

Part I

Critical Reflections



Fun Fair in Front of the Marx Monument Chemnitz (formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt), Germany, 2007. Photo and © by Bernd Adamek- Schyma.

An important aspect of critical scholarship is to look in the mirror and reflect on one's own practices. The essays in Part I represent such reflections. They discuss the role of geography in society and education, and the practices that characterize the institutional contexts and workplaces of geographers. Reflection means raising uncomfortable questions about the discipline's own shortcomings, including tackling issues of racism and sexism within the geographic community or the compliance with problematic institutional politics. Asking these uncomfortable questions is an important step in creating opportunities to address them. Through reflection

geographers have thought to create the conditions that enable progressive transformation of their own community and its institutional context.

The essays below address a variety of issues, ask a range questions and offer diverse suggestions and solutions. They are impressions of the time and place in which they were written. For example, the essay by Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) with its passion for science is situated in a period following Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1959) that was marked by the “revival of Natural Science” in geography (Richard Peet’s discussion in Chapter 14 further illustrates how Kropotkin’s thinking about human society is framed by the belief in the natural evolutionary process). Furthermore, his calls of international cooperation and exchange occurred at a time when Europe’s political order congealed around the configuration of the nation state (Hobsbawm, 1989). While some of Kropotkin’s ideas may seem hopelessly outdated to the contemporary reader, others are still as inspiring as they were more than 120 years ago. Conversely, the chapter by French essayist, filmmaker and founder of the Situationist International, Guy Debord (1931-1994), is situated in a very different historical context. His critique of urban geography is also a critique of the urban Paris of the 19th and 20th Century, while developing and applying the notion of *psychogeography* to capture geographies of emotion and behaviour.

The remaining essays in Part I outline the contours of more recent debate in English-speaking academic geography about academic practices and conventions, and about the contradictions between the ideas and concepts geographers advocate and teach and how geographers act. An early example of this recent trend of self-reflection is Nicholas Blomley’s essay, in which he asks important questions about the responsibilities and opportunities of academics to facilitate change outside of the academy. His essay ignited a vibrant and still on-going discussion of how critical geographers should engage in activism inside and outside their own workplace (e.g. Tickell, 1995; Castree, 1999, 2000, [Fuller and Kitchin](#), 2004). Similarly, Vera Chouinard calls on her fellow geographers not to lose sight of the aims of critical scholarship. As geographers seek to reinvent themselves and embrace new ideas and theories, they also should apply these ideas and theories to understand processes of oppression and exclusion.

That even in academia reflection can connect to action is exemplified in the report by Neil Smith and Caroline Desbiens on the Inaugural International Conference on Critical Geography. Smith and Desbiens show how critical geographers are meeting the tyranny of contemporary forces of globalization with “political optimism” and the formation of the International Critical Geography Group (ICCG) that set itself ambitious political goals. At the intersection of applying and theorizing critical geography, the group has sought to resolve practical barriers to internationalism, such as deciding in which language to communicate, and internal criticism, such as issues of representation and inclusion, through open debate (e.g. Katz, 1998). The ICCG continues to be active and last met in November, 2007, in Mumbai, India.

The difficulties with which the ICGG is grappling are part of a larger change among geographers towards greater sensitivity to issues of justice and equality. Discourses of race and gender, in particular, have occupied a prominent position in the research and writings of academic critical geographers over past decades (see, for example, Chapters 15, 16, 17 and 20, and Kobayashi and Peake, 1994). Many geographers have felt, however, that this thematic focus on race has not been matched by critical practice within the discipline. By using her own biography as an example, Laura Pulido illustrates the practical problems confronted by non-white geographers at North-American universities and shows how the “whiteness” of the geographic discipline has shaped geographic scholarship.

While these chapters illustrate that highly problematic practices have existed within geography and its institutions, the final essay in Part I, by Harald Bauder, investigates how and why these practices are reproduced by academic geographers. Students, junior scholars and seasoned professors all play critical roles in the reproduction of the academic institution with all its practices. The transformation of these practices will require not only that academic geographers recognize these forces of reproduction, but also that they consciously mobilize the particular resources at their disposal with the positions they occupy.

References

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