

The extraordinary task of crafting a more ‘ordinary’ geography: Post-vanguardism and the art of not-knowing best

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Shawn Bodden’s article and his insightful incorporation of the scholarship produced by the late Clive Barnett speak to the way in which our discipline is slowly emerging from an under-remarked vanguardism that has been with us for the last 50 years. Bodden (2023) suggests that we build on the work Barnett has left us by more fully incorporating the insights of ordinary language philosophy (OLP) to craft a new approach to critical geography. Barnett, of course, would have resisted the notion that we should import important theory from somewhere else, as Bodden is fully aware, but they both advocate for the production of geographical knowledge that starts from people in place, rather than academic theory in ‘geography-land’. This was Barnett’s intellectual mission and we honour him and create a worthy legacy if we try to follow his lead. Bodden makes a start in exploring how we might do this and my hope is that his article opens up a wider debate about Barnett’s understated and under-appreciated mission for radical change.

Bodden (2023) begins his paper by setting out the problem he is trying to address, alerting us to the way in which human geography and geographers have been focused on ‘the settling of key conceptual questions to enable “proper” forms of emancipatory politics’. This approach to ‘proper’ critical geography involves getting the concept right (say neoliberalism, post-politics, planetary urbanism or post-colonialism) and then applying it

to objects of study. Such studies invariably serve the publication machine by confirming and/or augmenting the predetermined concept while also bemoaning the lack of adequate resistance or response from those on the ground. Clive Barnett (2005) brilliantly dissected the way in which geographers used the related concepts of neoliberalism, hegemony and governmentality when he outlined this problem. He challenged the way that this style of argument occluded long-term processes of socio-cultural change whereby people make their own way in the world as best they are able. As an alternative, he advocated ‘figuring out how the world works and how it changes’ (Barnett, 2005, 10), rather than refining concepts that are then imposed on the world with ‘good’ or ‘bad’ outcomes. This intellectual project shaped his subsequent work and is exemplified in his book *The Priority of Injustice* (Barnett, 2017).

Fortunately for us, this mission has now been picked up by Shawn Bodden. He draws on OLP, a tradition of philosophy that includes Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell to focus on the ways in which language allows people to make sense of the world, their place in it, and the myriad decisions required

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in having a life. Bodden deploys this ‘ordinary’ approach as a counterfoil to the dominant and emerging approaches to understanding ontology in geography. He challenges the prioritisation of ontological concepts in geography, arguing that even more recent non-relational approaches that challenge the ‘relational turn’ have incorporated a misreading of OLP that is a barrier to the full breakthrough we need. However, he is also challenging the whole project of ontological prioritisation and the quest for certainty in geography, and in this regard, the first part of the article is much less important than the second. Indeed, things get much more valuable when we focus on the Barnett mission with which we began. This is beautifully summarised by Bodden, where he argues:

Rather than a source of metaphysical certitude, theory can contribute to practices of public inquiry into the ways people account for the world and make themselves accountable to it – how they circumstantiate the meaning, worth and wisdom of their actions through a giving and taking of perspectives.

For me at least, the article has been a provocation to think more deeply about how we develop this approach to the use of theory and the processes of academic scholarship that follow. This is the mission to create a more ‘ordinary’ geography and Bodden, and Barnett before him, are trying to move away from a model of scholarship (and politics) that knows the answers in advance of asking the questions. As he indicates, geographers will make truth declarations that then find resonance with parts of the world that confirm or fail to meet expectations. He provides examples from the lexicon of progressive geography through which geographers assert that ‘space is relational’, ‘open’, ‘processual’ and ‘contested’. He also points out that the emerging geographical scholarship that challenges this perspective on the basis of a non-relational reading of space that can better embrace ‘issues of uncertainty, limits and impossibility’ is similarly detached from research efforts grounded in everyday life. He puts this well when describing OLP’s opposition to philosophical interventions that neglect the contexts

in which language facilitates the development of ideas that can help people make sense of their world. He argues that the resources of OLP allow us to think about the geographical contexts in which human beings grapple with uncertainty and the challenges of determining what is best to be done. This is about attending to ‘the ordinary practices of judgement and response people use to work out their own answers’ in particular places and contexts.

Bodden (2023) rightly wants to challenge all forms of ontological certainty and *a priori* conceptual imposition in geography. As he suggests, such scholarship has advanced knowledge of ‘how the world always-and-really is, [meaning that] such ontological accounts always know what to say and what is to be done’. Bodden uses Barnett’s work as a launch pad for rethinking the assumptions that have been adopted by a generation of geographers, and in this regard, he could have been bolder. Appreciating the ‘tyranny’ of theory that reflects an unacknowledged authoritarianism that the scholar knows best means a root-and-branch overhaul of what geographers think, do and say. It means rejecting a vanguardism that has been with us since the 1970s, particularly associated with the widespread adoption of Marxist (and Marx-inspired) philosophy in geography (Barnes and Sheppard, 2019).¹ The hegemony of radical geography and its off-shoot critical geography remain strong, shaping disciplinary norms to this day. Geography has adopted a leftist structure-of-feeling that has recourse to an unwritten modern version of the ‘Little Red Book’ determining what the world should be like.² Indeed, the impact of this way of thinking stretches far beyond ‘geography-land’ (as Barnett liked to call it) and is evident in rhetorical mantras for abstractions like ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’, ‘net zero’ and ‘ending poverty’, that float above the everyday realities in which people live.

The scale of this problem demands that we make a much bolder shift than either Bodden or Barnett suggest. While Bodden (2023) is right to advocate that we engage in ‘intersubjective social inquiry into how to respond to the challenges of a shared world’, we need a much bigger tool kit than OLP to achieve this. Indeed, OLP is part of a broader body

of philosophy – pragmatism – that starts from particularity, place and context, connecting language to its localised meanings and consequences. It was pragmatist philosophers who developed the argument for ‘social inquiry’ as a way to understand how human beings converse and deliberate when faced with the dilemmas of everyday life. When people are confronted with what Charles Sanders Peirce called ‘forks in the road’ and John Dewey later referred to as ‘problematic situations’, and can no longer draw on habits of thought and action inherited through tradition and practice, they need to rethink what is best to be done (Cutchin, 2020; Wills and Lake, 2020). This is done in context, through conversation and experiment, in changing circumstances, and it is never finished. Dewey referred to it as a process of ‘social inquiry’ and more recent forms of pragmatism identify it taking place via public debate and contestation as people seek justification for their particular views in relation to matters of (in)justice (or anything else) (Barnett, 2017; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

If geographers are to be open to research questions arising from the particular contexts in which we find ourselves or position ourselves as researchers, it means tuning in to the ongoing conversations and challenges that might later come to focus these ‘social inquiries’. Indeed, as researchers, we might come to play a role in helping to facilitate inquiry and developing new ideas and practices to make better sense of, and action in, the world (Harney et al., 2016). Applying Rorty’s pragmatic approach to the discipline, Lake (2023, 1) advocates for this more public orientation to geography that would require: ‘a shift from analysis to conversation; from abstract theorization to the extension of loyalty to the widest possible plurality of publics; and from representing an antecedent truth to the pragmatist’s goal of reaching collective agreement on what to do’. This is an argument that we re-orientate the discipline towards making relationships, having conversations, listening and reflecting, rather than focusing on *a priori* conceptualisation and subsequent application to the ‘real world’. Such a move is easily understated and it would require a whole new approach to inducting new members into the community of geographers. Most

importantly, it would require modelling modesty and openness to not-knowing best. It would advocate allowing people their own ‘ontological self-determination’ (Savransky, 2021) in a rejection of the latent leftist vanguardism that still haunts the discipline (as well as the wider academy and much of the public policy community).

This will not be easy given the academic kudos that is attached to high theory and the intellectual standing that has come to geography as a result of its metaphysical work.³ However, the discipline has a number of things in its favour. First, it has its origins as a field discipline and can always find important research questions out in the field. Second, it speaks to the importance of place and context in shaping experience and ideas, giving it a strong public and intellectual rationale in place-based research and policy that is now gaining ground. Third, it has always been a practically oriented discipline, emerging to solve particular problems (Wills, 2014). Fourth, it is an open discipline in which people are encouraged to develop new ideas and share them in public debate. Fifth, people are already doing this kind of work, even if they do not necessarily dress it up in the language of OLP or pragmatism. Barnett recognised this legacy in an all-too-brief postscript on P/pragmatism, urging that we incorporate a Cavellian reading of the tradition that retains space for the individual, pluralism and conflict, as well as the scepticism highlighted by Bodden (Barnett, 2020).

Bodden’s article opens up the disciplinary conversation about how best to pursue the extraordinary mission to craft a more ‘ordinary’ geography. As we face up to the tragedy that Clive Barnett is no longer able to lead this debate, we need many more brains on the job.

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Notes

1. There is not space to unpack the idea of vanguardism in this response but more can be found in a debate about the future of leftist ideas in geography published in the pages of *Antipode* more than a decade ago (Wills, 2006).
2. This is a reference to the Little Red Book extolled by Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976. People had to adhere to its mantras or suffer extreme public humiliation or death.
3. Doreen Massey's work is a great example of the reach of geographical ideas across the humanities and social sciences. While Bodden challenges Massey for her ontological certainty and singularly progressive reading of space, these are the very attributes that have allowed the ideas to resonate so successfully beyond disciplinary lines.

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