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Psychogeography and Ground Zero

Alexander John Bridger

Abstract

In this chapter I want to discuss a psychogeographical project conducted at the main site of the horrific and monstrous September 11th 2001 attacks in New York, U.S.A. I will explain how I drew on the situationist practice of psychogeographical walking and why [the](#) ideas of detournement, spectacle and psychogeography are important. In recent years in my research, I have connected and considered this work in relation to the current memorialization of the Ground Zero site, to current political events (i.e. the on-going war on ‘terrorism’, the banking crisis, Occupy, and more recently the Charlie Hebdo events) [as well as](#) in relation to [the question of](#) how my research in psychology should connect with political practice and social change.

Key Words: Psychogeography, [Situationists](#), psychology, qualitative research, *dérive*.

1. Introduction

This [article builds on](#) a larger study that I conducted for my PhD [that was](#) completed a few years ago. When I started my PhD, I was planning to [draw on discursive and semiotic methods in order to](#) explore how political rhetoric [is represented](#) in speeches, songs, poems and films.¹ However, when the events of September 11th 2001 took place, I found watching the events unfold on the screen so horrific and incomprehensible that I wanted to explore my responses to that event [and attempt](#) to make sense of it all. So I decided to shift the focus of my research to representations of war and terrorism in relation to an analysis of political speeches and British news reports (newspapers and television) from September 11th 2001 and the aftermath. Whilst I was doing those particular analyses, I came

across an exhibition on Tony Wilson at the Urbis [Museum](#) in Manchester. Whilst I was [wandering](#) around the exhibits at Urbis, I came across a book edited by Christopher Gray titled, *Leaving the 21st Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*.² I was quite curious about that book and wondered why it was exhibited in a glass cabinet, and so I sought out a copy from a bookshop. I started reading [the](#) book and became quite interested [in](#) the situationist ideas of psychogeography, spectacle, detournement and the *dérive*. Then on a holiday in Prague, my then partner and I visited the Museum of Communism, and again I was struck by the idea of historical [artefacts](#) [being placed in](#) exhibition [cabinets](#). I spoke about [these experiences in relation to the commemoration of history in exhibition spaces and](#) my then [director of](#) [studies](#) suggested [that I](#) read a book by Sadie Plant, titled *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Post Modern Age*.³ [The reason why he had suggested that book was that he could probably see that I was being drawn towards a situationist way of thinking! Whilst reading that book I became very interested and excited about situationist theory and psychogeography. I began to consider how I might draw on such ideas in my research and in relation to my everyday life.](#) So this is the context [of the research ideas that will be presented in this chapter](#). Context is important to the work I do as a ‘critical psychologist’ as we argue that all knowledge is always situated in time and place and does not emerge from nowhere.

[As outlined earlier on in this paper, in 2001 I had originally intended to analyse how political rhetoric is represented in different formats such as songs, films and poetry. However, that idea was quite broad and I wanted to focus down the area to a specific topic and theme. At that point during the PhD I was quite interested in representations of history in relation to how historical events are represented in the ‘indoor’ areas of cities such as museums and art spaces as well as how such historical events are represented in the outdoors areas of cities such as business districts, shopping areas and](#)

residential areas. When the events of September 11th 2001 took place I decided to focus my research on that historical event as it was reported as being a day that changed the world and which was said to herald the new spectre of global Islamic terrorism. So during that time, I decided to focus on the World Trade Centre attacks as they seemed the most significant and catastrophic of all the attacks on that day and were the most reported by the news media across the world. However, following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and for a few years afterwards, the site lay bare and there was no rebuilding that took place. It has only been in recent years that a proper exhibition and memorial site has been constructed which has been named Reflecting Absence. However, the bare site in itself drew me to want to investigate that space and I wanted to consider the extent to which I could draw on a psychogeographical research approach. In my prior work I had drawn on discursive and semiological analyses to deconstruct and decode word and image representations of September 11th and the aftermath. And whilst those approaches were most useful to deconstruct and consider such representations, it didn't really provide much in terms of methods or techniques to analyse the physical space of Ground Zero. What I really wanted to do in this study was to conceptualise a psychogeographical walking methodological approach to making sense of Ground Zero. By 'making sense' I refer to an qualitative psychological approach that involves reflecting on my role in the research and considering the meanings that I produce about physical places and the extent to which that may complement and contradict the dominant accounts provided by the mainstream media, politicians and so on. The psychogeographical approach is drawn on in relation to doing research reflexively in order to attempt to see things 'anew' and with 'fresh eyes'.

2. Methods and Strategies

I considered first of all the pre-existing research from experimental social psychology and environmental psychology, but neither of those areas of work would fit with the proposed aims of the research, as will now be explained. In relation to environmental social and environmental psychologies, rather than studying spatial cognition, measuring the casual relations of attitudes to behaviours and assuming to be able to know what goes on in peoples' heads, I wanted to conceptualise how to use the situationist practice of psychogeography reflectively interpret the site of Ground Zero.

The three aims of this work as outlined previously would not fit with an experimental environmental or traditional social psychological framework. Thus I turned to work from critical psychology, including work by Burnett et al,⁴ Grup de Lesbianes Feministes⁵ and Precarias a la Deriva;⁶ the work of Pinder⁷ in geography and Joyce⁸ and Sadler's⁹ respective work in political theory and cultural studies. In my work, I consider it important to analyse social spaces as political spaces. One of the limits I have found with much of previous environmental, social and cognitive analysis of environments is the lack of focus in it on spaces as political entities. What I wanted to do was to draw on psychogeographical walking as a practice in order to physically map out the traces of neoliberalism in particular spaces. I draw on the work of the situationists rather than other approaches to studying environments because that approach is closest to my political standpoint that is both situationist and democrat. Psychogeographical, or one could refer to the term *psychogeography*, refers to the interface of psychology with geography in the loosest possible manner. One could say that psychogeography is about opening ourselves up to the experiences of spaces, places and other people, to explore the effects of environments on ourselves as well as how we impact on our environments. This practice is done in order to begin to imagine what environments could look like if they were not completely based on values of capitalism and consumerism. The

physical aspect to walking in and through environments brings together mind and body consider environments. Therefore walking is arguably akin to a mode of thinking through our relations to the physical fabric of our everyday terrains. The Situationists actually carried out a range of walks in Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s where they explored themes such as gentrification, the city as spectacle and modernization.¹⁰ The word *spectacle*, is a really important term to consider here. It refers to a term conceptualised by Guy Debord, a leading member of the Situationists, to indicate how society is represented as a spectacle and its subjects are positioned as passive spectators who are seemingly duped by the spectacle. Examples of the spectacle can include the cult of celebrity in reality television shows and the spectacular imagery of war reporting. The implications of the spectacle as an ideological system, is that it can lead to people unquestioningly accepting the order of things. If one applies the notion of spectacle to Ground Zero, whilst that site was an empty space and thus arguably devoid of meaning, it could be argued that it could provide an important site of reflection as to what to do next, how to respond to the attacks and whether there are necessary alternatives to capitalist order of things.

This then leads us into the next important theoretical resource, which is *detournement*. Detournement broadly speaking refers to a practice of taking the original meaning of things and affixing new meanings onto those things. The reason for doing that would be to question the original meanings and to suggest and point to alternative ways of reading things. An example would be whereby one could subvert the meaning of an advert for clothing by deleting the wording and pasting on new wording to create a new suggested understanding of the advertisement. It makes sense in this work to consider the concept of *detournement* in relation to the practice of psychogeographical walking, whereby the environments can be read as texts and where we use our bodies as the medium of analysis through such places. Rather than walking in order to get from a to b,

one walks to explore and to try see spaces with new eyes and in order to begin to consider what non-capitalist environments could look like. With psychogeographical walking one subverts and disrupts the ordinary, normalized ways in which we move through spaces and places from a to b. We may for example do what various situationists did and use a map of another city or put directional markers on a dice and use that to navigate a route while we wander through our hometowns. Such strategies would be used to take a detour, to subvert and disrupt the usual ways in which we would go from a to b with a view to open ourselves up to and challenge how we usually experience what we consider to be the ‘everyday’. Spontaneity is key and such methods may also enable random encounters with new people and places. Debord provides the following definition of the *dérive*:

Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive*, one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities and all other motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by all the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is less an important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly encourage and discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.¹¹

Debord even indicated that one could not critique the spectacle without being part of that system though whether or not that meant he or other situationists enjoyed the spectacle I doubt. The points in

the above quote also raise the question of whether it is really possible to really do *dérives* successfully in various environments. This though is somewhat similar to the idea of whether free association as a psychoanalytic concept is really ‘free’. I think with both these examples we are indeed determined and constrained to some extent by our everyday contexts but we also still have some level of free will to be able to change things for ourselves and others. Having discussed these core theoretical concepts brings me to [consider](#) how one would go about conducting psychogeographical walks. Indeed, there are many individuals and groups that have drawn on the work of the [Situationists](#), including Rhiannon Firth (also [in this volume](#)), Morag Rose, [Tina Richardson](#), Phil Smith (also at this year’s Monstrous Geographies conference) and various groups such as the London Psychogeographical Association, the Loiterers Resistance Movement, Leeds Psychogeography Group and the Huddersfield Psychogeographical Network.

Debord [has written](#) that *dérives* are best conducted in groups of two or more people [as this will allow](#) those involved [to cross](#) check their interpretations with each other.¹² I decided to do this project with my brother who was also interested in the practice of psychogeographical drifting, [and](#) so we made our plans to visit New York in order to [investigate](#) Ground Zero. However, [contrary to the idea of the *dérive* as wandering without intention or plan, our visit](#) to Ground Zero required some planning, [as the location was quite some distance from where my brother and I lived and I needed to ensure that I would be able to produce some data](#) [to](#) write about.

Debord writes that psychogeographical drifts can either be site-specific studies of particular places or can be completely random walks.¹³ The first [task](#) was to purchase a *Lonely Planet Guide to America* and also a *Rough Guide* map of New York. The question of how to do the psychogeographical walks and how to document such activities was something of a puzzle, [which required](#) [some](#) thought. I referred to [Khatib’s](#) account of a psychogeographical drift around the

Les Halles district in Paris because I found it to be a very useful account of psychogeographical work which I could draw on to formulate my own approach.¹⁴ I also came across numerous psychogeographical accounts in forums such as the online Manchester Area Psychogeographic and London Psychogeographic websites. In addition, there were a few critical academic psychology accounts of psychogeographical drifts, which I found useful to consult, as well as other critical activist and psychological accounts as indicated previously in this chapter.¹⁵ I had intended that after the drift I would write a reflective story of our walk interspersed with photographs and artistic maps of our walks. What follows next is an account of our psychogeographical walks.

3. Psychogeographical walking at Ground Zero

First of all, this account is an abridged version of the analysis. For those of you interested, you may wish to consult Bridger's PhD (2009) as well as another paper on this topic by the author.¹⁶ The following analysis highlights some of the main aspects and themes of the walks carried out at Ground Zero.

In order to maintain some of the effects of disorientation, which appeared to be conducive to psychogeographical walking, we decided to commence the work at Ground Zero shortly after arriving into New York from our original destination in the U.K. Our aim was to attempt to do a psychogeographical walk at Ground Zero and to explore what it meant for us to be at the site of Ground Zero. We decided to trace our route around Ground Zero by using a Bangkok map, which also had a World Trade Center building. This practice is indebted to a practice that the Situationists conducted where they used maps of other cities in places such as Paris and London in order to do psychogeographical work. The point of such work was to map out the changing form of urban environments and to undertake such work in order to begin to consider what needs to change in society.

When we arrived at the site, we both felt a sense of shock and horror. On commencing our first walk at the site, the words of Judith Butler came to mind in relation to her reflections on the September 11th attacks, ‘To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways’.¹⁷ I thought about my own sadness at the loss of lives at that site and across the world in various recent terrorist attacks, wars and conflicts. Whilst we stood at that site, several other people gathered and looked on at the empty space. Whilst I stood there, I thought back to where I was when the attacks had happened. I remembered that my brother and I had been at home, the phone had rung, my brother had picked it up and one of his friends had told him to put the television on and see what was on the news. My brother had put the television on and we both had stared at the screen and were speechless to see a news loop of a plane crashing into the World Trade Centre.

In relation to the walks that we conducted over the period of a few days, it proved rather difficult to wander around Ground Zero, as the whole area was restricted access, which meant that we could only walk a square route around the site. A footpath had been laid out for visitors on the outer perimeters of the site and there was quite a high level of security. However, no one seemed to mind us taking photographs. Though that did not stop us from feeling that it was somewhat inappropriate to take photographs or that we may be asked by security personnel as to what we were doing. We can only assume that no personnel stopped us because they may have thought we were tourists. Indeed there can be a fine line between tourism and psychogeography (Smith, 2012).¹⁸ The key difference here being that tourism is configured as touristic practice tied with consumption whereas psychogeography is configured as a means to critique the spatial ordering of places, systems and our positioning in capitalist society. We attempted to follow Khatib’s cue of exploring spaces,

which we felt drawn towards and to do this in order to open ourselves up to how we felt about being at Ground Zero. One should add here that such a practice is arguably closely tied to a psychoanalytic mode of free association whereby one attempts to act and think spontaneously to free up and create new chains of association of meanings in relation to understanding one's everyday experiences. Psychogeographical work can also be considered in some respects to ethnographical work in terms of qualitative observational methods, though arguably here the aims are rather more political in order to consider the political order of things and to use the research practice as part of a process of meaning making and for considering the question of social change.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of the Ground Zero walk for me was three-fold. The first purpose was to conceptualise what a psychogeographical psychological qualitative method could look like, the second purpose to consider the ordering of space at Ground Zero, and the third purpose to consider the bigger question of whether there could be alternatives to the capitalist order of things.

In relation to the first purpose, since the production of my PhD thesis, which set out to conceptualise a psychogeographical psychological methodology, I have gone on to write several papers which outline my approach to studying urban spaces. This work forms part of that mapping out of a psychogeographical psychological approach, but since this is a brief chapter, those readers who wish to learn more about this research could consult other writings of mine. Some readers may find that the psychogeographical psychological approach is similar to other qualitative methods such as ethnography and observational methods and indeed it is, though embedding this approach with a situationist political underpinning means that the type of analytical claims produced from such work would be different in focus. It is argued in

this chapter that different methods will produce different types of knowledge.

As for the second purpose, I do not claim to be able to produce 'findings' from research, as the aims of qualitative critical psychological work are not to assume to be able to find meanings hidden in environments or in peoples' heads. However, it is possible to draw some conclusions about particular themes constructed in the process of research in relation to my role as a researcher here. The two main themes running through the process of the psychogeographical walk centred on surveillance and power at Ground Zero. Surveillance was a main theme in terms of the high level security at the site, which we observed during the psychogeographical power. Power was a main theme in relation to where we were allowed and not allowed to walk.

In relation to the third purpose, this relates to the extent to which research can enable social change. In essence, psychogeographical walking will not change the world, but it can shift and shape the ways that we make sense of our everyday environments, and to do such work in groups can create useful and constructive dialogue. No one person should be able to say what should change in society as that is a decision that should be made collectively by people. Hayes (2003) has argued previously that psychogeographical research serves as a way to further politicise qualitative and critical psychological research.¹⁹ That previous argument could connect with what Pinder (1996: 414) indicates in terms of a need to change the 'social organisation of place' as well as changing society.²⁰ Hence I argue here that psychogeographical methods can serve as a useful strategy to physically consider our everyday environments and to begin to dialogue with others as to what built environments we really want as opposed to simply accepting the consumerist and capitalist formation of towns and cities as it is today.

Notes

¹ Alexander John Bridger, *September 11th 2001 and the Aftermath: Extending Qualitative Methods in Psychology* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2009).

² Christopher Gray, *Leaving the 20th Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (London: Rebel Press, 1998).

³ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Post-Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴ Judith Burnett, Erika Cudworth and Maria Tamboukou 'Women on Dérive: Autobiographical Explorations of Lived Spaces'. *Geography and Gender Reconsidered* [CD-Rom] (Women and Geography Study Group and Institute of British Geographers, London, 2004).

⁵ Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 'Exploring New Ways of Insubordination in Social Representation'. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 1.4 (2005): 107-114.

⁶ Precarias a la Deriva, 'Housewives, Maids, Cleaning Ladies and Caregivers in General: Care in the Communication Continuum'. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 1.4 (2005): 188-198.

⁷ David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

⁸ Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003).

⁹ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (London, MIT Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (London, MIT Press, 1998).

¹¹ Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', *Situationist International*, viewed 26 November,

<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

¹² Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', *Situationist International*, viewed 26 November,

<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

¹³ Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', *Situationist International*, viewed 26 November,

<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

¹⁴ Abdelhafid Khatib, 'Attempt at a Psychogeographical Description of Les Halles', *Situationist International Anthology*, viewed 26 November 2014, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/leshalles.html>.

¹⁵ Judith Burnett, Erika Cudworth and Maria Tamboukou, 'Women on Dérive: Autobiographical Explorations of Lived Spaces'. *Geography and Gender Reconsidered* [CD-Rom] (Women and Geography Study Group and Institute of British Geographers, London, 2004).

¹⁶ Alexander John Bridger, 'Psychogeography and the Study of Social Environments: Extending Visual Methodological Research in Psychology'. *Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research*, ed. Paula Reavey (Hove: Psychology Press, 2011), 284-295.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, xii, 2004).

¹⁸ [Phil Smith, *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* \(Devon: Triarchy Press, 2012\).](#)

¹⁹ [Graham Hayes, 'Walking the streets: psychology and the flâneur', *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 1.3 \(2003\): 50-66.](#)

²⁰ [David Pinder, 'Subverting cartography: the situationists and maps of the city', *Environment and Planning A*, 28: 405-427.](#)