institutional expectations, and changing professional requirements of its practitioners.

A closely linked issue relates to the politics of knowledge production and validation. Knowledge production, and perhaps more significantly, assumptions about knowledge producers and validators, are heavily implicated in the positioning of any scholarly tradition. In the case of critical human geography, this raises the question of who sets research agendas and determines the legitimacy of knowledge, when, as some scholars would maintain, “the empirical fact is that the ‘real problems’ [remain] constituted by existing knowledge and its gatekeepers” (Weingart 2000, 29). The implications for critical geographers in the year 2001 are in many ways similar to those faced by radical, Marxist, and feminist geographers over the past four decades: the challenge of broadening taken-for-granted knowledge by asking questions previously considered irrelevant or illegitimate—or not considered at all within conventional geographical knowledge. What may be different in the current political climate of universities is the extent to which the pressures already listed may influence the ways in which critical geographers frame their work and present it to the outside world.

The concern expressed by some respondents that critical human geography has been de-politicized and over-generalized may be related to the pressures to conform to new external expectations. At the same time, many responses confirmed a continued commitment to an agenda of social change, and altogether different reasons for dissatisfaction with the label and current practices of critical human geography.

Critical Geography, Power, and Knowledge

The respondents who answered the question about self-identification with an emphatic “yes” were able to clearly articulate the reasons why:

Because I am interested in the “hidden” power relations that work through everyday lived experienced, including lived geographies. Also because I am interested in progressive social change. Respondent H

I identify as such for the Marxist legacy it calls on, the tradition of questioning hegemonic values and thinking creatively about alternatives, as well as the commitment to social justice and equality the term signals. Respondent K

[I identify as a critical social geographer because] it refers to a critical perspective on existing social relations of power and oppression in society and space. Respondent J

I feel we have to be more critical towards human geography—especially because its history has remained relatively quiet around issues of race and feminism. Respondent A

[I identify as a critical human geographer] in the sense of creating a progressive agenda for radical social change which challenges common shared assumptions and disciplinary restrictions. Respondent L

Referring back to the types of research and teaching interests listed earlier, these latter responses might be what one would expect across the board. The ambivalence toward identifying as a critical human geographer may have much more to do with the trappings of the label ‘critical geography’ and dissatisfaction with its limitations (possibly due in part to the external and broader institutional issues already listed) than a rejection of any general premises behind critical geography itself. Most respondents, even those who did not identify themselves as critical human geographers, indicated that they believed that critical geography involved sensitivity to constellations of power and knowledge as they relate to identity politics and social change. In addition, most respondents indicated support of those premises. Responses to the following question underscore the extent to which this may be the case:

- *With particular reference to city-based inquiry, what do you perceive to be the distinction(s) between critical geographies and other approaches to geography?*

Here again, although my interest was initially in city-based problems, many respondents couched their responses in broader terms.

- Acknowledges multiplicity, a myriad of voices, and especially research that explores the relationship between race and gender
- Interdisciplinary; leftist orientation; preoccupations with power
- A higher level of abstraction and reflection. Insights into the subjectivity of our views on city development

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- A commitment to egalitarian or emancipatory politics
- Critical perspectives on past and present processes of urban change, for example, concern with class inequalities
- A concern with the role of the state and law in placing different citizens in urban life
- Power relations and possibilities for resistance
- Critical geographers, within urban geography ... should actively engage in urban agendas and use their knowledge actively in the field as well as in the university. There is much to be done in terms of pushing mainstream policy debates forward and teasing out the contradictions
- A concern with putting knowledge into action in ways that challenge existing relations of power and oppression in cities
- Critical geography attempts to make an inquirer visible
- The distinctions help us to understand that our own realizations of the world, space, and city development are far from objective, but that we—to some extent—‘construct’ realities

In general, a commitment to social change, not just the recognition of the premise, was evident when geographers were asked to distinguish between critical geographies and other approaches to geography. One respondent put it particularly eloquently when describing how critical geographical inquiry (in this case, city-based) can be distinguished from other types of geographical inquiry:

Critical geography is not predictive but explanatory, and does not use ‘what is’ to predict ‘what will be’ but, rather, offers a critical explanation of what is in order to think about what cities might be. In other words, it does not treat what cities are today as ‘natural,’ ‘inevitable’ or necessarily determining of what cities will be in the future. It thus leaves open possibilities for social change through collective action. Respondent J

Not all respondents identified distinctions between critical geography and other approaches to geography as being linked to social change. Some respondents were reticent to identify any distinctions at all.

I don’t know the distinctions. What does being critical mean today? Who is to say? How to define? I don’t have an answer. Respondent C

No idea. I only read the work on cities that I think will help me understand cities further. Probably the main distinction is whether I like it or not. Respondent F

I’m not sure I can answer that, given that I think critical is such an amorphous term. Respondent I

Whether support for the general premises of critical geography was evident or not, the reluctance to identify as a critical human geographer or to name distinctions between critical geography and other approaches to geography may be linked back to some of the issues already addressed. It may also be linked to an additional and unexpected theme that emerged from this section of questions.

The Self-Policing of Critical Human Geography

Some respondents, even those who readily identified as critical human geographers, indicated that one of the reasons that they shied away from critical geography stemmed from a sense of internal surveillance and policing of what ‘counts’ as critical geographical scholarship. When asked the following question,

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- *Do you think that the distinctions [between critical geographies and other approaches to geography] are productive? Why or why not?*

some respondents wrote:

I find that dominant voices (or choruses) ... somewhat narrowly circumscribe what counts or is recognized as 'critical' work. The result, which is neither surprising nor completely damning, is that work that is 'critical' of any of the widely held perspectives of Critical Geographers tends to be ignored or excluded from serious consideration as 'critical.' Respondent M

The result of the approach are what can be interesting ... not the babble about 'what fits' and 'what doesn't' or posturing about how 'critical' one is or not. Respondent B

[The distinctions] are productive to the extent that they may promote actual critical thinking and analysis, but unproductive to the extent that they may create smug sanctimony among 'critical' scholars. Respondent H

I do think politics matters and needs to be discussed but I think that claiming or disavowing labels is not very helpful. Respondent E

These sentiments, evident in a good number of responses, may be indicative of anxiety over a growing chasm between university-based critical geography and the many 'real world' problems identified and analyzed by critical geographers. In past decades, it seems that critical geography was synonymous with grassroots organizing, community-based action, and anti-establishment sentiment. As critical geography has evolved into the twenty-first century and gained institutional legitimacy, many geographers note that the ability to engage in practical action has suffered or is less easily reconcilable within the university setting. The following question drew out issues relating to geographers and the 'real world':

- *Do you consider yourself to be an activist?*

Six of the thirteen respondents indicated that they did consider themselves to be activists. Six indicated that they did not, and one responded, 'not now.' The geographers were then asked:

- *If yes, to what extent does your activism influence your academic work?*

The responses to this question appear to support earlier reported sentiments that critical human geography should not be divorced from its early impulses to connect with the communities it studies and should work to inspire means for progressive social change.

I see no reason to pursue academic work unless it is a means of demonstrating the inequalities that exist and offering means for change. Respondent K

I try to write about it and reflect on the ideas I impart in my teaching. The world of activism offers numerous rich resources—books, videos, etc.—to expose students to. Also getting them involved in activism/campaigning is an option which has to be managed carefully. Respondent L

I don't take on projects that lack a social change dimension. Respondent H

[Activism] influences how I work and what I work on. Respondent E

*Many of my [teaching] examples come from either my volunteer involvements or knowledge gained from non-academic pursuits (including consulting). Students love it. 80% of the time they haven't heard of the cases I'm talking about and they find these examples empowering and thrilling to learn about.
Respondent B*

Issues relating to activism and the academy have been controversial since the inception of radical geography in the 1960s. As critical geography has evolved and responded to internal and external pressures, the expectations and possibilities for political engagement—particularly outside the university setting—have changed. A number of human geographers have, in recent years, called for critical geographers to re-engage with the world they study. Geographers Nick Blomley (1994), Noel Castree (2000), and Adam Tickell (1995, 1997) are among those who advocate a renewed commitment to a politically engaged human geography. What is important to keep in mind is that, like the adjective 'critical,' the notion of activism is deserving of scrutiny. It is interesting to note, for example, that many of the respondents who called for a more radicalized human geography were also among those who did not identify as activists. Included in the many possible reasons for this apparent contradiction is what one respondent very rightly pointed out as the fact that 'activism' and 'activist' may only make sense in the context of North America. It may also be due to other assumptions about activism: that it only happens (or should only happen) 'out there,' apart from the university and that when it does happen it necessarily involves placards and public displays.

Many of these same debates raged in the months following Vancouver's IICCG. In Geraldine Pratt's (1998) contribution to the post-IICCG letter exchange editorial, she captures some of the more acute tensions that flared around the anxieties over activism and what counts as critical in critical human geography:

I may have different feelings about the attention given to the field trip to spray paint the Woodward's building. It seemed to me that a type of deep-seated sexism defined what counted as radical and activist at the IICCG conference which reinscribed old categories of private and public. The conference attendees should probably have known about the fact that they collectively subsidised the provision of high-quality childcare for the children of some of the attendees and that the caregivers, well educated in early childhood education, were also well paid. So too, the lunch catered by the Burmese Democratic Organization, to raise monies for their own political work, seemed to go unnoticed. I think we need to ask ourselves, what counts as radical politics and why some do activities attract more attention and excitement than others? (265)

Four years after the IICCG conference, the tensions around the notion of activism and what counts as critical are still evident, although perhaps now manifesting as weariness at the perception of having to 'prove' one's critical methods and credentials. Significantly though, some of the respondents who identified themselves as activists described their activist work as taking place in the context of the classroom.

The re-engagement with the world called for by geographers such as Blomley and Castree may be happening in new ways and under more subtle banners than that of traditionally conceived 'activism.' These are important issues that are tightly linked to how human geographers identify themselves and endeavour to practice a different kind of geography. At the same time, there is evidence at a popular level of a prestige associated with geography as a critical, even radical, endeavour. A recent Village Voice article describes

how geography is making it “back on the map” of social relevance in academia and beyond: “A growing number of scholars drawing on geography’s radical past—the anarchist Kropotkin was a geographer, and so was the French Commune Élisée Reclus—have given the discipline not just prestige but an academic blood transfusion” (Byles 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0131/edbyles.php>). These twists add even more layers of complexity to the connections between social change and intellectual traditions within academia.

“Critical of What?”: Conclusions and Future Directions

The paper sought to address the following questions: What role have agendas of social change played in the historical development of critical human geography? What are some of the issues currently facing its practitioners? The paper outlined some of the major developments in the evolution of critical geography including radical, Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial geographies. The value of providing a socio-historical context to the evolution of critical human geography is twofold: First, it contributes to a better understanding of the complex interweaving of social movements and political ideas with a still-evolving intellectual tradition. Second, it helps shed light on the benefits and tensions inherent in the present state of critical geography as well as gesturing towards its future. The second part of the paper presented excerpts from the results of a questionnaire on critical geography distributed by the author.

As already stated, the purpose of the paper is not to arrive at fixed conclusions. Rather, the aim is to add nuance and texture to far-reaching questions and foreground relevant issues for discussion and further examination. This being the case, what can be gleaned from human geography’s history and respondents’ comments as particularly suggestive of the need for further research in this area? Two of the strongest themes to emerge are embodied in questions about the possibility of reconciling an agenda of critical problem-solving and social change within geography and relating geographical problem-solving to the world outside the university.

The former theme is exemplified in the prevalence of questionnaire responses that reveal an ambivalence toward critical human geography, while at the same time indicating a strong commitment to agendas of social change. This seeming contradiction is not surprising when one considers the extent to which the ‘critical’ has become absorbed into the accepted, and some would argue, mainstream machinations of the academy. Respondents expressed clear concern that if everything can be deemed ‘critical,’ the specificities of various social struggles may be diluted or effaced. This theme reflects the need to achieve a balance between broader goals of social change sought by critical human geography and its own internal differentiation. The politics of race and gender, sexuality and class, ethnicity and culture have produced complex social and political global conditions from which academia is not immune. For instance, feminist geography, itself a heterogeneous field, clearly shares concerns, methods, and practices with other ‘critical’ geographies, while at the same time carving its own much needed niche reflecting particular analyses and social conditions. The challenges inherent in this balancing act are perhaps best captured by the seemingly banal question: ‘critical of what?’ Although there is perhaps no easy or satisfying response to this question, what is clear is that practitioners of critical human geography have historically navigated (and will continue to navigate) strategically the shifting structures and changing institutional cultures of academia.

The latter theme, that of relating geographical problem-solving to the world outside the university, is intimately bound up with the former. Geographical research and practice does not begin or end within existing disciplinary structures in the university setting. The politics of geographical knowledge, geographical imaginations, and geographical discourses have wide-ranging implications, a recognition that will continue to be brought to bear on the future of critical human geography.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank all questionnaire respondents for their valuable and insightful contributions. Thanks are also extended to Dr. Minelle Mahtani, and two anonymous referees for their useful and constructive comments on the paper.
2. “That part of the discipline of geography concerned with the spatial differentiation and organization of human activity and its interrelationships with the physical environment” (Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 1994, 353).
3. North American and European traditions of critical human geography are themselves notably varied, but, for the purposes of this paper, critical geography in Anglo-American milieus in general will be examined with the goal of producing more nuanced comparative analyses in the future.
4. The questionnaire asked geographers not only about their perceptions of issues relating to critical geography, but also about perceptions of the connection between critical human geography and interdisciplinarity. The results formed the basis of a conference paper which was presented by the author in May, 2001 at the symposium, Paradigms Lost and Paradigms Gained: Negotiating Interdisciplinarity in the 21st Century at the University of Calgary, Alberta. The scope of this paper is limited to an exploration of current issues in critical human geography that emerged from the questionnaire responses.
5. The fact that almost seventy percent of the questionnaire respondents are female is notable. The relation between gender (and issues of race and ethnicity) and critical human geography is one that merits further attention, particularly in light of the well-established state of feminist geography and the tensions between feminist geography and critical human geography that emerged in the questionnaire responses.

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