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## New Directions in Cultural Geography revisited

Peter Jackson

### Origins

'New Directions in Cultural Geography' (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987) had rather humble origins. The paper was written to advertise a forthcoming conference which took place at University College London (where I was then working) in September 1987. Rather than writing a report on the conference after the event as was the convention at that time, the late Denis Cosgrove and I decided to write a more programmatic essay. The journal's editor Linda McDowell responded positively to the idea, writing in her editorial that she 'would be pleased to receive similar contributions from other conference organizers, either in the form of an article or perhaps a debate between proponents and opponents of particular points of view' (McDowell 1987: 94). Linda's comments were prescient as our short article would later provoke considerable discussion among 'proponents and opponents' of what came to be known as the 'new cultural geography' including an energetic exchange of views in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Price & Lewis 1993, Cosgrove 1993, Duncan 1993, Jackson 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Our paper, and the conference to which it referred, set out to trace 'the growing convergence of interests between contemporary social geographers and those with a historical interest in the cultural landscape' (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987, Abstract). For these were, at the time, two very separate strands of work. The conference was organized under the auspices of the Social Geography Study Group before it morphed into the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group in 1988, the significance of which is outlined in the introduction to *New words, new worlds* (Philo 1991). Cosgrove and Daniels' *The iconography of landscape* (1988) was already in press and I had started work on *Maps of meaning* (published the following year). While there were tensions between these two approaches to cultural geography – one rooted in the humanities, the other in the social sciences; one with an historical interest in landscape representation, the other focussed on contemporary cultural politics – the UCL conference brought these and other strands of work together to chart a series of 'new directions'.<sup>2</sup> Similar changes were occurring in North America, marked by a parallel conference under the same name, held at UBC later that same year, including some of the same participants (myself included).

There was a real sense of energy and excitement about these meetings – a feeling that change was in the air and that the new ideas and approaches we were exploring had the potential to reinvigorate, perhaps even to transform, the discipline. The UCL conference attracted 50 participants, including several plenary speakers: David Ley from UBC spoke about landscape as spectacle; Jim Blaut from the University of Illinois at Chicago talked about theoretical approaches to cultural geography; and Angela McRobbie from Ealing College spoke about the cultural politics of the second-hand dress trade. Other speakers in what

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<sup>1</sup> Denis and I responded to Price and Lewis's critique in very different ways. I sought to claim the moral high ground, arguing that 'Accusing other authors of selective amnesia, intellectual jockeying, hasty scholarship, careerism, elitist posturing, and egregious error will do little to encourage ... plurality and mutual tolerance' (Jackson 1993: 520). Denis had more fun, accusing Price and Lewis of 'tilting at windmills' and having 'a muscular disdain for the fey and the metropolitan', favouring 'hairy-chested feats of scholarly endurance' as 'the backpack entry ticket to the ranks of genuine cultural geographers' (Cosgrove 1993: 516).

<sup>2</sup> Seeking to repudiate the existence of any unified group of scholars who could be said to embody 'the new cultural geography', I drew attention to 'many significant differences between Cosgrove's landscape iconography, Duncan's literary post-structuralism, and my own brand of "cultural politics"' (Jackson 1993: 519). Denis was equally outspoken in denying any such 'conspiracy of scholars', declaring that 'as will readily be apparent to anyone who has read our substantive works as well as our programmatic statements, there are areas of quite significant disagreement between us' (Cosgrove 1993: 515).

now seems a quite remarkable line-up included Gillian Rose, Jacquie Burgess, David Mitchell, Mike Heffernan, Judith and Andrew Sixsmith, Eleonore Kofman, Derek Gregory, Nigel Thrift, Peter Larkham, John Bale, Jane Jacobs, Stanley Waterman, Pyrs Gruffudd, Dave Matless, Steve Daniels, Peter Murphy and Ullrich Kockel. I still have the conference programme and this is the order in which we spoke.

Despite the programmatic nature of what Denis and I wrote, we were sufficiently reticent about the novelty and ambition of the project to use the conditional voice in our mooted definition: ‘If we were to define this “new” cultural geography’, we wrote, ‘it would be 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’ (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987: 95).<sup>3</sup> In a slightly more strident tone, we added: ‘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’ (ibid.: 95). This phrasing later gave rise to a debate with Don Mitchell about the ontological status of ‘the cultural’ (as a domain or sphere or medium) in his provocatively entitled essay ‘There’s no such thing as culture’ (Mitchell 1995, Jackson 1996).<sup>4</sup>

## Sources

If memory serves, I wrote the initial draft of the New Directions paper and Denis added to it with free-hand comments and additional suggestions in brightly-coloured ink (I wish I still had the manuscript). He added a series of references to new work from Danish, Indian, Israeli, Spanish and Swiss authors of whom I was only dimly aware. We debated whether landscape was ‘a sophisticated cultural construction’ (which was my take on the matter) or ‘a cultural image’ (which sounds more like Denis’s distinctive ‘way of seeing’). We quoted the poetic opening lines of *The iconography of landscape* in which the authors speculated on the way landscapes could 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’ (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987: 96) – and we referenced work in social and cultural history by Edward Muir, Robert Darnton and Carl Schorske, taking inspiration from sources well beyond our own discipline.<sup>5</sup>

My main contribution to the paper was the final section on ‘Social geography and contemporary cultural studies’. I had been teaching Humanistic Geography at UCL with Jacquie Burgess, including the student-led field projects we called ‘streetwork’ (Burgess & Jackson 1992) but I had also been reading some of the seminal works of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, led by Stuart Hall. This was initially a kind of hobby, peripheral to my main academic interests, simply because I found them more interesting than much of the current work in social and cultural geography, later seeking out their intellectual roots in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. But

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<sup>3</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this is the only time that Denis and I referred directly to the new cultural geography, our ambiguity about its novelty and coherence as a unified approach emphasised by placing the ‘new’ in quotation marks.

<sup>4</sup> I’ve always thought that the vehemence with which Mitchell expressed his argument was overplayed and that I had argued something similar about how the idea of culture can be mobilised for ideological purposes. This is what I called ‘the problem of culturalism’ (Jackson 1989: chapter 2) where a reified idea of ‘culture’ is taken as an explanation for social difference when an alternative (materialist) approach has much greater explanatory power. For a recent extension of these arguments to the politics of consumption in the current ‘age of austerity’, see Jackson (2016).

<sup>5</sup> This was, in fact, a slight misquotation. The full passage actually reads: ‘A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings. This is not to say that landscapes are immaterial. They may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces – in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. A landscape park is more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem’ (Daniels & Cosgrove, ‘Introduction: iconography and landscape’ in Cosgrove & Daniels 1988: 1).

it was Stuart Hall's work that most inspired me as was clear from the argument that 'culture is the medium through which people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value' (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987: 99). These ideas derive from the same section of *Resistance through rituals* where the CCCS authors argued that 'Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups "handle" the raw material of their social and material existence' (Clarke et al. 1976: 10). A few lines later, the authors continued: 'A culture includes the "maps of meaning" which make things intelligible to its members'. They go on to note that 'These "maps of meaning" are not simply carried around in the head: they are objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a "social individual"'. Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted' (ibid.: 10-11).

These ideas proved central to my own future work and were the theoretical foundations of my approach to cultural geography (Jackson 1989). Hall's ideas also underpinned my empirical work on the politics of Carnival (Jackson 1988), the topic of my presentation at the New Directions conference. It was therefore one of my proudest academic moments when, after the publication of my edited collection on *Race and racism* (1987), I received a hand-written letter from Stuart Hall commending the book. Hall wrote: 'How pleasant it is to read something *really* new, breaking new ground, in the race/racism debate – and especially to commend the extension of these questions into Social Geography'. He added wryly: 'No doubt you are guarding your back as the stilettos are sharpened...'. I remember running up and down the corridor at UCL, brandishing the letter and sharing my delight with colleagues -- and I'm still deeply grateful for Hall's generosity, encouragement and inspiration.

### **Current and future directions**

How, then, might these ideas from the late 1980s be applied in the very different cultural and political context of the present day? At the height of the 'cultural turn' in the 1980s and 90s, social scientists were preoccupied with the politics of identity, opening up an intellectual space in which to explore the cultural dynamics of gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race, provoking a sharp response from those who insisted on the continued primacy of class (cf. Pile & Keith 1993, Hobsbawm 1996). These issues and debates have not gone away, of course, but scholarly attention is now focused on other questions including the 'grand challenges' of food security and climate change, about which my own work in the 1980s was largely silent. There was no discussion of food, nature or environment in *Maps of meaning*, for example, about which I was chided at the time. But I was soon extending these ideas in new research on the geographies of consumption, where I was fortunate to work with Daniel Miller and others, which later developed into my current interest in the political and moral economies of food.<sup>6</sup>

The ESRC-AHRC *Cultures of Consumption* programme prompted me to focus more directly on food, in collaboration with Neil Ward and Polly Russell. Our project sought to extend previous work on commodity chains which examined the points at which economic value was created and profit extracted to argue that food's cultural and moral values should be included alongside its political-economy, a nexus of meanings that shifted as food moved along the supply chain 'from farm to fork' (Jackson et al. 2009). These ideas have taken me into a wider field, working in collaboration with food scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds (Murcott et al. 2013). While this field is inherently interdisciplinary, my training in social and cultural geography still shapes my approach to food and related issues and I remain wedded to the power of 'thinking geographically' about space, place and scale, searching our relational

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<sup>6</sup> We secured funding to study Brent Cross and Wood Green shopping centres in 1993 at the point when I left London (where I had been living in Wood Green) to move to Sheffield. Our co-authored book, *Shopping, place and identity* (Miller et al. 1998) had much less impact than Miller's solo-authored book, *A theory of shopping* (Miller 1998).

connections and interdependencies (Jackson 2006). I'm also delighted that growing numbers of geographers are being attracted to this field, as is apparent from the recent formation of a Geographies of Food working group within the RGS-IBG. Geographers surely have a distinctive contribution to make to these debates, where the kind of cultural materialism that I outlined in *Maps of meaning* continues to have purchase, in combination (and sometimes in tension) with more recent work on actor-networks, socio-cultural assemblages and the more-than-human. Much of my current research is informed by a theories-of-practice approach where 'the cultural' features not as a separate domain but as an intrinsic part of the triad of things, competencies and meanings (see Jackson 2015 for further discussion of these ideas).

Now, ESRC and other funding agencies have turned their attention to the Nexus of food, water and energy security, encouraging work across sectors and domains that are often studied separately. When I was asked to chair the 2016 RGS-IBG Conference, I chose 'nexus thinking' as the conference theme. Though its origins are complex and the need for such an awkward neologism is disputed, nexus thinking has attracted a surge of interest in the last five years among academics, policy-makers and third-sector organizations. The approach aims to address the interdependencies, tensions and trade-offs between different domains and sectors. Rather than seeing energy, food and water resources as separate systems, nexus thinking focuses on their interconnections, favouring an integrated approach that moves beyond national, sectoral, policy and disciplinary 'silos' to identify more efficient, equitable and sustainable uses of scarce resources.

The current interest in nexus thinking originated in an influential 2011 report from the World Economic Forum which described water security as the gossamer that links together the web of food, energy, climate, economic growth and human security challenges. The concept gained further currency in the run-up to the Rio+20 Summit in 2012 and is currently the focus of the ESRC's Nexus Network initiative.<sup>7</sup> While there is some rhetorical redundancy in the approach and some overlap with previous debates about sustainable development and integrated resource management, nexus thinking now has its own momentum, generating new research across previously disconnected fields. My own predilection is not to focus exclusively on 'the Nexus' of water, energy and food security but to widen the debate to explore the power of nexus thinking in a range of different contexts -- thinking relationally and making connections across temporal horizons and spatial scales, exploring the potential of nexus thinking as metaphor and method. If nexus thinking has the power to open up new spaces for critical debate about environment and sustainability, culture and society, that would be an exciting extension of the ideas that Denis Cosgrove and I outlined nearly thirty years ago.

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<sup>7</sup> The intellectual genealogy of nexus thinking is traced by Leck et al. (2015)

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