

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Questioning the Normative “We”

To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and *we must change with it*. (United States President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009, our emphasis)

Less than two years after the first African-American won the US Presidency, the US government's commitment to the agenda of “free trade” has not wavered (disaffecting millions of poor farmers worldwide), economic recovery programs seek to get people living in the United States to earn and thus spend money to stimulate the capitalism that eagerly consumes the world's resources, millions of gallons of oil have spewed into the Gulf of Mexico just after the President signed legislation allowing for more offshore oil exploration, and anti-immigration sentiments entrench through local and state laws like Arizona's, which gives police the right to search anyone suspected of being an undocumented migrant. (In fact, the number of deportations of undocumented migrants in the United States has *increased* during Obama's administration.) The intense global attention given to the ascent of a black man to the “most powerful position in the world” presented for some a sense of post-racial politics, of hope for those living in racist and disempowered America, and of a possible progressive turn in American national politics. But the representational power of Obama as President has thus far largely failed to connect with a wider progressive messaging. The office is not primed for dramatic change, even as the President had hoped it could be. This is even more clear now that the 2010 midterm

elections have remade Washington, DC, once again. Obama's "we" therefore remains an imagined community. The polarities of rich and poor, of young and old, of white and not, of party politics, mark the inability of a national geography to align toward a global "good." And let's be clear here: Obama is addressing a certain middle-class constituency. He beseeches the polarity of national politics with a "hope" that there is a middle ground of diplomatic agreement. American economic and military hegemony go unquestioned in an assumption that its intervention is what the world needs to cure itself of illness, poverty, environmental degradation, and hunger (not to mention terrorism). President Obama's words might shape a sentiment for goodwill, but in the practice of the US government under his watch it is largely business as usual.

While it is tidy to identify the United States for its many behaviors condemning the world's poor, let's not forget that the 2010 Conservative victory in the United Kingdom – which put the Tories and new Prime Minister David Cameron in power for the first time in 13 years – also illustrates the effectivity of anti-immigration sentiments, free market ideology, and the sentiment that post-national unity (i.e., a European Union) is more trouble than it is worth. Indeed, the UK elections represent more than simply the fact that the Labour Party has moved so far away from labor politics that it might as well be the US Democratic Party, it also represents a clear set of fissures in societies throughout the world, where conflict and tension make socio-spatial differences more distinct. Examples of these fissures can be witnessed as well in countries such as Thailand, where street protests by various political factions have met, to differing degrees, with outright state repression by national leaders, such as Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. Resting at the heart of these tensions is the very question of what it means to be "Thai" in Thailand. On one side are those "loyal" to the monarchy, who threaten both national and expatriot with imprisonment for maligning the King, while others line up on the side of open democratic debate, while others still support a constitutional monarchy, which is both "democratic" and "monarchical."

President Obama's call for change confronted George W. Bush's policies of direct and egoistic disregard for life beyond his simplistic worldview. We thus started the book's introduction with Obama's quote to draw attention to the ways that even so-called progressive messaging can quickly be mired in status quo hierarchies of social difference. Changing the inequities of the world means fundamental redefinition of how life itself is defined and valued. This book therefore addresses the assumptions underpinning dominant ideals and norms about what is "good" for the world and for individual people. These kinds of ideals and norms are deeply problematic for their erasure of radical particularity, of space and its differences, and of an ignorance and disregard for unequal sociality, privilege, and positionality. Powerful assumptions about the "good" life are mired in normative racism, capitalist consumption, nationalism, colonialism, and heteronormativities about family and nation, whether they come from men with state power like Obama or Abhisit, or whether they result from the banalities of everyday life that reproduce these assumptions. Critique of these normative underpinnings is absolutely necessary, and authors in this volume address issues at the heart of why and how such messaging work on and through all subjects, and how resistance to the social norms of differentiation can be possible. This book is about space and social difference, the

spatial contingencies that frame real and possible social life, and scholarship that attempts not only to make sense of these social-spatial relations, but that advocates for more just social geographies.

Social geographers in this text thus help to disentangle how any politics of difference must carefully contemplate the underlying categories that propel and constrain resistance. Power relations frame the differentiation of subjects and spaces, despite all too-easy calls to ignore the foundational categorization of the world into “we” and “you.” It is therefore incumbent on social geographers to continually work against the grain of these messages to help produce new social geographies that can meet the goals of the larger progressive agenda established by the words of President Obama, and others. With this in mind, we now briefly move into a discussion of social geography, the subdiscipline, to ask what frames this field of inquiry and what challenges it faces as its practitioners seek to present new social geographic possibilities, confront inequalities, and promote social justice more broadly.

Social Geographical Turns

Social geography is a broad field that attends to the socio-spatial differences, power relations, and inequalities that shape every person’s life. Social geography is also a way of going about the intellectual work that focuses in on these very political questions and issues. How exactly social and spatial differences are embodied and reproduced through communities, individuals’ identities and subjectivities, and indeed societies, are of course issues of debate. Not all geographers agree on how to theorize social-spatial life, or how difference exists and gets reproduced in the world, what matters when and where, and the mechanisms for the reproduction of social categories and power relations. It is thus important to recognize that social geographies have developed over time using contrasting theoretical traditions that have different ideas of the world. This means that social geographers do not produce knowledge about social geography in the same ways. The question of how social geographers know what they know – or what we would call epistemology – is very much tied to their theories of what the world is or could be – what we call ontology. What social geographers know is connected to how they examine and explore social geographies – that is, their methodologies. Our quest for this volume has been to illuminate the different ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that make up today’s social geographies. We revel in the differences found throughout these chapters, which means we do not necessarily advocate for a synthesis of all social geographic thought and practice. Illustrating the tensions that propel social geographers’ work as scholars, theorists, and sometimes activists, can energize debate and research. New thinking about the social and spatial differences that constrain and enable life can grapple with questions that are crucial to a range of different everyday lives in different places. It is this sort of energy that animates social geography today.

Social geography has occupied an important position in the wider canon of human geography scholarship for many years now, and we maintain that this role for geographies of the social remains a vital one in the contemporary world. Since the late 1980s, however, there has been some disquiet within the debates

surrounding social geography. In much of Anglophone geography, for example, there has been an ongoing tendency to subsume the social within the cultural, by emphasizing the use of cultural texts, a heightened reflexivity towards the role of language and representation in the constitution of “reality,” and a particular interpretation of poststructural epistemologies that points to the close relationship among language, power, and knowledge and toward a set of emergent and hopeful possibilities for new social geographies. There are many benefits from this co-immersion with the cultural, but there is also some concern that social geography has risked losing sight of some of its core foci – e.g., the study of inequality and difference – during this period. We address very briefly the four most significant concerns surrounding the shifts in social geography since the 1980s. At the same time, we want to be mindful of the fact that these challenges have also enabled a whole new set of social geographic possibilities.

The first main concern has been to examine the effect of what is often called “the cultural turn” in human geography. This “turn” is primarily defined as “cultural,” which detracts from the ways that its debates proceeded along very social lines. Thus, while the turn toward “culture” might indicate a process that has *desocialized* human geography, thereby rendering social geography moot, in fact we can evidence a healthy flourishing of social geographies throughout the 1990s and 2000s. We do caution, however, against a tendency to withdraw from the everyday processes – the social practices, relations, and struggles – that constitute the stuff of everyday life when relying heavily on a largely “cultural” social geography. Nicky Gregson (2003) has argued, in fact, that although the social has not been replaced by the cultural, it is nevertheless the case that the social has been increasingly refracted through the cultural. Thus, a new set of concerns for cultural difference and resultant identity politics might encourage attention away from the structures and spaces of inequality. That said, because of the engagements with cultural theory, many social geographers theorize subjectivity and identity through the ongoing importance of gender, sexuality, race-ethnicity, nationality, age, health, and class. Simply put, social categories still matter.

Second, because social categories still frame the ways that subjects and spaces become delineated, the material ramifications of difference also must be examined. There is a price to pay for social difference in spaces of inequality. Chris Philo (2000) argues that human geography has become “less attentive to the more thingy, bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the-world kinds of matter” (p. 13, see also Chapter 21, this volume) and his diagnosis is to insist on a re-emphasis on reclaiming the materiality of the everyday world. A *dematerialized* human geography is preoccupied with immaterial processes, the intersubjective nature of meaning and the working out of identity politics through texts, signs, and symbols, without an accompanying exploration of how these result in winners and losers under capitalism, heterosexist patriarchy, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization. Social geographies offer a vital imprint on the material outcomes of social differentiation.

Third, political quiescence draws attention away from contemporary forms of globalization and neoliberalism, which sustain and transport the cut-throat politics of the market throughout the world, with violent results on everyday lives and environments. A *depoliticized* human geography re-routes research away from the

analysis of and intervention in social struggles (cf., Mitchell 2000). Social geographies, particularly feminist, queer, and anti-racist geographies, on the other hand, insist that processes and spaces of social differentiation involve elitist power relations, normative social meanings and identification, and uneven material distribution (e.g., Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Gilmore 2007; Oswin 2008; Thomas 2008; Wright 2006). These arguments demand a political stance against injustice, disenfranchisement, and hierarchies of subjectivity.

Fourth, it has been claimed that human geography has been insufficiently *deconstructionist*, by adopting a rather lukewarm and over-conservative approach to non-representational approaches, approaches that could open up new and exciting possibilities relating to the performative and the immanent as models for the emerging social (see Thrift 2000). In this way, it is feasible to imagine social geographies that are more fully engaged with the mundane everyday acts of social violence or hope that mark out spaces of both domination and resistance, both planned and spontaneous. At the same time, calls for a more robust ethics based in deconstruction have challenged the concern that we must always operate in the realm of “affect” as a way to engage with the performance of just and moral social geographies (Popke 2003, 2007, 2009; see also Chapter 19 on affective life in this volume). Indeed, social geographers continue to engage the relational (inter)subjective nature of ethics and justice in ways that provide possibilities for more fully deconstructionist social geographies.

Thus, social geographers offer important responses to these broader human geographic concerns, and in fact, over time they have deflated attempts to unproductively distinguish between “culture” and “society.” The chapters in this book illustrate this point well. We also want to remember that debates in human geography always have different levels of intellectual purchase in different parts of the world, and some of the resultant perceived excesses and limitations of debate apply to a relatively small part of the global and heterogeneous “we” of social geography. As the chapter authors in this volume survey current scholarship and research in social geography through this *Companion*, we see a strong awareness of, and response to, the risks outlined above. We see a social geography that is in different ways highly socialized, with a capacity to address longstanding social differences relating to gender, race-ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, and class. The chapters that follow explore in exciting ways the importance of other social groupings and new theorizations of materiality and agency. There is considerable diversity in the ways in which geographers delimit and address the human-social, and we see that diversity as richly productive. It is clear that social geographers are maintaining and expanding their politically active edge, resisting by word, thought, and deed the reactionary forces that would seek to govern these spaces to the detriment of the marginalized, and being attentive to new political lines of flight, including the integral deployment of both ethics and aesthetics in emerging practices of protests and resistance.

We want to suggest, then, that there is currently a healthy array of diverse awareness about the risks of desocializing, dematerializing, depoliticizing, and underwhelming deconstructing geographies of difference (e.g., Pain 2003, 2004, 2006). Part of our excitement as editors of this *Companion* is to see in the chapters that follow a willingness to consider different ontological and epistemological avenues,

without any seeming need to produce a synthetic “we must” approach to social geography. We appreciate this diversity, this openness to different inquiry, and this determination to contextualize knowledge and to engage actively with its various politics and ethics. Social geography involves wrestling with contradictions and tensions, and we salute the energy that these practices and performances engender in the hope that social geographies of the future can continue to participate in the positive assertion of social difference and challenge the broader inequalities that distinguish our world today.

Mapping *A Companion to Social Geography*

While social geographers have worked to identify (and often critique) the differences and inequalities shaping societies and everyday lives, the intellectual mechanisms for building this knowledge have varied enormously. This has resulted in a (sometimes) confusing array of approaches and styles for students and scholars to understand (see e.g., Cloke et al. 1991; Del Casino 2009; Panelli 2004, 2009). At the same time, in a *Companion* of this type, it is important to recognize that social geographies (and social geographers for that matter) are intellectually and politically diverse. It is also essential to acknowledge the reasons for these differences in *how* social geographers understand – and create – social geographies, reasons tied as much to the history of discipline as it is to the situatedness of various research programs and perspectives in particular institutional contexts. In the following chapters, many authors convey important contemporary foci and debates as well as institutional tensions surrounding those debates, while also drawing upon the diversity of approaches from and through which social geography has flourished. This is important for them to do if readers are to understand how to generate social geographies that are both intellectually robust and politically relevant.

Consequently, this volume sketches out – in differing ways – how various historical practices have shaped geographers’ engagement with the social and the spatial, sociality and spatiality. It does so, however, without chapters outlining “traditional” theoretical approaches – spatial scientific models, marxism(s), feminism(s), poststructuralism(s), etc. – but rather through a series of discussions that draw from these approaches differentially across four main parts: (1) ontological tensions in/of society and space; (2) thinking and doing social geographies; (3) matters and meanings; and (4) power and politics. In each of these parts, authors were asked to consider some of the larger concerns of social geography – e.g., how do we conceptualize difference or belonging?; how do we frame “the field” or write about our social geographies?; how do we theorize life and its contours?; and how do we study and engage with questions related to marginalization or care and caring? These and many other questions animate the chapters that follow, which attempt to both trace social geography as a subdiscipline and offer a trajectory for how to “think” and “do” social geography moving forward.

This *Companion* is thus framed as an intervention into the major debates in and practices of social geography as a subdiscipline, while also engaging in the conceptual tensions that inform how social geographers think about, on the one hand, the meanings of nature or economy, and on the other hand, the sociality of geopolitics.

While each editor outlines their part's chapters in more depth (see the individual introductions preceding each part), it is important to briefly situate each part in terms of the larger project. In Part I ("Ontological Tensions in/of Society and Space"), the authors in six chapters map out some of the core ontological tensions with which social geographers most often have to struggle – difference, identification, social natures, economies, community, and belonging. In each of these chapters, authors trace not only the "current" theorizations of these concepts but the larger historical trajectories of how these concepts have been "taken up" in social geography. This provides both context and nuance to what are sometimes represented as easily delineated and defined concepts. That difference cannot be easily grounded in one ontological definition engages with the wider argument made with this volume – social geography is a dynamic, diverse, and contested (in the best sense of the word) intellectual and political terrain.

Part II ("Thinking and Doing Social Geographies") steps back (or better yet repositions) readers to think about how social geographers go about "doing" social geography. This part does not eschew theoretical questions but stays at the level of methodology – the theory of method. In so doing, authors in this part ask readers to think about their own positionality as researchers: why we ask the questions we do, what we do with the answers once we have them, and how we go about "doing" something politically effective with all those data and answers. Moving back and forth between the broader methodological concerns in social geography and some of the on-the-ground methods and approaches that social geographers employ, this part provides partial insight into the complex and contested spaces of "the field" and the tensions that are brought to life in and through the processes of analysis and writing.

Part III ("Matters and Meanings") offers perhaps this volume's most original entry point into the debates and discussions animating social geography today. Social geography is after all a subdiscipline intimately concerned with questions of life, and not just human life but life writ large. The authors in this part were thus asked to consider how life is not only understood but also socially and spatially made "real" through bodies, feelings, affects, and practices. Taken together, this part provides some provocative insights into both how social geographers theorize socio-spatial relations and how social geographers take on the tensions and debates that inform social geographic theory and practice today.

The final part of this volume, titled "Power and Politics," stays true to the rest of this *Companion* by engaging in a conversation about social geography's larger role in challenging dominant relations of oppression, inequality, and difference. In many ways, readers should be able to work across this part and back through chapters from the other parts they think about, for example, how theories of difference (Chapter 2) inform the study of marginalization (Chapter 25) or transnationalism (Chapter 28). In fact, readers should begin to see that areas of scholarship historically situated in "other" subdisciplines, such as political geography (see Chapter 24 on Geopolitics), are primed for social geographic engagement and inquiry. Moreover, as readers take on the chapters in this volume, they will likely find themselves challenging its very organizational principles – reading chapters on embodiment (Chapter 20) or emotion (Chapter 18) alongside chapters on participatory research (Chapter 13) and social action (Chapter 29). Indeed, the editors and

authors of this text encourage readers to do just that – disrupting the linearity that remains so entrenched in academic publishing.

We believe that this volume does more than catalogue the field of social geography; it challenges readers to reflect critically on the diversity and differences found within the broadly organized field of social geography. We did not ask the contributors to resolve these tensions for readers. Rather, we asked the authors to be both engaging and engaged. The overall text demands that readers think about their own theoretical and political positions and consider how their intellectual choices compel them to think reflexively about the way that they epistemologically and methodologically frame their social geographies. While this volume is intended to set out an agenda for key topics and concerns that inform the histories of the subdiscipline and drive the current field of social geography, it is also a volume riddled with theoretical, methodological, and political differences that continue to drive social geographic research, practice, and politics. Readers are asked to engage this *Companion* in the spirit in which the editors and authors engaged it – as another important moment for social geographers to reflect on what we mean by social geography in all its complexities.

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