

International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography

Overview of the sub-discipline of Social and Cultural Geography [draft, February 2012]

Objectives:

This overview seeks to provide:

- An assessment of how research in social and cultural geography has developed over the last ten years (noting its major strengths and weaknesses)
- Examples of key academic outputs which have made important contributions to scholarship and/or have helped set or move intellectual agendas
- Examples of key non-academic impacts involving 'users' in policy and practice.

Evidence base and consultation:

This overview was developed through consultation with the Chair and members of the RGS-IBG's Social and Cultural Geography Research Group. A group of senior UK academics and a smaller group of international experts were also consulted.¹

The process began with a review of the annual 'progress reports' of social and cultural geography, published in *Progress in Human Geography*. Specialist journals in social and cultural geography were also reviewed as well as work by social and cultural geographers in general Geography journals such as the IBG *Transactions* and the AAG *Annals* together with work in cognate social science journals. Major investments from the research councils and other funding bodies were also considered.

1. Developments in social and cultural geography over the last ten years

Social and cultural geographers have been at the forefront of theoretical and methodological developments in human geography over the last ten years, also making major contributions through theoretically-informed and methodologically rigorous empirical research. The field has been invigorated by the advent of new journals such as *Social and Cultural Geography* (launched in 2000) and *Social Geography* (an interactive open-access journal, launched in 2005) and by the re-fashioning of *Cultural Geographies* (formerly *Ecumene*) in 2003. Numerous handbooks and companions have charted the intellectual history of this lively and diverse field (e.g. Anderson et al. 2003; Duncan et al. 2003; Atkinson et al. 2005; Del Casino et al. 2011). It might also be noted that many of the most-

¹ Requests for input into this review were sent out to members of the RGS-IBG *Social and Cultural Geography Research Group*. Thanks to Dr Gail Davies (Chair of the SCGRG) for her help in contacting members. A group of *senior UK academics* was consulted including Professor Alastair Bonnett (Newcastle), Professor Tim Cresswell (RHUL), Professor Steven Daniels (Nottingham), Professor Nicky Gregson (Durham), Professor Jon May (QMUL), Professor Chris Philo (Glasgow), Professor Gillian Rose (Open) and Professor Susan Smith (Cambridge). A smaller group of *international experts* was also consulted including Professor Michael Brown (Washington-Seattle), Professor Robin Kearns (Auckland), Professor Audrey Kobayashi (Queen's), Professor Lily Kong (NUS) and Professor Don Mitchell (Syracuse).

cited and most-read papers in general Geography journals are by UK-based social and cultural geographers.²

Just over a decade ago, social and cultural geography was still in the throes of the discipline's 'cultural turn' (Cook et al. 2000). Since then, the field has gone through a series of further transformations, facing up to the postcolonial critique (Nash 2002; Jazeel & MacFarlane 2010) and responding to calls for a 're-materialization' of social and cultural geography (Jackson 2000, Lees 2002) among other significant political, ethical and intellectual challenges. British social and cultural geographers have been at the forefront of these developments and the sub-discipline has come through these tumultuous times in good shape, described by one recent commentator as 'rich, diverse and challenging' (Blunt 2005: 505).

Among key intellectual developments in the field has been the emergence of a range of new geographical sensibilities associated with the rise of 'non-representational theory' (Thrift 2007, Anderson & Harrison 2010), described by one of its chief interlocutors as 'an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual world' (Lorimer 2005: 83). This has involved an engagement with geographies of affect and emotion (e.g. Anderson & Smith 2001; Davidson et al. 2005); a concern for phobic and psychoanalytic geographies (e.g. Davidson 2003; Philo & Parr 2003); and an interest in geographies of fear and anxiety (e.g. Pain & Smith 2007; Jackson & Everts 2010).

While British social and cultural geographers are internationally acclaimed for their engagement with social theory including major contributions to the development of non-representational theory, actor-network theory and theories of relationality and hybridity, there have been vigorous debates about the social relevance and political edge of recent work in British social and cultural geography (e.g. Amin & Thrift 2005; Smith 2005). A future challenge might therefore be to integrate geographies of affect and emotion with geographies of inequality and oppression, injustice and exclusion. The need for current research to be more deeply grounded historically has also been noted, with Matless's study of *Landscape and Englishness* (2001) cited by one of the international contributors to this review as exemplary of such work in terms of its scale and scope.

Methodologically, the field is diverse and reflexive, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods and with an emphasis on combining theory and practice (e.g. Shurmer-Smith 2002; Blunt et al. 2003). Besides an increasing sophistication in the critical application of GIS and related methods of data analysis and visualization (e.g. Dorling & Ballas 2011), the last ten years have seen a coming-of-age of qualitative research methods (Crang 2002). Archival and documentary methods continue to thrive alongside in-depth interviews and focus groups, ethnographic, participatory and visual methodologies, together with survey-based research and secondary data analysis. There is a sense of pride and professionalism

² For example, *Progress in Human Geography* lists the following papers by UK social and cultural geographers among its 'most-cited' papers in the last ten years: Cloke (2002), Dorling and Shaw (2002), Jackson (2002) and Lorimer (2005). Social and cultural geographers also feature strongly in the list of 'most read' papers (based on full-text and PDF views): Demeritt (2002), Crang et al. (2003), Blunt (2005), Jayne et al. (2006), Bell (2007), Feagan (2007), Staeheli & Mitchell (2007), Anderson (2010) and Fuller and Askins (2010). Full details at: <http://phg.sagepub.com/reports/most-cited> (accessed 24 February 2012).

among graduate students and early-career researchers in acquiring the necessary methodological skills for their research and applying them in appropriate ways. The Essex summer schools and the advanced training provided by ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods have provided the infrastructure to enable these developments (now being further enhanced through the advanced methodological training provided by the ESRC's network of Doctoral Training Centres).

As previously noted, British social and cultural geographers are probably best-known internationally for their engagement with social theory. They have been less prominent in terms of their contributions to the development of GIS and related innovations in cartography and visualization. Important exceptions include Dorling's high-profile studies of social injustice and spatial inequality (including Dorling 2010; Dorling & Thomas 2004, 2011; Dorling et al. 2008; Thomas & Dorling 2007). One international contributor to this review also suggested that British geographers might be encouraged to engage more fully with recent developments elsewhere in northern and southern Europe (such as the pan-European 'Right to the Landscape' movement and initiatives such as the European Landscape Observatory in Catalonia). In other respects, however, the links between British and European social and cultural geography remain strong, particularly with the Nordic countries (see, for example, Baerenholdt et al. 2010).

Finally, we might note that social and cultural geographers have won some very substantial research grants in recent years including Gregson's ESRC-funded 'The Waste of the World' programme (2006-11) and Jackson's 'Changing Families, Changing Food' programme, funded by The Leverhulme Trust (2005-8). Stephen Daniels directed the AHRC's major interdisciplinary programme on 'Landscape and Environment' (2005-2010), while British-based social and cultural geographers (including Jackson, Valentine and Staeheli) have been successful in winning Advanced Investigator Grants from the European Research Council. Social and cultural geographers have also held grants under major AHRC and ESRC programmes including Cultures of Consumption, Landscape and Environment, and Transnational Communities.

2. Agenda-setting contributions to scholarship

The best recent work by British social and cultural geographers includes Massey's innovative theorizations of space-time (Massey 2005), Thrift's outline of non-representational theory (Thrift 2007), Whatmore's account of relational thinking and its associated hybrid geographies (Whatmore 2002) and Wylie's text on landscape and phenomenology (Wylie 2007). Some commentators (e.g. Harvey 2006) have noted a decline in the prevalence of book-length research monographs in preference for refereed papers in academic journals (driven by the exigencies of the RAE/REF) and in comparison to the profusion of textbooks and edited collections (driven by recent changes in commercial publishing). But this criticism can be challenged by the remarkable success of the RGS-IBG monograph series, which includes a range of significant contributions by British social and cultural geographers.³ Other important and influential monographs in the last ten years include

³ Examples include: Alison Blunt's *Domicile and Diaspora* (2005), Mustafa Dikeç's *Badlands of the Republic* (2007), Steven Legg's *Spaces of Colonialism* (2007), Peter Merriman's *Driving Spaces* (2007), Andrew Tucker's *Queer Visibilities* (2008), Hester Parr's *Mental Health and Social Space* (2008), Avril Maddrell's

Gregson and Crewe's *Second-hand Cultures* (2003), Gregson's *Living with Things* (2007) and McDowell's *Redundant Masculinities* (2003), *Hard Labour* (2005) and *Working Bodies* (2009).

Besides the theoretical innovations noted above, other major strengths include recent work on migration, transnationality and diaspora (reviewed by Blunt 2007); geographies of 'social nature' (e.g. Castree & Braun 2001); work inspired by the 'new mobilities paradigm' (including Cresswell 2001, 2006); studies of the cultural economy of food, fashion and other commodities (e.g. Cook et al. 2004; Dwyer & Jackson 2003); geographies of architecture and the built environment (e.g. Jacobs 2006; Jacobs et al. 2007); geographies of waste and related matter (e.g. Edensor 2005a, 2005b; Gregson et al. 2009; Gregson & Crag 2010); geographies of 'race' and racism (e.g. Nayak 2003; Dwyer & Bresseley 2008); religious identity (e.g. Dwyer & Shah 2009; Valins 2003); childhood and youth (e.g. Hopkins 2007; Nayak 2011). There have been important new studies of the intersectional geographies involved in 'living with difference' (e.g. Valentine 2007, 2008) and exciting new work on sexuality and queer theory (e.g. Browne et al. 2007).

Reflecting on current trends in social and cultural geography, Wylie (2010) has advocated a 'performative path' including a range of participatory and public geographies as well as a deeper engagement with the affective, emotive and praxis-based aspects of life (further discussed by Smith et al. 2009 and Pile 2010). Summarising recent developments in cultural geography, Crag (2010) writes about the sub-discipline's long-standing attempt to bridge a number of intellectual tensions: between the material and the immaterial, the theoretical and the substantive, the natural and the cultural. He goes on to identify a number of related tensions which, in his words, have 'a particular present pertinence': between the significant and the insignificant, the small and the mighty, the trivial and the momentous. He concludes that: 'Today's Cultural Geography is ... at its best characterized by powerful senses of texture, creativity and public engagement' (Crag 2010: 197).

3. Impacts on 'users' in policy and practice

This is an area that is not easy to assess as there is no single 'user' constituency for the outputs of research in social and cultural geography. There have, however, been notable contributions by social geographers to Census analysis and research (e.g. Dorling 2004; Rees et al. 2009) and high-profile contributions to national and international debates on social inequality and injustice where Dorling's deployment of cartograms and other methods of data visualization have attracted a very wide audience (with more than one million visits to his website: <http://www.worldmapper.org>).

Many social and cultural geographers are actively involved in policy-related research and activism (e.g. Burgess 2005, Fuller & Kitchin 2004) and there are vigorous debates about questions of 'relevance' to non-academic 'users' (e.g. Dorling & Shaw 2002; Massey 2002). To cite some specific examples of policy-related work, geographers have made significant contributions to recent debates about the relationship between housing and health (e.g. Smith et al. 2004); they have challenged assumptions about the nature of 'food deserts' (e.g. Cummins & Macintyre 2002); and they have brought reliable evidence to bear on

Complex Locations (2009) and Clive Barnett et al's *Globalizing Responsibility* (2010) – with several more titles in press and forthcoming (see <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-324408.html>).

heated public debates about the extent of ethnic segregation in British cities (e.g. Phillips 2006; Simpson 2009; Peach 2009). In this latter context, four geographers (Dorling, Johnston, Peach and Simpson), were among those invited to present evidence to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in December 2005 following the furore over Trevor Phillips' 'sleepwalking to segregation' speech.

Cultural geographers have been active in disseminating their work through different media and in collaboration with a wide range of creative practitioners. As examples of such partnerships, Crang (2010) highlights Caitlin DeSilvey's work on the Randolph-Moon Homestead in Montana; Toby Butler's sonic archives and 'memoryscapes' in London; Shiloh Krupar's re-enactment of promotional urban discourses in Shanghai; Kathy Prendergast's collaboration with geographer Catherine Nash on emotional mapping; Christian Nold's use of GPS technology and aesthetics in mapping emotions; Alison Barnes' engagements with urban graffiti and other forms of public inscription; Helen Scalway's reworking of the geographical tradition of field sketching in her work on South Asian visual and material cultures in London; Stephen Daniels' work on the art of the garden with Tate Britain; David Gilbert's work on 'swinging London' with the Victoria and Albert Museum; and Hayden Lorimer and David Matless's series of radio essays on animal and human nature (among many other recent examples). Jackson's work on families and food was disseminated via exhibitions at Weston Park Museum in Sheffield and at the V&A's Museum of Childhood in London while Gregson's 'The Waste of the World' programme culminated at an exhibition at The Bargehouse in London's Oxo Tower Wharf.

Social and cultural geographers have also made a series of important critical contributions to the debate about the wider public 'impact' of academic research including Phillips' (2010) argument about the value of curiosity-driven research and Gregson's invocation to 'build bridges' through innovative forms of public engagement (Gregson et al. 2011). Often this work has a catalysing effect on policy and practice as demonstrated by Steven Daniels' AHRC Impact Fellowship which led to a series of performance-related work in connection with the Landscape and Environment programme. For a wider discussion of action-orientated and participatory research in social and cultural geography, see Pain (2003, 2004).

Finally, the large number of social and cultural geographers who have been elected to the British Academy and to the Academy of Social Sciences might also be noted.⁴

⁴ Fellows of the British Academy currently include Ash Amin, Hugh Clout, Stephen Daniels, Felix Driver, Ron Johnston, David Livingstone, Susan Smith, Philip Rees and Charles Withers. Those recognized by the Academy of Social Sciences include John Allen, Ash Amin, Jacquie Burgess, Noel Castree, Paul Cloke, Sarah Curtis, Stephen Daniels, Danny Dorling, Alan Gilbert, Mark Goodwin, Peter Jackson, Wendy Lerner, David Livingstone, Doreen Massey, Linda McDowell, Graham Moon, Philip Ogden, Chris Philo, Susan Smith, Nigel Thrift, Neil Ward, Sarah Whatmore, Paul White, Charles Withers and Neil Wrigley.

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