

On comfort and the culture of cultural geography

Article

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For Classics revisited: New Directions in Cultural Geography (1987) by Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson

Abstract

In this commentary, the author revisits Cosgrove and Jackson's article in two parts: first, outlining the personal significance of Cosgrove and Jackson's agenda by revisiting her roots in, and route through, cultural geography over the last two decades; and second, re-engaging with the paper's key themes and arguments in a contemporary context, considering its on-going influence, with reference to work on methodological innovation, collaborations with other practitioners and transdisciplinarity. The author concludes by calling for a continued practice of revisiting within cultural geography to help ourselves and our students understand where cultural geographies come from and may be going next.

Key Words

Cultural geography, transdisciplinarity, landscape, enthusiasm

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Commentary

Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson's 1987 paper 'New Directions in Cultural Geography' outlined the sort of cultural geography – involving an attention to landscape and everyday life and the adoption of ethnographic approaches – that I studied and was inspired by at university a decade later. Revisiting this paper, almost thirty years after its publication, I immediately feel at home with its focus and core mission for cultural geography post-1987. There is a comfort in the theoretical and empirical directions proposed by the authors, such as the relations between 'elite' and 'popular' cultures, the representation of real and imagined 'landscapes', the place of 'civil society', and the geographies of 'consumption'. These themes opened up spaces for the subjects and specialisms that we now take for granted when describing the features of contemporary cultural geography, for example mobilities, consumption geographies, geographies of architecture, postcolonialism, children and youth, hybrid geographies, non-representational theory, to name but a few (ESRC 2013). The authors also indicated a more 'interpretative' discipline, encouraging cultural geographers to seek out new research methods. My short commentary is in two parts: first, I outline the personal significance of Cosgrove and Jackson's agenda by revisiting my roots in, and routes through, cultural geography over the last two decades; and second, I re-engage with the paper's key themes and arguments in a contemporary context, considering its on-going influence, with reference to work on methodological innovation, collaborations with other practitioners and transdisciplinarity.

As cultural geographers we are taught early on in our careers to be attentive to where, how and by whom knowledge is made. I am a white British woman writing here about a largely British cultural geography – and this is important to acknowledge – a point I return to in my conclusion. My fascination began shortly after I finished my A-levels at an all-girls comprehensive school in South East England. In 2000, I was a second year undergraduate at the University of Exeter, being taught by Catherine Leyshon (nee Brace) (Brace 1999a, 1999b), a former student of Denis Cosgrove, who was interested in landscape as 'a particular way of composing, structuring and giving meaning to an external world' and 'the *symbolic qualities* of landscape, those which produce and sustain social meaning' (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 96 original emphasis). Kate's module entitled 'Landscape and Representation' was my first encounter with cultural geography – specifically through the landscapes of Capability Brown and Gainsborough's painting Mr and Mrs Andrews. Where else, other than in cultural geography, would an undergraduate assessment involve a brief from an 18th century Lord and Lady of the Manor in want of a new garden. This creative writing opportunity to combine theoretical ideas about landscape with historically grounded research, inspired me to apply for the Masters in Cultural Geography (Research) at Royal Holloway, University of London. During my MA, my cohort and I enjoyed a half-day fieldclass walking the memorial landscapes of Runnymede with Denis Cosgrove himself. The names and works of Cosgrove and Jackson loomed large in my induction into cultural geography. The first academic books I read cover-to-cover were *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988) and *Maps of Meaning* (Jackson 1989). Alongside Mike Crang's *Cultural Geography* (1998) and Don Mitchell's *An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (2000), the breadth of topics discussed in these works inspired my dissertations on landscape, memory and popular culture.

I embarked on my PhD at Royal Holloway in the wake of the 'cultural turn' and the renewal of material culture studies, as illustrated by Cosgrove and Jackson in their discussion of the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams and the need to understand

how 'people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value' (1987, 99). Mixing social and cultural geography, I focussed on the emotional and material cultures of 'enthusiasm' and used the work of the CCCS to study one particular subculture surrounding technology. I explored how some male, retired members of the 'so-called consumption classes' (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 99) are attached to and socialise around obsolete technologies, combining documentary evidence with ethnographic encounters and interviews (Geoghegan 2009; 2013). As I mentioned above, an academic's research interests are in part shaped by those scholars we encounter and the institutions we pass through. It strikes me now by revisiting this article that the expertise of my supervisory team of Felix Driver (1988; 2001) and Phil Crang (1992; 1994) reflected many of the concerns of the new directions in cultural geography advocated by Cosgrove and Jackson: 'contemporary as well as historical (but always contextual and theoretically informed); social as well as spatial (but not confined exclusively to narrowly-defined landscape issues); urban as well as rural; and interested in the contingent nature of culture, in dominant ideologies and in forms of resistance to them' (1987, 95). The importance of 'culture' to my research interests and approach to being a geographer was cemented yet further by my participation in 'Landscape Surgery', a fortnightly social and cultural geography research group meeting established by Denis Cosgrove during his time as a Professor at Royal Holloway. As a doctoral student, Landscape Surgery provided my peers and I with a safe space to share and debate ideas and enjoy the company of cultural geographers (Martins 2009).

Towards the end of my PhD, and 20 years after Cosgrove and Jackson's article was published, Tara Woodyer (2008, 2012) and I began to think about the enchantment of material things, extending our ideas about objects and their attendant meanings and values. We were interested in affect, emotion and vital materialism (Bennett 2001). Over a post-seminar beer, we decided to convene two sessions at the 2007 RGS-IBG Annual Conference on 'Enchanting Geographies'. Little did either of us imagine that this would lead us to a paper in *Progress in Human Geography* where we would define enchantment as 'an open, ready-to-be-surprised 'disposition' before, in, with the world', launching our cultural geography 'manifesto' for 'a less repressed, more cheerful way of engaging with the geographies of the world' (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013, 196; Geoghegan and Woodyer 2014). A paper that has gone on to offer a bridge between human and physical geography (see *Progress in Physical Geography* (Brierley et al. (2013))). The culture of cultural geography has, in my experience, always been supportive of new theoretical and empirical directions regardless of the career stage or geographical location of the geographer. Early-career geographers must continue to be encouraged to host workshops, symposia and conference sessions to enable open debate – much like the Social Geography Study Group conference at University College London upon which Cosgrove and Jackson's paper is based.

Now, I'm a lecturer and I teach first year undergraduates about the history and philosophy of geography. We cover the twists and turns of the emergence of human geography and its interest in 'theoretical problems' (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 95) and understanding of culture as 'politically contested' (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 99) and 'time- and space-specific' (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987, 99). Students learn about place and space through the work of Carl Sauer, the Berkeley School, Yi-Fu Tuan, Doreen Massey and Tim Cresswell. These first year geographers prefer real-world examples and are initially more comfortable with Sauer's ideas about landscape and differing barn types in North America and Christaller's Central Place Theory. However as we move towards,

what Cosgrove and Jackson described as, a cultural geography ‘where particular cultural forms can be related to specific material circumstances in particular localities ‘on the ground’ (1987, 99), I see a shift in their appreciation of (cultural) geography and what our approach allows us to do and say about the world. Cultural geography enables the spatial exploration of activities, processes and identities in the world around us and I regale them with contemporary geographies of architecture (Kraftl and Adey 2008; Kraftl 2010), big things (Jacobs 2006), materials things (Jackson 2000), creativity (Hawkins 2013a), and mobilities (Cresswell and Merriman 2011). Recounting the personal significance of these new directions in cultural geography might seem rather self-indulgent, however it serves to emphasise here the article’s enduring legacy in both research *and* teaching.

I now come to the second half of my short commentary and a focus on the paper’s on-going influence. At the moment, cultural geography is the subject that other disciplines want to be (Amin 2009). Over the last thirty years, cultural geographers have built on those early interests in landscape (Lorimer 2005) and theoretical problems (Thrift 2005) and learnt to speak many disciplinary languages. They’ve travelled across disciplinary borders and thrive on the intellectual challenge of ‘space [not] being this flat surface ... [but] a pincushion of a million stories’ (Massey 2013, unpaginated). For me, the legacy of the cultural geography reported on by Cosgrove and Jackson in 1987 lies in three key areas, namely our capacity for and comfortableness with methodological innovation, collaborations with other practitioners and transdisciplinarity.

First, methodology has always been a site of innovation for cultural geographers, from the attention to ethnography, thick description and the importance of language in the late 1980s (Crang 2002) to the focus on things (Cook 2004) to the use of photography, video and participatory methods (Spinney 2011, Woodyer 2008, Butler 2007; Garrett 2011; Mills 2013) to the collaborations with artists, curators, performers and scientists (Nash et al. 2002). Cosgrove and Jackson indicated ‘a broadening of the sources available for study in cultural geography’, suggesting ‘landscapes may be studied across a variety of media and surfaces: in paint on canvas, writing on paper, images on film as well as in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground’ (Daniels and Cosgrove 1987) (1987, 96). The work of my peers is testament to the legacy of this suggestion, for example – Harriet Hawkins’s work at the interface of geography and art (2013b), Justin Spinney’s combination of cycling and non-representational theory (2006), Amanda Rogers’s interdisciplinary journey through cultural geography and the performing arts (2012), and Tara Woodyer’s work on embodied practices of play (2012). Their acts of methodological bravery have now become popular approaches to creativity, mobility and performance – extending yet further the ways in which cultural geographers are able to understand what it means to be human. Cultural geography’s attention to methodology and, as I outline in the next section, openness to collaboration has also created space for hidden, inspirational, and transgressive stories to emerge, in the company of the public, volunteers, curators, specialists, experts and children (DeLyser 2014; Driver 2013; Garrett 2014). In addition, cultural geography has also become more public, improving our ability to communicate our work across a range of media and to a diversity of audiences.

Second, and linked, is the collaborative reach of the cultural geographer. I’ve mentioned above some of the individuals and institutions we have the privilege of working with. This ability to work with other practitioners is important for two reasons. First, in a discussion of the ‘cultural geographies of the future’ (Wylie 2010), questions were raised

(and rightly so) regarding the identity of the cultural geographer and the potential impact of our work. Yet it is in collaboration and working across disciplinary borders, through non-academic partnerships, and working with artists, museums, science, public bodies and institutions – specifically our public cultural geographies – that we have a lasting impact. Our collaborations with creative practitioners are second to none – with exciting exchanges between cultural geographers and artists in residence (DeSilvey 2007; Foster and Lorimer 2007; Scalway 2006). Second, if we link this to recent work on public geographies (Fuller 2008, Philo et al. 2015), participatory historical geography (DeLyser 2014), collaborative geographies (Craggs et al. 2013), civic geographies of enthusiasm (Craggs et al. 2015) and museum geography (Geoghegan 2010) – any suggestion that we may lack impact or have a tendency for theoretical hyperbole – can be readily assuaged. Having worked hard to develop these collaborations, I argue, we now need to focus some of our attention on popularising our ‘cultural geography’ as a subject of interest beyond non-academic collaborators and towards the public.

Third, cultural geography is uniquely positioned to lead and contribute to transdisciplinary research involving the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences (Castree et al. 2014). Present-day attempts to make sense of and respond to global issues, such as climate change, (bio)security and plant health, require the involvement of cultural geographers and their willingness to transcend disciplinary norms. Cosgrove and Jackson identified a ‘form of ‘green’ cultural geography’, examining ‘themes of human agency with respect to the natural environment and its ecological balances’ (1987, 96). Extending beyond the landscape as a key site for research on the environment, ideas of the more-than-human, non-human/human relations, and the new epoch of the Anthropocene reveal some of the exciting ways in which social and cultural geographers are leading on examining the complex inter-relationships or ‘nexuses’ between people and nature (Head and Atchison 2009; Ginn 2014; Brace and Geoghegan 2011). In the UK, cultural geographers have played key roles in a number of RCUK-funded interdisciplinary initiatives including: Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU), Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) and Landscape and Environment Programme (Whatmore 2009; Potter et al. 2011; Daniels and Veale 2014). Their leadership and involvement in such schemes is testament to Cosgrove and Jackson’s observation that ‘Culture is not a residual category, the surface variation left unaccounted for by more powerful economic analyses; it is the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted’ (1987, 95). My own career has been built on this fascination with people and the ways in which individuals and collectives hold contested, contradictory and competing perspectives. I’m about to start work on a project with 35 natural scientists to examine the causes and potential solutions surrounding tree health and Acute Oak Decline in particular. Cultural geography has taught me that people do not experience the world in neat spatial models. Indeed, encounters between people and the material world are messy (Bastian 2013). I will be bringing this expertise to our new project and asking whether *living with* Acute Oak Decline is preferable to any potential technological or biological solution. I’m proud that cultural geographers have not been afraid to reach across disciplinary boundaries in order to develop theories that allow us to grapple with this interconnected, chaotic and uneven world.

In conclusion, the new directions described in Cosgrove and Jackson’s article shaped the cultural geography I have come to know and love. Revisiting their work and that of others during the course of preparing this commentary has certainly revitalised and renewed my commitment to cultural geography. A final point I want to make in relation to Cosgrove and Jackson’s paper hones in on the plurality of cultural geographies. For

Cosgrove and Jackson, ‘A unitary view of Culture gives way to a *plurality of cultures*, each of which is time- and place-specific’ (1987, 99 original emphasis). For me, this plurality must be extended in this second decade of the 2000s to incorporate gender and minority underrepresentation and a commitment to intellectual plurality. Jackson and Cosgrove’s reference list contains over 60 texts, only five solely- or co-authored by female scholars: Jacquie Burgess (Burgess and Gold 1985), Dorothy Hobson (Hall et al. 1980), Susan J. Smith (Jackson and Smith 1984) and Doreen Massey (1984) and Catherine Silk (Silk and Silk 1985). Whilst this was reflective of cultural geography at the time, change here has been slow (Crang 2003). Recent research by Maddrell et al. (2016) revealed that there has been a growth in the number of female staff in geography in UK Higher Education establishments, for example an increase between 1978 and 2012/13 from 4% to 21% in female professors, 8% to 48% in lecturers and researchers, and 31% to 50% in female PhD students (full-time), but women remain under-represented at all career stages beyond postgraduate level. The recent *International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography* (ESRC 2013) acknowledged the unacceptability of minority underrepresentation in geography. One approach to tackling the ‘gender problem’ is, I argue, to continue the practice of revisiting, by identifying what Whatmore (2006) has described as disciplinary ‘returns’, and profiling the longevity of women’s geographical work through activities such as the 100+ celebration at the 2013 RGS-IBG Annual Conference, marking the centenary of the permanent admission of women to the RGS. I’m updating my first year reading list next term, and I will be including Cosgrove and Jackson’s paper, but also those of social and cultural geographers who inspired my own cultural geography and way of being in the discipline (Anderson 1995; Blunt and Rose 1994; Bondi 2014; Bowlby 1984; Brickell 2012; Callard 2003; Crewe and Gregson 1998; Davies 2000; DeLyser 1999; Domosh 1991; Endfield and Morris 2012; Kobayashi 1994; Kong 2001; Little 2002; Morin 1998; Nash 1996; Shurmer-Smith 1998; Till 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2007; Valentine 1993 – as well as others cited throughout this paper). In so doing, we can continue to ensure that our students and colleagues recognise where the exciting cultural geographies – of the everyday, experiential and material aspects of life, the associated attachments, emotions, performances, politics, and the relations between humans and non-humans – come from and may be going next.

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