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## Professionalisation, activism, and the university: whither ‘critical geography’?

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Noel Castree<sup>¶</sup>

Department of Geography, Liverpool University, Liverpool L69 3BX, Merseyside, England

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**Abstract.** In this paper I seek to describe, explain, and evaluate three decades of Left geographical change. Now that ‘critical geography’—rather than ‘radical geography’—has become the privileged descriptor for Left geographical inquiry, it is argued that this temporal switch of labels is of more than merely semantic significance. Specifically, it is suggested that the supercession of the ‘radical geography’ label is symptomatic of a substantive shift in the nature and purposes of Left geographical inquiry. This shift has entailed the ‘professionalisation’ and ‘academicisation’ of Left geography. Both developments have occurred in the context of a thirty-year transition from a ‘modern’ to an ‘after-modern’ higher education system. Taking the Anglo-American case, it is argued that the current vitality of the geographical (read ‘critical’) Left in the academy correlates with its detachment from ‘real world’ political constituencies and also a blindness to the academic changes underpinning this inverse correlation. Rather than worrying over their apparent failure to connect with constituencies ‘out there’, it is argued that geographical Leftists need to recapture something of the radical geography spirit of action and engagement in order to contest changes occurring ‘in here’: that is, changes in the political and moral economy of the higher system that enables and constrains our academic labours. A brief manifesto for a ‘domesticated critical geography’ is offered by way of a conclusion.

### Introduction: the dissenting tradition

If my title seems strange then so much the better. Why, and to what end, do I invoke the term ‘critical geography’ instead of ‘radical geography’, the ostensible focus of this special issue? And why, moreover, do I do so in relation to professionalisation and the university? Surely, such institutional concerns are parochial when compared with the pressing litany of ‘real world’ problems that are normally the stuff of critical geographical research? In answering these three questions I hope in this essay to raise several issues which ought to be of central concern to those on the geographical Left today. But I should begin by explaining why they are *significant* questions to ask some thirty years after the radical geography movement was inaugurated.

When Jim Blaut (1979, page 157) described radical geography as “the dissenting tradition” he was identifying a movement at once firmly left of centre, unpretentious, action orientated, grass-roots focused, democratic, and antiestablishment, which emerged out of a set of specific economic, social, and political conditions to be found in North America, and particularly the United States, in the late 1960s. Indeed, depending on which of geography’s historians one reads, radical geography, so the story goes, was born at the AAG meeting in Ann Arbor in 1969, when several constituencies—including the early *Antipode* group based at Clark University and those involved in the Detroit Geographical Expedition—converged, collaborated, and synergised. However, as we enter the 21st century things have, of course, changed considerably. And yet the influences of the past still permeate the present. As a result Leftist geography today is characterised by a double relation of indebtedness to, and departure from, its radical geography origins. Among many things that could be said here, it is worth highlighting just two.

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<sup>¶</sup>Current address: School of Geography, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL; e-mail: [noel.castree@man.ac.uk](mailto:noel.castree@man.ac.uk)

First, the geographical Left is today probably more vibrant and varied than ever before. To be sure, this expansion and pluralisation of dissident geographies cannot be attributed, at least in any simple or unmediated way, to the efforts of the first radical geographers. But it remains the case, nonetheless, that those early efforts were a condition of possibility for the subsequent emergence, in the 1980s and 1990s, of a serious and substantive corpus of Left geographical scholarship. Second, as the geographical Left has grown and multiplied these last three decades, old idioms have been reworked, and new ones put in place, to describe it. Specifically, one rarely hears the term ‘radical geography’ these days (notwithstanding *Antipode’s* subtitle). Instead, ‘critical geography’ has become the privileged descriptor for Left geographical work. Indeed, it was given a certain institutional weight and legitimation in the form of the Inaugural International Conference of Critical Geographers (IICCG) in Vancouver in August 1997.<sup>(1)</sup> What is one to make of this? Are radical and critical geography simply synonyms? At one level the answer to the latter question is clearly yes. Where, by the late 1970s, ‘radical geography’ designated the then relatively small Left geographical community *tout court* [rather than any specific group or movement within it (though Marxist geography did loom very large)], so ‘critical geography’ stands two decades on as an homologous umbrella term for that plethora of antiracist, disabled, feminist, green, Marxist, postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, and queer geographies which now constitute the large, dynamic, and broad-based disciplinary Left—a Left that is today such an important force in geography as a whole. Seen thus, the difference between the terms ‘radical geography’ and ‘critical geography’ is relatively insignificant: they are, apparently, no more than interchangeable.

It is, however, possible to suggest an alternative interpretation of this temporal switch of labels. For the currency of the term ‘critical geography’ is arguably coincident with, indeed symptomatic of, a *qualitative* shift in the nature and locus of Leftist scholarship in geography: namely, a shift towards *job professionalisation* that brings with it academic and political gains but also some notable losses. Among these losses, I will suggest, is the spirit of engagement and activism associated with the first stirrings of a radical geography movement within the discipline. In other words, the professionalisation of today’s Leftist (read ‘critical’) geography is also coincident with its *academicisation*. That is why the terms ‘radical geography’ and ‘critical geography’ cannot be collapsed one into the other. This is why the first of the three questions I posed at the outset is a significant, rather than trivial, one. And this is why I call, in this essay, for a qualified reclamation and revalorisation of the term ‘radical’ in human geography some three decades after its first invocation.

What, though, of my second question? Why consider radical and critical geography in relation to the *university*, rather than in relation to the many ‘real world’ problems Leftist geographers routinely diagnose and critique? Three reasons immediately come to mind. First, the professionalisation and academicisation of Leftist geography just referred to can only be understood in relation to changes in Western higher education from a ‘modern’ to what (simplifying outrageously) one might call an ‘after-modern’ university and college system. Second, although these changes have aided the development of a Leftist geography in all sorts of ways, they have also circumscribed it in a manner yet to be fully disclosed and debated. Third, what all this means is that, far from being ‘local’ and thus somehow ‘mundane’, the question of the nature and structure of the after-modern university must be absolutely central in any discussion of what Leftist geography is, and could be, about in the present era.

<sup>(1)</sup> And, more recently, by plans for a series of follow-up conferences and the publication of a statement of purpose by the International Critical Geography Group (see Desbiens and Smith, 1999 and the appended Statement of Purpose).

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This brings me, finally, to the third of the questions posed at the outset. For, however relevant the changing nature of the university might be to grasping the present and future course of Left geographical scholarship, does it not remain the case that such scholarship ought to be addressing pressing problems beyond the university's precincts? The obvious answer is yes. Indeed, in recent years a number of younger commentators (for example, Blomley, 1994; Peck, 1999; Tickell, 1995; 1998) have worried about the apparent separation in geography between 'activism and the academy' and have called for critical geographers to re-engage with the world, both personally and politically. In many ways, these writers reclaim something of that spirit of hands-on engagement and quotidian commitment which animated the radical geography of the late 1960s—a reclamation that, as noted, will be argued for in this essay. However, unlike Blomley et al, any contemporary form of geographical activism arguably needs to be as much *within and against* the academy as about reaching out from it. For it seems to me that when activism is aimed largely or solely 'out there', Leftist geographers may overlook both the need for, and possibilities of, change within the very institutions which both enable and constrain their inquiries: namely, the universities. Thus, though the radical geographic legacy of political engagement ought legitimately to inspire a recoupling of today's critical geography with the peoples and places it studies, that legacy needs also to be channelled 'in here' in order to contest and influence the structure of the university system from which any such recoupling must necessarily proceed.

The argument is organised as follows. First, some general reflections are offered on the nature and state of the geographical Left in its thirty-year passage from radical to critical geography. Second, this passage is explained in terms of the professionalisation and academicisation of the geographical Left which, in turn, are both linked to an activist disengagement not only from the 'real world' but also from the very forces within the academy undergirding them. Third, drawing upon recent work by several educational critics, economists, and sociologists, I argue that professionalisation and academicisation are best understood in relation to the changing political and cultural economy of Western universities. Finally, I call for a renewal of geographical activism—very much in the spirit of the early radical geography—but an activism focused as much within higher education as outside it. Before proceeding, two qualifications are in order. First, this essay limits its claims to Anglophone—and specifically Anglo-American—geography. Second, many of the arguments made are far less sensitive and refined than a longer analysis would allow.<sup>(2)</sup> I hope, then, that my tendency to overgeneralise and overstate things in what follows will be understood (and tolerated) as a deliberate provocation for further debate about the nature and purpose of critical geography in contemporary academia.

## **What's 'Left'? From 'radical' to 'critical' geography**

### **The 'arrival' of the Left**

These are exciting times for those on the geographical Left. In the space of three decades, geography's dissenting tradition has evolved in ways the tradition's founders could barely have anticipated. In simple terms, this evolution can be described as a four-fold process of quantitative growth, disciplinary insinuation, thematic diversification, and political pluralisation. By quantitative growth I am referring, of course, to the tremendous expansion in the numbers of professional geographers and graduate students who consider themselves 'of the Left', an expansion secured in large part by a process of intergenerational socialisation and influence. Quite simply, without the efforts of the radical geographers of the 1970s and 1980s, the many young geographers

<sup>(2)</sup> A longer version of this paper is available from the author upon request.

who have fuelled the prodigious growth of the disciplinary Left in the 1990s would not have been able to nail their professional and personal colours to the Leftist mast so readily or so willingly.

With quantitative growth has come disciplinary insinuation, meaning that Leftist geography has in some senses ‘arrived’, particularly in the UK and US. It is, if you like, now part of the day-to-day fabric of the discipline as a whole. For example, where, even a decade ago, those socialised into the tradition of spatial science topped the citation charts, today it is the likes of Derek Gregory, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Neil Smith, and Michael Watts. This citation reversal suggests in a clear (if simplistic) way that Leftist geography has insinuated itself into the very heart of the discipline—something that would have seemed impossible not just three decades ago but even as recently as the late 1980s, when Richard Walker (1989, page 81) still described the geographical left as “an embattled minority”.

If, then, the geographical Left has of late gained at the expense of the disciplinary Right, what of its ‘internal’ dynamics? This brings us to the conjoined issues of thematic diversification and political pluralisation. By the late 1970s, of course, Marxism was already emerging as the dominant ‘radical’ approach within Anglophone geography. By the late 1980s, that position of dominance was more-or-less secured. A decade of remarkable change later, though, that dominance has been dismantled as first feminist, and then other, critical geographies have made their way into the discipline. Although some Marxist geographers would disagree, on the whole all this has been an immensely important and salutary development. Among other things, it means that today the geographical Left is more ecumenical than ever before. It also means—and here we come to the issue of political pluralisation—that the normative edges of Left geographical inquiry no longer revolve largely or exclusively around class. Though class always had the appeal of being a general, rather than local or idiosyncratic, axis of sociospatial inequality, it could not remain a political rallying point for the geographical Left indefinitely. Accordingly, the 1990s have seen questions of gender, sexuality, ‘race’, the environment, ageism, disability, and so on challenge and complicate the focus on class to the point where older Marxist geographical notions of a ‘common’ Left politics seem unduly restrictive, if not downright exclusionary.

The four-fold process of change just described represents three decades of achievement for the geographical Left. From the radical geography of the late 1960s to the critical geographies of today, then, those who claim allegiance to the dissenting tradition have much to be proud of. Indeed, a case could be made that the Left of human geography is today stronger than in most of the other social sciences and humanities. Moreover, through the IICCG and other new vehicles, it is now building many new disciplinary connections within and between different nations in an effort to consolidate and extend the progress already made (see Desbiens and Smith, 1999).

### **The bifurcation of the Left**

The arrival of the geographical Left described above is not, of course, exclusive to geography. On the contrary, subjects like politics and sociology have experienced similar internal shifts so that today, like geography, they are well populated with tenured radicals. Clearly, this is a gratifying development for those, like myself, with a personal and professional commitment to critical scholarship. However, this said, few can ignore the fact that the expansion of the *academic Left* has been coincident, in ways both striking and seemingly contradictory, with the precipitous contraction of the *nonacademic Left* in the domains of business, government, and civil society.

The story here is well known. Since the mid-to-late 1970s, the major Western countries have undergone an economic, political, and social sea change. Put simply, the shift to

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'free market economics', the dismantling of social welfare programmes, and the institutionalisation of new forms of individual and group identification have together undone the postwar social-democratic consensus. Added to this, the late 1980s saw the collapse of communism in Russia and the Eastern Bloc, thus effectively ending the great (if deeply flawed) 20th-century experiment in noncapitalist modes of production and societalisation. Finally, the ongoing reconstitution of international systems of finance, governance, and trade mean that the neoconservative and neoliberal agenda can now claim to have an almost global purchase. As a result of all this, Leftist thinking and practice—be it in business, politics, or the public sphere—has been left so battered and bruised that it is but a pale shadow of its former self. Indeed, in countries like the UK and US, the political centre has moved so far to the right that governments an older Left would have considered conservative—like Blair's or Clinton's—actually appear relatively progressive.

In short, the Left has become bifurcated. As the influence of the nonacademic Left within business, government, and the public sphere has waned, the influence of the academic Left within the university system has apparently increased, at least in the Anglophone world (and I will suggest some reasons for this later in the essay). Thus, at the very moment when the first radical geographers sounded their clarion call (in the late 1960s and early 1970s), wider political economic forces were already working to render vulnerable the postwar developments that had made such a call both possible and necessary. Thirty years on, the geographical Left is thus witness to a peculiarity which would be funny if it were not so sad: namely, the fact that the unprecedented vitality of critical geography comes at a time when the prospects for progressive change beyond the precincts of the university arguably seem more dismal than ever.

### **The 'decoupling' of the geographical Left**

Still, however dismal those prospects may be, there is in principle nothing to stop today's critical geographers reaching out from the academy in order to improve the world they study. Indeed, one might argue that the imperative to reach out increases in proportion to how bleak the opportunities for progressive change in the real world are. After all, if the academy is one of the few remaining places where the Left survives with relative freedom from countervailing forces, is it not incumbent upon Leftist academics to use that freedom to make a difference in the world?

Many in geography today would, with appropriate caveats, answer this question in the affirmative. Thus Vera Chouinard (1994, page 5) recently reminded Leftist geographers that "if you want to help in struggles against oppression you have to 'connect' with the trenches". In so doing, she articulated a commitment to conjoining the academy with activism which, as I observed in my introductory comments, can be traced back to the radical geography of the late 1960s. However, the traces of the past end there because the fact of the matter seems to be that "for all [the geographical Left's]...elegant talk about transgressing boundaries and 'practice', more of us are [today] immured in the academy than perhaps at any other time in the last two to three decades" (Smith, 1995, page 505). In short, at the level of material engagement, today's critical geography is arguably decoupled from the world it studies.

Of course, this rather bold statement needs immediately to be qualified. For instance, many Leftist geographers are active and engaged in ways not readily evident from their research and publications.<sup>(3)</sup> In addition, one should not forget that Leftist research can itself be 'active'—rather than simply academic—when it discloses hitherto

<sup>(3)</sup> I know personally of many geographers who are involved in local politics, in community organising, and in charity work.

unknown things or makes concrete recommendations for change on the basis of new evidence. Finally, the common tendency to scrutinise Left academic 'stars'—like David Harvey—can blind one to the quiet and relatively anonymous efforts of less well-known geographers who have long been grass-roots activists. However, these points notwithstanding, I would still concur with Neil Smith that something has been lost in the thirty-year passage from radical to critical geography: namely, that spirit of engagement which Chouinard articulates with such directness. It is almost as if the moment when the geographical Left announces its arrival—with the IICCG and related events—is the moment when it also declares its practical detachment from the very world it seeks to make critical sense of. The contemporary geographical Left must thus live with the irony—perhaps even the embarrassment—that, for all its unprecedented dynamism and vibrancy in academic terms, its contribution to forging better human geographies in the real world is minimal.<sup>(4)</sup>

### Activism and the academy

Fortunately, this decoupling of theory and practice has not gone uncontested. As noted earlier, in recent years a number of younger Leftist geographers, like Nick Blomley and Adam Tickell, have suggested some possible strategies and sites for renewed academic engagement. I declare my solidarity with these and other calls to reconnect activism and the academy. And yet, this said, my aim in the rest of this essay is *not* to follow Blomley, Tickell, and others in arguing that critical geographers should forge more connections with constituencies *beyond* the university precincts. Though such connections matter, I want here to argue for a project of activism *within* the higher education system Leftist geographers typically feel obliged to reach out from. If this seems strange, then it is only because we have become so accustomed to thinking that activism *ought* to be focused 'out there', in the 'real world'.<sup>(5)</sup> Consider, for example, the following statement by Paul Routledge (1996, page 400): "there has been [little]... attention in geography to how... [one] might initiate... struggle outside of the classroom or university setting." Though quite unintentional, the implication here is that activism *within* the classroom or university setting is either unnecessary or else so well understood as to require little further discussion. By contrast, it is arguable that such in-here activism is both necessary and not at all well understood by the geographical Left. Consequently, I will claim that a major effort of debate (and, of course, *action*) is required to put the current vibrancy of critical geography to practical use in contesting current developments within the higher education sector (compare Mitchell, 1999; Thrift, 1998). Put differently, I want to reclaim radical geography's commitment to practical action, but in relation to the institutions which both enable and constrain our work as professional geographers. First, though, I want in the next section to offer some kind of *explanation* of the developments described in this section. Why has the geographical Left grown so prodigiously when the Left at large has fared so badly? Why, politically speaking, is the geographical Left relatively decoupled from the world it studies? And why do Leftist geographers routinely assume that the proper (sic) locus for geographical activism lies out there, rather than in here?

<sup>(4)</sup> One of the reviewers of this paper suggested—contentiously—that a possible reason for this lack of activism is human geography's so-called 'cultural turn'. Specifically, the suggestion is that this turn emphasises theory over empirical research and so fosters a detachment from real world struggles.

<sup>(5)</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this. For instance, the work of feminist geographers has been characterised by a close attention to disciplinary politics (specifically, the masculine mores of professional geography). The recent actions by UK geographers against the RGS–IBG merger and the sponsorship of Shell Oil also attests to the concern some geographers have with in-here activism (see Castree, 1999).

### The professionalisation of the geographical Left

Since these questions cannot be answered in the abstract, I want to ground my response in a context that will be familiar to many readers: the Anglo-American one. Why, to address the first question, has the Anglo-American geographical Left grown at a time when the nonacademic Left has fared so badly? The answer, simply stated, is that it has become steadily *professionalised*. By professionalised I mean that most members of the Anglo-American geographical Left are, or aspire to be, what Roger Kimball (1991) called 'tenured radicals': that is, fully paid-up (and paid) members of the academy. Let me stress that, unlike Kimball, I do not invoke the term 'professional' in any pejorative sense. The professionalisation of the geographical Left, or of the academic Left more generally, is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative. As they say, 'it all depends'. In using the term 'professionalisation', therefore, I simply want to highlight a process the judgment of which is necessarily context dependent.

That process has several dimensions. The first is getting or questing after *tenure*, in other words, occupational and financial security. Though tenure was effectively abolished in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s, it still lives on in something like the US form, only now through slightly less generous contractual arrangements which are offered to fewer people than previously. The second dimension is *departmental socialisation*, wherein the individual Leftist geographer must learn the rules and mores of his or her institution. Third, professionalisation is about *disciplinary socialisation*. Here, like all members of the discipline, the Leftist geographer comes to think of himself or herself as much an American or British *geographer* in general as a *Leftist geographer* in particular. Fourth, professionalisation is about *claims to expertise* and a concomitant *monopolisation of academic practice*. Here, like other faculty, the Leftist geographer develops, and then defends, a specific academic competence and in so doing asserts the right to be uniquely qualified to teach, research, and award degrees at a higher level. Fifth, professionalisation is about *accreditation*. This involves gaining individual recognition for one's efforts by, for example, publishing in the 'right' journals, winning academic prizes, and securing research monies. And it involves gaining recognition for one's department. Thus in the United Kingdom, Leftist geographers, like their non-Leftist colleagues, strive to maximise their department's ranking in the government's Research Assessment Exercises.

Of course, to say that the geographical Left has become professionalised in these five ways is hardly a revelation. In some senses, professionalisation was inevitable: after all, if one wants to work in higher education full-time *and* be Left-leaning, one usually has little choice but to play by the rules of the higher education game. Bill Bunge and a few others have been notable exceptions to this, but the fact remains that yesterday's untenured 'radicals' are today's 'critical' professors, fully integrated into the day-to-day structure of the tertiary sector. The list of individuals one could name here is potentially very large. It includes, among others, David Harvey at Johns Hopkins, Doreen Massey at the Open University, Gordon Clark at Oxford, Nigel Thrift and Ron Johnston at Bristol, Peter Taylor and David Slater at Loughborough, Ray Hudson at Durham, Neil Smith formerly at Rutgers now at CUNY, Allan Pred, Richard Walker, and Michael Watts at UC Berkeley, John Agnew, Michael Dear, Allen Scott, and Ed Soja at UCLA, and Eric Sheppard and Helga Leitner at Minnesota. There is, of course, nothing inherently bad about this.<sup>(6)</sup> To suggest that professionalisation is *necessarily* antithetical to being a Left thinker is not only dogmatic but trades on the dubious notion that the only way to be 'authentically' Left is to resist professionalisation.

<sup>(6)</sup> And I am not, let me be absolutely clear, implying any personal criticism of the geographers named above.

Such a suggestion also overlooks the sheer effort of insinuating Left geography into the academy this last three decades (one thinks, for example, of Dick Walker's highly political struggle to get tenure at Berkeley in the early 1980s). Accordingly, one can argue that the arrival of the geographical Left in the UK and US has generated two very material benefits. First, far more Left geographical teaching and research is now undertaken and published in both countries. Second, as Left geographers have come to occupy professorships, editorships, and other positions of administrative clout, they have been able to influence, however minimally, the norms governing their own institutions and even, perhaps, those governing Anglo-American geography as a whole. Indeed, given the current buoyancy of the Anglo-American geographical Left, one anticipates that many more senior positions than is presently the case will be occupied by critical geographers as the new century unfolds. For example, where (to take a random sample) will already-influential younger critical geographers like Andrew Herod, Don Mitchell, Gerard Toal, Gill Valentine, and Jane Wills be in ten to fifteen years and with what influence?

And yet, all this said, the professionalisation of the Left of Anglo-American geography has been bought at a certain cost. For it arguably helps explain why that Left is separated from its nonacademic twin, politically decoupled from everyday contexts and relatively low on out-there activism: in short, why professionalisation has correlated with a rather detached *academicism*. This has several dimensions. First, the sheer time and effort needed to hold down a full-time academic job—be it tenured or untenured—often means that there is little left over for activities beyond the campus gates. Second, the professional 'rules' of Anglo-American geography are such that teaching and research are valued more highly than 'extracurricular' activities. To be sure, there are exceptions to this. However, normally speaking, Anglo-American higher education demands its faculty to teach exclusively within the system and/or to research the world outside it according to received norms of academic practice (objectivity, distance, etc) which are often not conducive to grass-roots involvement on the part of researchers (Imrie, 1996). Third, there is a sociological dimension to consider in all this. Whatever their intellectual-political predilections, geographers of the Anglo-American Left possess a set of specific (though complex and nonunified) class habituses which arise in part from their professional status. Not surprisingly, these habituses usually differ from those possessed by the constituencies Left geographers study or seek to work with. Though such difference is not necessarily disabling, and is frequently productive, it does nonetheless pose challenges for the researcher or activist seeking to make common cause with people out there.

In light of all this, one can begin to see how the Left has fared so well within Anglo-American geography even as it has become bifurcated, decoupled, and 'inactive' in the ways described earlier. For the fact of the matter is that, *as professionals*, Left geographers have played the rules of the academic game very well. They have published significant papers and monographs; they have won major grants to conduct research; they continue to teach interesting and challenging courses which students respond to positively; and they do their fair share of administration. In a sense, then, Leftist geographers can be seen as structurally isomorphic with their non-Left colleagues: they dance, if you like, to the same institutional tune.

If, then, the thirty-year journey from radical to critical geography has been a journey of professionalisation, it is not my intention to urge turning back the hands of time. Though recalling radical geography's spirit of activism and engagement is, arguably, a useful challenge to critical geography's current academicism, it cannot undo the fact of professionalisation. Moreover, the link between professionalisation and academicism that I have outlined is *contingent*, not necessary: there are other possibilities. For these

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reasons, if the geographical Left is to move beyond academicism in the spirit of a renewed activism and engagement it needs not to *reject* professionalisation but to *exploit the potential inherent within it further*.

This returns me to the two possible forms of geographical activism identified earlier: activism outside, and activism within, the academy. As Blomley, Tickell, and others are right to argue, the Left's present position of academic prominence in geography ought to be used more aggressively to effect change out there. In other words, the Left's professionalisation confers material and institutional powers whose potential to influence the world beyond the university is not being fully utilised. But what of the potential of those powers to make a difference *within* the university? In the next section I consider some of the momentous changes that have occurred in Western higher education in recent years, focusing once again on the Anglo-American case. These changes form the wider institutional context in which the gradual professionalisation and academicisation of Left geography I have considered in this section have occurred. I then, in the final part of the essay, argue that these changes demand some kind of response in the form of an in-here activism which I seek, in a very preliminary way, to explore.

### **The university in ruins: from the 'modern' to the 'after-modern'**

The period during which the Left of Anglo-American geography has become professionalised has been one of dramatic restructuring for the higher education sector. In talking of 'the' higher education sector I do not, of course, mean to imply that the US and UK tertiary systems are exactly the same. Yet, their obvious differences notwithstanding, it is possible to suggest that in recent years the UK and US tertiary systems have been subject to some very similar changes as they have affected geography (and most other disciplines). These changes include the recent 'Americanisation' of British geography in the sense that it has moved, like UK higher education in general, towards degree modularisation and towards teaching far larger numbers of undergraduate students. But these changes also include a set of *structural* shifts in the two countries which I wish to narrate in terms of the (uneven and as yet incomplete) end of the 'modern' public university system.

By the 'modern' university system I mean that which existed during the long postwar boom (1945–73) when the USA became the world's leading economic player and Britain reinvested heavily in its war-torn economic and social landscape. Under the aegis of moderate and left-of-centre governments, higher education in both countries enjoyed something of a golden period of growth. Existing public universities were expanded and new ones created in order to accommodate postwar population expansion and make good on government commitments to increasing educational access. In the USA this resulted in the consolidation of the now-familiar model of the large campus university educating many thousands of students. In Britain, which still had an elite university sector, postwar expansion took the more modest form of opening up the 'old' universities to a new middle class while simultaneously creating the 'polytechnics' for more vocationally minded students. Though never as central to this postwar expansion as disciplines like English or physics, geography in both the UK and the US nonetheless enjoyed many of its benefits in the form of considerable increases in student numbers and full-time faculty. In addition, strong governmental commitments to research (both basic and applied) meant that encouragement and funds were available for activities other than teaching.

When radical geography was inaugurated in the late 1960s it was thus in the context of a growing and generally well-funded higher education system. Thirty years on, though, the arrival of the geographical Left (in its critical geography incarnation) has been

coincident with the crumbling of that system. Anglo-American geography thus exists today in an increasingly 'after-modern' tertiary sector. In what follows, 'after-modern' designates a higher education system characterised by five features, my understanding of which is drawn from a mixture of personal experience and the work of educational critics, economists and sociologists such as Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996), Gamson (1997), Nelson (1997a), Newfield (1997), Readings (1996), Rhoades and Slaughter (1997), Slaughter and Leslie (1996), and Tirelli (1997), to whom I refer readers seeking a more in-depth analysis than I can offer here. As will be quickly apparent, the developments described below concern Anglo-American higher education in general, rather than geography alone. However, this is precisely the reason why geographers of the Left need to engage with them, not become guilty of disciplinary parochialism.

### **Fiscal retrenchment, planned austerity, and revenue stream reorganisation**

By fiscal retrenchment, planned austerity, and reorganised revenue streams is meant the massive, deliberate and uneven withdrawal of state funds from public education this last twenty years or so. As the postwar economic boom ground to a halt circa 1973, the UK and US became emblematic of a new order characterised by economic stringency and political neoconservatism. That the tertiary sector should suffer as a result was not just an inevitable knock-on effect of economic crisis. More than this, the Thatcher–Major and Reagan–Bush governments saw higher education as part of the wider problem of a bloated and inefficient public sector.<sup>(7)</sup> Consequently, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, academia came under intense political scrutiny on ideological as much as economic grounds. The new governmental measures which followed were designed to achieve two things: first, to reduce public funding for higher education while maximising the return from the money spent; second, to make academia a tool for national wealth creation [what Slaughter and Leslie (1996) call "academic capitalism"]. The two objectives were, of course, complementary from the neoconservative point of view. Where the modern tertiary sector had been heavily weighted towards giving students a 'general' education and balancing both basic and applied research, efforts to link higher education directly to the pursuit of national economic competitiveness (more vocational degrees, more applied research, etc) would help to ward off the very economic pressures which had necessitated slashing public expenditure in the first place. As a result of this pincer-movement, Anglo-American higher education today does far more than it did twenty years ago with less public money and to rather different ends.

Of course, these several developments have not proceeded in exactly the same way in the UK and the US. The centralised nature of the British system—with Westminster the major financial provider—means that retrenchment, austerity, and revenue stream reorganisation have cut more quickly and deeply than they have in the USA, where the federal system gives state governments the opportunity to dampen or resist the demands of Washington. Thus, through the University Grants Commission and its replacements, through the Jarrett Committee, through the Council for Industry and Higher Education, through the 1988 Education Reform Act, and through the 1992 creation of a single market for research and teaching funds, the Thatcher and Major governments succeeded in reorganising virtually every public university in the United Kingdom along similar economic and organisational lines. However, despite the power-sharing built-in to the US system, the Bayh–Dole Act (1980), the swathe of 1980s legislation allowing universities to behave in business-like ways, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) and the Vocational and Applied Technology Educational

<sup>(7)</sup> The irony of Reagan, of course, is that his policies were actually more akin to a military Keynesianism than to the free-market rhetoric he and his advisers peddled to the public.

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Act of 1995 mean that federal government has been able to exert similarly powerful pressures on US universities to use fewer state funds, seek more private monies and to teach and research with national economic interests in mind. [Mitchell (1999) argues that this in fact amounts to the *privatisation* and commodification of further education in the USA.]

### **Heightened managerial control**

If the financial restructuring just described means that higher education is now run along quasi-capitalist lines, as Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter (1997) argue, the corollary has been heightened managerial control within public universities in the UK and the US. Simply stated, as the power of educational administrators has increased, the independence once enjoyed by faculty has decreased. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the era of modern higher education was one in which faculty worked free from restrictions. However, caveats aside, it does seem undeniable that the last twenty years or so has seen power shift decisively towards nonacademics within Anglo-American higher education.

These administrators have, in effect, become the means by which universities and colleges have readjusted to the new political economy of retrenchment, austerity, and revenue stream reordering. Indeed, the need for a set of 'on site' agents to enforce this readjustment explains precisely why academic managers have been one of the few employment growth areas in Anglo-American higher education of late (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996). Standing between government and faculty, their increased power has become a means of enforcing the agenda of the former and controlling the work of the latter. If the notion of 'control' sounds exaggerated in this context, then it is worth recalling how such basic decisions as student numbers, departmental budgets, tuition fees, and even curriculum content now lie partly or largely in the hands of nonacademic administrators. Following Chris Newfield (1997), two strategies of controlling academic labour stand out. The first is 'downsizing', a reality and a discourse through which academic managers have withdrawn and reallocated departmental funds. Second, the disenfranchisement of Anglo-American faculty has proceeded by means of a new governance culture within public higher education, a culture in which academic managers are empowered to monitor, decompose, and assess the academic labour process while faculty are made to feel that they must be accountable to managerial diktat. Thus in the United Kingdom, the recent near-national shift towards the 'modularisation' of degree programmes has been implemented from on-high, with faculty having to conform to a system many of them strongly oppose. Likewise, in the USA, many faculty have been expected to surrender copyright on on-line teaching materials to their institutions as a matter of course.

### **The measurement and maximisation of input – output ratios**

A third key aspect of life in the after-modern tertiary system in the Anglo-American world is the drive to measure, and maximise the difference between, academic inputs and outputs. In the new environment of austerity and competition, universities and colleges are not only seeking cost-gains (that is, producing more for less) but also 'quality' of output—what Bill Readings (1996, page 7) calls "the pursuit of 'excellence'". This requires a new 'audit culture' (Power, 1997) in which diverse teaching and research endeavours are accounted for in a common currency. That currency is partly financial, as already noted. But it is also more qualitative and value based, as in student course assessments and peer reviews of teaching and research. Though this logic of accounting has long characterised the US system, where it has intensified of late, it is perhaps best illustrated in the United Kingdom where it has appeared virtually overnight. Thus, in little more than a decade, UK faculty in geography and other disciplines have been

subject to external, nationally conducted Research Assessment Exercises and Teaching Quality Assessments and, in the near future, will have to be nationally ‘accredited’ as teachers. Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong with seeking to measure and maximise the input–output ratios of academic labour. For instance, it is arguable that the modern tertiary system had a good deal of ‘slack’ within it which the new logic of accounting has helped eliminate. But questions nonetheless arise over whether the performance measures used are appropriate ones and whether the output levels demanded by government and academic managers are reasonable and sustainable.

#### **The selective reduction, segmentation, and flexibilisation of academic labour**

The new logic of labour measurement and maximisation has gone hand-in-hand with the reduction, segmentation, and flexibilisation of the Anglo-American academic workforce. Despite the tremendous increase in undergraduate numbers in the UK and their relative stability in the US, the numbers of tenured faculty have been decreased in recent years through a mixture of natural retirements, early retirement schemes, and policies of nonreplacement. However, as is well known, this reduction of academics has been selective in that the numbers of nontenured, short-term, and part-time academic staff (including many graduate students) have actually mushroomed in both countries. What this means is that Anglo-American geography, like most other disciplines, is today the site of a segmented market for academic labour in which tenured faculty still enjoy employment stability and reasonable remuneration while nontenured staff suffer the psychological and financial stresses of a potential lifetime of job impermanency.

#### **The interpellation of students as would-be workers and as consumers**

If the four aspects of after-modern higher education described above amount to something like a qualitative change in the political and cultural economy of Anglo-American academia, that change has affected students as much as it has academics and their managers. For it is arguable that these changes have worked actively to interpellate students (especially undergraduates) in new ways, specifically as both would-be workers and as consumers. This double-interpellation is the final aspect of after-modern university life to be discussed here. In both the US and the UK, enormous numbers of students now pass through the higher education system. Possession of a degree or similar qualification is today virtually a *sine qua non* for those seeking even relatively low-skilled and low-paying occupations. Of course, this fact does not determine students’ attitudes towards higher education or what universities and colleges decide to teach them. What arguably does, though, is a situation where both the Clinton and Blair governments, like their neoconservative predecessors, actively encourage education for work—what Rhoades and Slaughter (1997, page 9) call “supply-side education”. Thus, recent legislation in both the UK and US clearly puts national wealth creation and employment as the twin criteria for educational provision. At the same time, competition for students means that universities and colleges have to ‘advertise’ themselves in ways which encourage students to feel they are being offered a ‘service’ (education) which they can ‘purchase’ like any other commodity. Indeed, as tuition fees have increased and state bursaries and scholarships have decreased, students are, not surprisingly, becoming increasingly demanding of higher education institutions as to the content and mode of educational provision.

Of course, all of this is not to say that students of the past were not concerned with the vocational relevance of their education or that all of today’s Anglo-American higher education students see their studies as but an instrumental means to the end of employment. But the potential problems with work-oriented and consumer-oriented higher education are also readily apparent. Why, for example, teach putatively ‘non-relevant’ cultural geography when one can teach GIS? And how can one persuade

students that a Marxian or feminist approach to labour markets is 'useful' when many of those students simply want to acquire the Core Transferable Skills that will enable them to work in, rather than contest, those labour markets?

The five features discussed above hardly exhaust the issues surrounding after-modern higher education in the UK and the US. But they do give a powerful sense of the major institutional changes which have taken place in recent years. Lest it be thought otherwise, let me stress that not all these changes should be seen as negative. The modern university system was not an unalloyed good and it would be dogmatic to argue that any move away from it was (or is) inherently regressive. However, for those on the Left working in Anglo-American higher education—geographers and others—many of the after-modern developments I have narrated clearly cannot be embraced uncritically.

### **'In-here' activism: a geographical manifesto**

How, then, to respond to these developments? How to move beyond the geographical Left's current academicism in order to translate the potential for in-here activism into a reality? Fortunately, we do not have to approach this question in the abstract. This is because for many years now various constituencies within higher education have been analysing and contesting developments within the after-modern tertiary system, particularly in the USA which has a long history of campus politicisation. In the last decade this has taken the form of a whole series of campaigns by students, nonacademic staff, faculty, and graduate students at institutions like Yale University, CUNY, NYU, and the Universities of California, Iowa and Minnesota over such diverse issues as tuition fees hikes, academic pay and conditions, and class sizes. Indeed, even in the United Kingdom, where universities and colleges have been traditionally less politicised, recent government-led changes (like imposing a national tuition top-up fee) have generated student protests and even local and national strikes by faculty and support workers. In their own ways, many geographers have already participated in these and other protests against the new political and cultural economy of Anglo-American higher education. But the task of analysing and acting against developments in-here arguably needs to become a far more systematic and explicit one than it currently is.

The range of possible vehicles for, and targets of, an in-here geographical activism are potentially manifold. In order to place some limits on the scope of discussion, the following 'manifesto' highlights only those kinds of activism which, with relatively little effort, are arguably *already* available to critical geographers willing to pursue them. At the same time, it is a manifesto aimed largely at tenured faculty, or those with comparable employment security (like myself). The rationale for this, of course, is that these faculty hold a stable and relatively powerful position (especially at the full-professorial end) compared to their untenured and part-time colleagues (compare Nelson, 1997b).<sup>(8)</sup>

### **Contesting academic labour**

An obvious place to begin is with the contestation of our own labour. Like all other workers in the economy, faculty are first and foremost employees, albeit relatively privileged ones in the case of tenured faculty. But this privilege should bolster, not hinder, efforts to contest the changing composition, nature, and pace of academic labour in the after-modern university. On the one side, this may involve tenured critical geographers fighting over their own work conditions. Notwithstanding their job security and reasonable rates of pay, the move to an after-modern tertiary system has meant many tenured Left geographers having to endure changes to their working lives which

<sup>(8)</sup>I am aware that manifestos of this kind tend to be rather too optimistic and speculative for most readers' taste and apologise accordingly.

they find personally and professionally objectionable. Thus, to take just one example, Jane Wills (1996) shows how geographers in the United Kingdom face longer working hours than at perhaps any time in their history. On the other side, tenured Left geographers can also use their influence to work on behalf of untenured colleagues who are caught up in the insidious segmentation and flexibilisation of nontenured faculty. In relation to both forms of contestation, it is worth recalling that faculty in countries like the UK and US are, relative to other professions, quite highly unionised. How, then, can tenured Leftist geographers today use their unions (along with other means) to make a difference both to their own work conditions and to those of less fortunate colleagues? The recent dispute of the British Association of University Teachers (along with other higher education unions) with New Labour might be something of a test case in this regard. After years of succumbing too readily to government diktat, the AUT General Secretary, David Treisman, has announced his determination to draw the line and resist further erosions in higher education pay and conditions. If the rolling actions planned for this summer and the autumn of 1999 fail to have any effect, then it may be time for a strategic rethink of academic union politics and the pursuit of properly organised, nonunion modes of resistance.

#### **Contesting nonacademic labour**

After-modern universities are not just seats of learning but major economic institutions with their own nonacademic labour force. Crudely speaking, this labour force splits into two segments: on the one hand, an administrative-managerial elite (deans, librarians, technical staff, etc) and, on the other, a much larger cadre of support workers of usually working-class origin, including cleaners, groundskeepers, security guards, etc. Strangely, despite the fact that the latter share the same workplace as Left faculty, these faculty have rarely inquired into the conditions of their work (Nelson, 1997a). Yet, in the financially austere environment of the after-modern university, the same conditions of low pay, poor benefits, and job insecurity plague this nonacademic working class as much as they do ordinary workers outside academia. The difference is that this class exists on the doorstep, as it were, of tenured Leftists like those in geography. Is it not therefore time to look closer to home and agitate on behalf of those manual workers who help keep our universities running on a day-to-day basis?

#### **Contesting the conditions of student education**

A third issue which, in terms of activism, is within the day-to-day reach of Leftist geographers is that of the conditions of student education. The issues here are potentially manifold and vary between undergraduates and postgraduates. In the case of the former, questions of fees, scholarships, and equal access arise, along with those of class sizes and the physical infrastructure within which education takes place. In the case of the latter, additional issues arise, not least in relation to the quality of supervision, the pay and conditions of teaching assistants (more a North American issue than anywhere else), and the oversupply of PhDs relative to faculty posts. In other words, students' interests should be central to Left academics in geography and beyond. Students are, after all, our educational bread and butter.

#### **Promoting critical pedagogy**

Finally, Left geographers, and indeed Left academics at large, need to pay more attention to what counts as successful critical pedagogy. Given the emphasis on research in countries like the United Kingdom, teaching seems not to figure in the central debates in Left geography—this despite the fact that the discipline has a journal dedicated exclusively to teaching issues (*The Journal of Geography in Higher Education*). Yet the question of the manner and mode of a specifically *critical pedagogy* matters.

Given the relative detachment of academia from the ordinary public, students remain the one audience Leftist geographers can influence in material and potentially lifelong ways. More than this, the forces which today encourage students to see education as but a training for work require a strong pedagogical response which shows that 'critical' thinking can be every bit as useful and world-changing as more technical, vocationally centred knowledge. The challenge for Leftist geographers is thus to undertake a more sustained and open exchange of ideas on what critical teaching is and should be all about in the after-modern university.

These four targets for an in-here geographical activism, though obvious and hardly exhaustive of the options available for Left geographical engagement, are nonetheless important ones. The question, though, is whether enough Left geographers are willing to move beyond their current academicism in order to use professionalisation towards these more practical and 'local' ends. In the first instance, this will require an open and sustained debate—to which this paper is a minor contribution—about strategies and tactics for an effective in-here activism. Such a debate is now beginning to take place between critical geographers (see Castree and Sparke, forthcoming). Let us hope that this debate gains momentum—and leads to real change—rather than becoming yet another flavour-of-the-month issue which soon becomes passé as new and seemingly more exciting academic and political concerns capture critical geographic imaginations.

### **Conclusion: the reconstruction of the idea of 'the geographical Left'**

In his book *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, old Leftist Todd Gitlin (1995, page 83) laments what he calls "the fragmentation of the idea of the Left" since the late 1960s. In some ways the recent formalisation of the 'critical geography' label confirms that fragmentation within our own discipline even as it seeks to overcome it by identifying a supposed commonality running throughout Left geographical research and teaching today (its 'criticality'). As Graciela Uribe-Ortega (1998, page 266) put it, reflecting somewhat acerbically on the IICCG, "if everything can be called critical geography, then it becomes 'nothing'".<sup>(9)</sup> Though this is to overstate things, one takes the point that the geographical Left has gone so far in the direction of diversification and pluralisation in recent years that the question of what its members *share* has been placed on the backburner. It is as if the previous hegemony of class as an academic and political rallying point has tainted *all* attempts to define a common basis for Left geography today. I mention all this because I think the argument made in this essay—that today's 'critical' geography should rediscover the 'radical' spirit of practical engagement in the conduct of an in-here activism—can offer one concrete and viable basis for Left geographical solidarity in the late 1990s. Though the current heterogeneity of critical geography is a source of strength, without a complementary effort to identify genuine points of commonality it threatens to become a weakness. In this respect, a project to monitor, analyse, shape, and contest developments within the institutions where critical geographers together work offer something like this 'both/and' combination of unity-in-difference. On the one hand, it is a project of potentially wide relevance because it speaks to issues which concern (or should concern) many Left geographers in very direct, professional, and personal ways. Yet, on the other hand, it is also a project which does not call for any substantive reduction in the academic and political differences between those geographers. Indeed, contesting developments within the after-modern university is arguably a project designed to foster the institutional conditions within which the critical geographic community can *continue* to communicate and deploy its current plurality to the maximum pedagogical and research effect.

<sup>(9)</sup> For wider reflections on the pros and cons of the IICCG see Katz (1998).

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