



What's Just? Afterthoughts on the Summer Institute in the Geographies of Justice 2007

283 Collective¹

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Introduction

This paper is a dialogue; an unfinished dialogue that started at the 2007 Summer Institute in the Geographies of Justice (SIGJ), sponsored by *Antipode* and the International Critical Geographer's Group. The voices within reflect the concerns, arguments and thoughts of a group of 29 graduate students and junior faculty from Europe and the Americas, a senior African journalist, and seven senior scholars from the United States, who came together for one hot and humid week in Athens, Georgia. The SIGJ was in many ways modeled on the 2003 Summer Institute in Economic Geography in Bristol, where a group of junior scholars who were frustrated with the state of geography wrote a manifesto under the banner of the *Bristol 1505 Collective*. That manifesto called on economic geographers to engage in radical geography and served as a precursor for the SIGJ.²

In this spirit, as participants in Athens we formed the *283 Collective* and were determined to add our own voices to the debate. The following paper is thus not traditional academic prose. It is not meant to be. It was birthed through intense discussion and negotiation between 17 junior scholars spread out across the US, Canada and Europe (see Endnote 1). The four months of writing, reviewing and revising began on our last day in Athens where we summarized the week's proceedings. Although the debates at the SIGJ spanned many topics, we chose to focus on the four that resonated deepest with those involved.³ As one reviewer commented on an earlier draft of this paper, these are not novel themes and many readers will likely agree with our sentiments. However, that the issues discussed within this paper have been established previously, yet remain subjects of incredible tension and anxiety for junior and senior scholars, deserves critical reflection. Our purpose, therefore, is as much to carry the discussions at SIGJ forward, as

it is to remind radical geographers that there is much work that remains.

Over our week in Athens SIGJ participants took turns leading workshops and panels. These intensive sessions evolved into forums for exchanging ideas, experiences and concerns. We talked about our own work and began to sketch out the linkages between our interests and individual projects. Our conversations covered a range of questions and concerns that we face as part of a new generation of radical geographers. We asked the following questions. What is radical geography and why do it? What models of radical engagement and activist-scholarship do we want to use? How do we produce public geographies? What ought to be the role of interdisciplinary dialogue? How are we enabled and constrained by our institutional cultures? How can we teach and publish radical geographies? Most importantly, how, if at all, should we map the sub-discipline's future? These discussions were in part based on a selection of articles distributed prior to our arrival in Georgia and we include this reading list at the end of the paper to set the groundwork for understanding the contours of a socially just geography.

As a record of our proceedings, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about the changing nature of radical geography and the geographies of justice (eg Blomley 2007; Braun 2003; Castree 2000; Smith 2005; Wills 2006; Wills and Peck 2002). Writing as a collective voice offers a unique opportunity for junior scholars to articulate our vision for the present and future of radical geography. However, before proceeding it is important to make transparent the difficulties of such a project.

First, we stumbled immediately on the possibility and value of articulating a unified vision for radical geography. This brought into sharp relief the tensions and weaknesses that inflect the field and led us to think about who we are, what we do, and why we do it, as a way to cultivate and strengthen the radical potential of our work and envision a common ground. This paper thus begins by outlining "who we are" as geographers of justice, radical geographers, and/or critical geographers—labels that are themselves contentious.

Second, we recognized the limits of our collective voice. We cannot nor do we want to claim to be more than what we are—a few who had the privilege of being a part of a challenging, stimulating and inspiring conversation that unfolded at the SIGJ. Yet, we think our conversations offer important theoretical and practical contributions to radical geography. Through the lens of borders and walls, we therefore, explore in the second and third sections the ways in which we can direct radical geography towards imminently important ends. Specifically, we argue that it is imperative that the social relations within the academy be changed to undo repressive material and discursive boundaries. This call for change, however, is tempered by an equally imperative call for

constructing new boundaries and reinforcing older ones to ensure justice within and outside the academy.

The third difficulty we encountered in this collective project was in balancing our energies between a grand radical project and the small victories along the way. We asked: where should we focus our energy? Can a grand vision be articulated given the contemporary diversity of radical geography? The fourth section of this paper roughly sketches answers to these questions while attempting to maintain the tensions that permeated our discussions. We argue, on the one hand, for the articulation of a common goal, however limited, towards which radical geographers can collectively struggle. On the other hand, we lay out the concrete steps put in motion by the 283 Collective as a way of tentatively moving forward.

Ultimately, this work is informed by a conviction that our discipline needs a recommitment to a collective process of social change as we approach the end of the fifth decade of (Anglophone) radical geography (Peet 2000). The social, political–economic, and ecological realities that shape our world make this work as urgent and as important as ever.

Who Are We?

We come from various disciplines, trainings, identities, research interests, theoretical backgrounds and locations. Yet, through time together we found that we collectively applaud and embark on interdisciplinary projects; argue against the artificial distinction between research and activism; seek to open spaces for social justice in the institutions with which we engage; and attempt to undo the academy's traditional "white", patriarchal and heteronormative character (Gilmore 2000; Pulido 1996). We agree that the individualization, professionalization and diversification of left scholarship have discouraged the articulation of a common project. Happily, we also discovered that we are more preoccupied by our work and our passion for it than by the labels of "radical", "critical", "just", "activist" or "leftist". After all, as Heynen (2006:925) suggests, "radical is as radical does".

Our enthusiasm stems from a deeply felt commitment to social change and is fueled by the words and actions of radical scholars across the field. As one participant remarked during our first meeting, "Sometimes I think radical geography saved my life. Without this literature I would think I was crazy because I don't fit into these neat little boxes and stereotypes". Thus, as a matter of course, we reject the assumed and deflating dismissal of a radical position as a transitory youthfulness that fades with maturity.

While we do not subscribe to the same labels, we acknowledge that the term radical does have implications for our work. The actual meaning of "radical" requires that our analyses must get to the *root* of

the problems that concern us, and those problems ought to be about what is *fundamental* in people's lives (Heynen 2006; Mitchell 2004). Radical scholarship requires "research into *the materialist exigencies of life*, into the practices and ideologies of institutions, and into the residue that power, past and present, always leaves of its operation" (Mitchell 2004:28, our emphasis). In this paper, as in our sessions, "radical" means working for *transformative change*, and a desire to make our analyses politically relevant within and beyond the academy (see Blomley 1994; Mitchell 2004, 2006).

(De/Re)constructing Walls and Boundaries

Much of our discussion focused on how material and discursive barriers shape the lives of scholars and others working for social and environmental change. The discussion of social barriers to change was timely and more than a little ironic. While we sat in our university setting discussing how to tear down numerous obstacles that impede our work, other workers were constructing an 1100 km fence in the Arizona desert to stem the flow of marginalized people into the US. This "chain-link" immigration policy demonstrates the imminent necessity of deconstructing walls and the power relationships they reinforce.

We asked ourselves: what are walls and what do they really do? To begin, walls are both symbolic and material; they are *simultaneously enabling and constraining*. These barriers are primarily designed to regulate and channel information, consciousness and movement; but they are also (un)intentionally constructed with a certain degree of permeability, such that they selectively facilitate certain flows while limiting or outright blocking others. A major problem, then, is not that walls exist, but that they are built to service the forces of capitalism, militarism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, sexism, and other damaging institutions. Boundaries benefit these institutions by channelling "desired" flows of commodities, people and information to certain ends while insulating with exclusionary politics and policies these same institutions from the potentially damaging and contradictory "ill-effects" of said flows. Thus, in the process of producing empowerment and enclosure for some, most contemporary acts of wall building facilitate political fragmentation, disempowerment and exclusion for many others. Unfortunately, these same walls are designed to simultaneously obscure the suffering their construction engenders. This makes the task of (de/re)construction that much more challenging.

Initially we decided it was crucial for us to dissolve, undermine and blur boundaries inside and outside the academy. However, we came to appreciate over a week of discussion that it is not enough to blur and dissolve boundaries, because in the very process of blurring and

dissolving we will need to erect new boundaries and walls as part of our emancipatory political project. The question becomes what kind of boundaries are necessary for a more socially just world? This brought us to our second realization that *we want to actively reconfigure/reconstruct walls and boundaries to enable social justice and to interrupt destructive flows of capital and relations of power*. Therefore, a significant aspect of our mission is to (1) constantly question extant boundaries and walls; and (2) creatively devise and propose new ones that aid our radical struggles.

Accordingly, we must interrogate the (often false) institutional boundaries that socialize us into “legitimate scholarship” but constrain us in pursuing social justice through our academic work, thereby reasserting the research-activism hyphen (Katz 1994; see also Blomley 1994; Peck 1999; Tickell 1995, 1998). There is an objectionable under-appreciation within the academy for community service, and an overemphasis on publishing in journals that communicate our ideas to a small fraction of our already small and fractious discipline. To undermine and redraw this problematic boundary we must take action within our own institutions by serving on hiring and tenure/promotion committees and pursuing administrative positions. In so doing, we can direct the current academic institutional approach toward community outreach and service, while promoting academic boundaries that channel activist ideals and radical forms of research and praxis into and out of the university setting.

While tearing down some academic walls, we need to build, defend and strengthen others. For example, we are privileged to use our time for radical research and theory, which are important parts of our struggle for social justice. However, we need to be cautious not to separate theoretical from practical engagement, a phenomenon that plagues the academy. It is necessary to balance the pursuit of urgent issues with critical reflection and writing. Therefore, we wish to rebuild the boundaries between the academy and on-the-ground activism in such a way as to provide for a sharing of information and a space for both parties to do what they do best.

Another boundary that radical scholars must carefully interrogate and navigate is that which separates work and home. Feminist and queer scholars and activists have shown that the personal is always political, and artificial barriers between our private and public lives only serve to silence us (cf Hanish 1970; Young 1990). While we do not want to forget the hard fought struggle to remove this boundary, we are troubled by the incessant creep of our work lives into our home lives. We face increasingly unrealistic demands in our work lives that are eroding our ability to pursue meaning elsewhere. Attendees with children often remarked on the daily strains of balancing activist work agendas with raising healthy children. These strains are particularly felt by tenured

women (still an appallingly low percentage of the academy) who frequently find their desires for family constrained by the necessities of academic practice (Mason and Goulden 2002). Those among us who would like to have children expressed confusion or uncertainty as to whether it would be possible for us to be successful as both a parent *and* a radical academic. The importance of these challenges should not be underemphasized. As one parent participant stated, “Raising children while working in the academic world should not have to be a radical concept”.

We recognize that having fulfilling work in which we earn a living wage and the ability to control our own reproduction is a position of tremendous freedom. Having any kind of job is a privilege in the global economy, making us better off than so many (even though many of us have not yet secured academic jobs). As scholars, however, we cannot be complacent workers marvelling guiltily and in wonder at our own freedom. Work and control over reproduction *cannot* be thought of as privileges—they must be considered *rights* to which everyone is entitled. We must insist in our homes, our own institutions, and the myriad workplaces beyond the academy on the right of workers to have precious time for their personal lives and children, for a decent wage, for safe work environments free of toxicity and intimidation and the right to make reproductive decisions. The contest is fierce but the end result is survival; we must engage the walls that link our homes to our institutions. Only then can we begin to make meaningful change by tearing down these walls and reconstructing them in ways to enact justice.

Changing the Walls Within

Although we recognized our privileged positions in the global political economy, as is evident, our discussions also raised serious questions regarding the current state of the academy. A palpable anxiety arose over the course of our week together and many of us seemed particularly anxious to know how and where we might want to situate ourselves in what remains a relatively conservative academic landscape. Participants were particularly concerned about the increasing pressure to “publish or perish” and the implications that this has for our academic and private lives. While our focus may stem from our positions as graduate students and junior scholars, it is also indicative of a deeper problem plaguing academic labor relations in this era of neoliberal restructuring. Although discussions of teaching loads and the potential contradiction between good work and fast work are seemingly unorthodox elements of a radical agenda, our conversations underscore their fundamental importance. We must pause and redirect our energies if we have truly come to a point where child care, partnership and taking a weekend off have

become radical interventions. These seemingly personal agendas and contradictions are tied to the conditions of labor in a neoliberalizing academy. Ignoring the basic conditions of our own workplaces and that of our colleagues renders us complicit in the reproduction of many of the injustices we are fighting against.

The conditions of our employment, therefore, are walls that we must begin to reconstruct. The contemporary Anglo-American academy exists in a strikingly different political economy than that of the late 1960s when radical (Anglophone) geography was born (Castree 2000). The neoliberal and neoconservative agendas inaugurated in the Thatcher–Reagan–Mulroney era have drastically restructured what it means to work within an academic setting. Universities have responded to the significant loss of public funding with a flexible and contingent teaching staff and mounting workload expectations. These changes are deeply problematic insofar as they limit the opportunities to become “tenured radicals” and construct an extremely vulnerable and voiceless workforce. In essence, they are the physical manifestation of capitalist social relations operating in our own backyard and bring with them serious social justice implications (Birnie et al 2005; CGEU 2000; Laoire and Shelton 2003). As the vehicles of surplus value, contingent academic laborers are rarely granted the institutional support afforded their tenure colleagues. Non-tenure-track faculty receive substantially less compensation for comparable labor and are often used to fill the gaps in undergraduate curricula with little or no input in scheduling decisions (CGEU 2000). Even where compensation is equivalent, teaching loads often prevent individuals from pursuing the research and publications that would enable advancement to better-paying positions within the academy (Curtis and Jacobs 2006). Most importantly, contingent academic labor reinforces the discipline’s persistent gender and racial disparities, with women and minorities making up the bulk of this flexible workforce and earning significantly less than their white, male counterparts (GESO 2005; Laoire and Shelton 2003).

Competition for limited tenure positions and the shifting expectations of universities place pressures on us to publish copiously and extend our service to our institutions beyond previous levels (Euben 2002; Hardwick 2005). Fiscal austerity coupled with increasing competition for students in an expanding post-secondary education system has also led to increases in class sizes and teaching loads (Hardwick 2005; Richards and Wrigley 1996; Solem and Foote 2006). How can radical geographers speak out against such flexibilization and exploitation when it happens in the textile or food industries but ignore it when it directly affects our colleagues?

Our responsibility to actively engage with struggles within the academy becomes all the more potent and “radical” when we realize how

they are deeply implicated with wider struggles against neoliberalism, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc. (Castree 2000). Standing up against academic neoliberalization will not only shore up the justice of our departments and preserve the quality of university education, but it can also play a crucial role in tearing down the institutions and ideological walls that perpetuate injustice wherever it occurs.

Our reconstruction efforts must thus focus on the criteria by which we evaluate ourselves and our colleagues. North American workshop participants frequently lamented the basic accounting that constitutes much of the tenure process and there was a general concern about the implications that the pressure to publish has for the quality of our contributions. Of particular concern was the distinction between academic and non-academic publications, and the disregard for the latter by review boards. To the questions of publishing, “what” and “how much”, we must add anxiety over “where”. This is particularly distressing for radical academics who attempt to engage directly with and provide meaningful products for groups outside the academy.

These are major, evolving structural shifts and we did not expect to come up with solutions in our week together. Nonetheless, several concrete ideas were put forward. Among them was a proposal to call on professional, Anglo institutional bodies like the Association of American Geographers and the Institute of British Geographers to pay more attention to the growing flexibilization of geography departments and to explicitly adopt a critical stance against it. As individuals, we must work hard to discourage our departments from filling vacancies with limited-term positions instead of permanent tenure-track ones, and to ensure that any existing limited-term faculty have a greater say in administrative issues. As elaborated below, we are also interested in the use of the internet as a means of de-commodifying scholarly work and organizing broad communities of knowledge. As small or large as these propositions may seem, they constitute, in our view, an important part of the work that is needed to navigate the future of radical geography.

Mapping the Future of Radical Geographies

On the final day of the institute's organized proceedings, a senior participant presented us with a challenge: if the radical project is to change society and question the forms and processes that reproduce inequality and oppression, then we should also clearly articulate the ultimate purpose of our work. We must not be reticent to name our specific goals; to name the “enemy”; to recognize what we share; and to do so without reverting to abstractions. Before moving forward we must all, individually and collectively, specify what we mean by “justice” and position our work within the context of a broader transformative

vision. We must also consider the implications of embracing the term “radical”. As one participant pointed out, the term may not, in and of itself, make clear to others the direction in which our ideas or actions move. While this makes it all the more critical that we articulate *our* vision of radicality, we are intimately aware of the challenges in doing so.

Efforts to answer this call to action in Athens immediately stumbled. What *is* a vision for radical change, we asked each other? Can we or should we strive to articulate grand narratives or common projects? And, assuming we can agree upon a collective endgame, what modes of political engagement do we enlist?

In many ways, answering these questions was the purpose of our time together; to work towards such a common vision and shape the future of radical geography. We are mindful of the fact that this problematic has been much explored in the pages of *Antipode* (Amin and Thrift 2005; Castree, 2002; Hague 2002; Heynen 2006; Smith 2005; Wills 2006; Wills and Peck 2002) and elsewhere (Harvey 2006; Peet 2000). Indeed, any attempt to map the future of radical geography must recall and reaffirm the revolutionary traditions upon which it was founded while also forging new trajectories for the sub-discipline.

The frame we turned to in writing up these tensions and their implications—“grand visions and small victories”—raised another set of debates about the interrelatedness of the two concepts. On the one hand, we do not wish to delineate a false dualism. On the other, we are hard pressed to find a suitable way of capturing the tension dialectically. Some of us wanted to write about concrete steps, while others opted to focus on a programmatic call to arms. We recognize that these are not mutually exclusive endeavors. However, we lay them out here as part of our ongoing dialogue.

Grand Visions

As radical geography prepares to celebrate its fifth (Anglophone) decade, agendas are back on the agenda. At the SIGJ meeting it was certainly on the table, yet even among those who put it up for discussion, there was a reticence to articulate concrete visions. Building metanarratives to encompass what should appear obvious (eg the basic human rights to a decent life noted by Castree and Wright 2005) is not simply a matter of academic aesthetics; it is a question of strategy. As witnessed by the rise of conservative forces in Europe and the evangelical insurgency in America’s rust belt, the far right is articulating a relatively unified political program against which the left appears ideologically splintered. There is clearly significant need and desire for a program to counter such offensives. It is not so much a case of coming full circle, but rather of shifting ballast.

However unfinished, we take the SIGJ conversations as the beginning of such a change in course. Though our project stumbled, through the morass of uncertainty we can discern the following:

We are unsatisfied with constantly reacting to the raft of injustices that capitalism so effortlessly produces. We must cease to be the Davids in the struggle against Goliath and take the reins of our alternative future. To do so we must articulate this vision—whatever it is—to ourselves and others. For our part we believe the right to live without fear of violence, in good health and with access to clean water and good food is an appropriate starting point. Beyond this, we want equity both at home and in employment and the ability to pursue the pleasures that enrich our lives and those around us. We must be proud of these commitments and refrain from allowing them to pass with academic fashion.

We are acutely aware that our tools for building ideologies—visions of what we want and how to achieve it—are rusting out of neglect. This is something that needs to be addressed. Our role as radical academics should not be confined to complicating and disabling. We also bear the responsibility of nourishing fresh mobilizations.

These are, perhaps, not the radical visions that some participants hoped would emerge, but they are a beginning; they are what we can agree upon. That we are not ready, willing, or able to collectively articulate anything more requires critical examination. We recognize the risks involved in elaborating metanarratives and the dangers of assuming the universality of our struggles. Nevertheless, we should not dismiss the potential of a common project. We must at least commit to coming together, from our often disparate and sometimes contradictory positions, to oppose the basic affronts to human dignity that continue apace.

Small Victories

While keeping our “eyes on the prize” of justice (Smith 2005), we also looked to the small victories produced by concrete actions. We support and engage in these activities so as not to become immobilized by the enormity of the structures of injustice and exploitation we face. Articulating these steps can provide a way to help us clarify the grand visions of justice. By identifying our struggles, finding linkages and drawing counter-topographies (Katz 2001) we can and do work towards convergence. Just as the global justice movement has been weaving a coming together of convergence spaces (Routledge 2003) so too we, as geographers committed to justice, engaged in this work at the SIGJ, and hope to continue to do so at the AAG, ICCG, and the critical geography “mini-cons” (Cascadian, Kentucky, and others). The fact that so many of

us straddle these academic/activist spaces of convergence and resistance speaks to the potential of radical geography as a vehicle for disrupting traditional boundaries.

We list here some of the concrete steps we have taken to create more arenas for this sort of collective engagement. The supportive networks and democratic conversations enabled by listservs (eg GEOGFEM, CRIT-GEOG, LEFTGEOG, PYGYWG (Participatory), SXS GEOG) are serving as such spaces, and we encourage readers to join these forums. But there is room for more. To this end we are endeavoring to produce several web-based initiatives including:

- a list of outlets for the publication of critical scholarship;
- bibliographies of key texts on race, sexuality, labor, among others;
- a repository of critical syllabi, assignments and other pedagogical tools;
- a collective “notes from the field” blog;
- an online reading group and discussion forum;
- links to public geographers and geographies.

Throughout our week together (and in the conversations that continue) we expressed a palpable sense of urgency regarding the need for collective political engagement in radical geography. We believe that despite our divergent views, we must hold on to our version(s) of the future and continue to engage and celebrate the small actions that bring us closer to constructing utopias. Understanding what sort of society we wish to fight for involves both grand visions *and* small victories. We must face head on the relation between them by queering the expectations that one precludes or outshines the other. Our individual and collective projects and research provide a crucial starting point for considering how radical geographies can provide both substantive critiques and the formulation of alternative structures of power (Harvey 2006).

While we may sometimes disagree on substantive issues and modes of engagement, we believe it is critical to keep working towards common ground, even if it remains unspoken and ambiguous. This paper is a dialogue that it remains unfinished. We are all at work. Please join us.

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Endnotes

¹ Although this paper is informed by the thoughts of all who participated in the Summer Institute in the Geographies of Justice (SIGJ) 2007, the words are those of the following (in alphabetical order): Jeremy Anderson, Department of Geography, Queen Mary University of London; Laura Barraclough, Department of American Studies and Ethnicity, University of Southern California; Trevor L Birkenholtz, Department of Geography, Rutgers University; Sandy Brown, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley; Ipsita Chatterjee, Department of Geography, Clark University; Veronica Crossa, School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy, University College Dublin; Kate Driscoll Derickson, Department of Geography, Penn State; Anne-Marie Debbané, Department of Geography, York University; Jen Giesecking, The Graduate Center, City University of New York; Sara Koopman, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia; Matt Michelson, Department of Geography, University of Georgia; Diana Ojeda, Department of Geography, Clark University; Stijn Oosterlynck, Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning at the University of Leuven; Robin Jane Roff, Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University; Harold A Perkins, Department of Geography, Ohio University; Anu Sabhlok, Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Louisville.

² See SIGJ announcement in *Antipode* (2007): <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2007.00516.x?cookieSet=1>.

³ A note on process: It is likely that few readers would have ever contemplated writing with 15 other people. Indeed, the endeavor was itself a fascinating process. After outlining basic themes and arguments in Athens the writers divided into four groups and spent the next six weeks crafting the sections that make up this paper. The initial drafts were then compiled and the manuscript was circulated via email to three “internal” reviewers. Upon receipt of their comments, the manuscript was sent out for a second round of internal review and then distributed back to the initial authors who took it upon themselves to revise their sections. After a final “smoothing” revision, the text was submitted to *Antipode* for formal review.

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