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Psychogeography and Ground Zero

Alexander John Bridger

Abstract

In this paper 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 made sense of and reflected on my experiences of being at that site as well as conceptualising how I drew on the situationist practice of psychogeographical walking. I will explain how I drew on the work of the situationists and why their ideas of detournement, spectacle and psychogeography are important. In terms of my experience in being at the site of the attacks, I will also discuss core themes of my research including trauma and violence and the limits of words to explain experience. 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 with the Charlie Hebdo events) and in relation to considering how my research in psychology should connect with political practice and social change.

Key Words: Psychogeography, situationists, psychology, qualitative research, *dérive*.

1. Introduction

This particular project was actually part of a larger study that I conducted for my PhD, which I completed a few years ago. When I started my PhD, I was planning to explore how political rhetoric could be represented in different mediums such as 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 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. The Urbis museum is now gone and has been replaced by a Football museum. Whilst I was wondering 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 that book and became quite interested about 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 artifacts in exhibition pieces. I spoke about these experiences and thoughts with my then, Director of Studies, and he suggested for me to read a book by Sadie Plant, titled *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Post Modern Age*.³ After reading that book, it set me on a journey to learn all about situationist theory and psychogeography. So this is the context in which I begin in presenting my research ideas! Context is important to the work that 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.

These ideas then led me to consider the question of how to analyse the sites of the terrorist attacks in America on September 11th 2001. I decided to focus on the World Trade Centre attacks seeing as they seemed to be the most significant and catastrophic of all the attacks on that day and which was most reported by the news media across the world. I thought about the sorts of methods that I knew about from my training in psychology research methods though to be honest, I was at a loss as to how I would draw on such methods to make sense of the physical space at Ground Zero. The work that I had written so far in that thesis was where I drew on discursive and semiological analyses to critique 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. I could have conducted interviews with people about what they thought about the terrorist attacks at that site but what I wanted to do in this study was to work out how the psychogeographical practice of wandering, or otherwise known as drifting or the *dérive* could be used to make sense of the physical space at Ground Zero.

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. Rather than studying spatial cognition 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 to make sense of the space around Ground Zero, explore my reflective experiential responses to that site as well as to consider how to draw on situationist theory to consider alternatives to the current capitalist ordering of society. The three aims of this work as outlined previously would not fit with either 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 also Joyce⁸ and Sadler's⁹ work in political theory and cultural

studies. In my work I consider it as important to reflect on the importance of studying the politics of spaces and places. One of the limits I have found with much of the previous environmental, social and cognitive analysis of environments is the lack of focus on the study of places and spaces as political. What I wanted to do was to draw on 'psychogeographical' walking as a practice in order to explore the social relations of neoliberalism. 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 and doing this in order to develop a full counter critique and challenge to the contemporary order of things in capitalist society. 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 and refers to what Debord explains where society is represented as a spectacle and its subjects are positioned as passive spectators whom are seemingly duped by the spectacle. Arguable examples of spectacle can include reality television shows, right wing news propaganda and so on.

This then leads us into the next important theoretical resource, which is *detournement*. It makes sense here to consider the concept of detournement in relation to the practice of psychogeographical walking. So with the idea of rather than walking in order to get from a to b, one walks to explore and make sense of places and to begin to consider what non-capitalist environments could look like. With psychogeographical drifting, one does this via subverting and disrupting the ordinary, normalized ways in which we would go from a to b and how we would ordinarily move through spaces and places. So for example, one may use a map of another city to wander around our hometowns or one may put directional markers on a dice and use that to navigate a route through our workplaces or hometowns. Such strategies would be used to take a detour, to subvert and disrupt the usual ways in which would go from a to b with a view to opening ourselves up to and challenging 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

Having discussed these core theoretical concepts, this brings me to considering 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 work by Rhiannon Firth (also on this panel titled 'Godzilla, Graffiti and Ground Zero'), Morag Rose, Phil Smith (also at this year's Monstrous Geographies 2015 conference) and various other groups such as the London Psychogeographical Association, the Loiterers Resistance Movement, Leeds Psychogeography Group and the Huddersfield Psychogeographical Network. Debord wrote that *dérives* are best conducted in groups of two or more people in order that those involved can check their interpretations with each other.¹² I decided to do this project with my brother whom was also interested in the practice of psychogeographical drifting. And so we made our plans to visit New York in order to do a *dérive* at Ground Zero. However, the idea of going to Ground Zero required some planning, which indeed is ironic, if one considers the practice of doing *dérives* as wandering without intention or with a plan! Some planning was involved, 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 that I could 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 phase was to purchase a Lonely Planet Guide to America and also a Rough Guide map of New York. In my role as a critical psychologist, I drew on particular analytic concepts to formulate my reflective position in the research, i.e. Ellis and Bochner's¹⁴ autoethnographic approach and Hollway's¹⁵ concept of subject positions in order to reflect on my role in the research as well as the idea of writing reflectively and politically about one's experiences of being in places and spaces. I have referred to this in other work as centering on the importance of studying 'spatial relations of power'.¹⁶ The question of how to do the psychogeographical walks and how to document such activities was something of a puzzle at the time, which required quite a lot of thought. Anyhow, I referred to core 'situationist' texts such as Khatib's account of a psychogeographical drift around the Les Halles district in Paris.¹⁷ That document, I found to be quite useful in how to write accounts of psychogeographical drifts. I also came across other numerous psychogeographical accounts in forums such as the online Manchester Area Psychogeographic and London Psychogeographic websites. Furthermore, there were also a few 'academic' critical psychology accounts of psychogeographical drifts, which I

found to be quite useful to consult as well as other critical activist and psychological accounts as indicated previously in this paper.¹⁸ And so having read these accounts, my brother and I decided that we would take the following items with us: an SLR camera, notepad and a map of downtown Manhattan. I had intended that after the drift, I would write a reflective story of our walk and would intersperse the accounts with photographs as well as producing artistic maps of our drifts. What follows next is an account of our psychogeographical drifts.

3. Psychogeographical drifting at Ground Zero

First of all, this account is an abridged version of the analysis and for those that are interested, you may wish to consult Bridger's PhD (2009) as well as another paper on this topic by the author.¹⁹ The following analysis highlights some of the main aspects and themes of the drifts carried out at Ground Zero.

In order to maintain some of the effects of disorientation, which appeared to be conducive to psychogeographical drifting, we decided to commence the drifts at Ground Zero shortly after arriving into New York from our original destination from the U.K. Our aim was to attempt to do a psychogeographical drift at Ground Zero and to explore how we made sense of being at the site of Ground Zero. When we arrived at the site, we didn't really have words to communicate how we felt and we both felt a sense of shock and horror. On commencing our first drift at the site, the words of Judith Butler came to mind in relation to her reflections on the September 11th 2001 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'.²⁰ On being at that site it is hard not to feel an immense sense of sadness, shock and horror at what had happened. 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 and remembered that my brother and I were both at home, the phone rang, my brother picked it up and one of his friends told him to put the television on and see what was on the news. My brother put the television on and we both stared at the screen and were speechless as we saw a news loop of the plane crashing into the World Trade Centre.

In relation to the drifts that we conducted at Ground Zero over the period of a few days, it was actually 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 to take any photos at all seemed to be somewhat wrong to do. This left us in an awkward position as to whether or not to take photos and whether we would be questioned as to why we were taking photos. However, no officials stopped us as I guess they may have assumed we

were tourists. However, in order to try to open ourselves up to experiencing that site, which in fact was quite unsettling and uncomfortable due to our feelings about the serious mass loss of life, we tried to draw on some psychogeographical techniques of wandering where we felt drawn towards at Ground Zero. We had a map of Bangkok with us, which also featured another World Trade Centre and so we used that map in order to disorientate ourselves by way of finding landmarks such as rivers. We used the Bangkok World Trade Centre as the starting point for our walk at Ground Zero and we attempted to find landmarks such as a Bangkok river, which actually mapped onto a New York highway. Such practices did enable us to a small degree to disorientate ourselves at that place, though as to whether we were doing situationist psychogeography, well I will leave that to others to decide! One of the arguments that the situationists stated was that there is no such thing as situationism, only a use of situationist methods.²¹

4. Conclusions

I hope in this paper that I have been able to provide a clear and understandable account of my approach to psychogeographical work. I do not claim that either my arguments or anyone else's is the definitive word on making sense of spaces and places such as Ground Zero. Moreover I offer this account as one way to make sense of that site and argue that a plurality of perspectives and approaches to studying environments is needed. Neither do I claim that doing psychogeographical walking can change the world. Indeed, in this work, there were clear constraints, which prevented my brother and I from randomly wandering around the site of Ground Zero.

However, I do think that in engaging in such practices, that such walks can enable us to focus in quite different ways on our lived everyday experiences of our environments and that we can do this in order to consider new orderings of society. I also believe that this sort of work should be connected with political practice and with considering social change. Indeed, the situationists argued for a revolution of everyday life and I will leave you, the audience with that point to consider. Thank you for listening to my presentation and I look forward to engaging in dialogue and debate about this work.

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).

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- 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 Insubmision 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 Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject'. *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman Denzin, and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 733-768.
- ¹⁵ Wendy Hollway, *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science* (London: Sage, 1989).

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 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>.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, xii, 2004).

²¹ Situationist International, 'Definitions'. Situationist International 1. In *Bureau of Public Secrets*, viewed 16 January 2015, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/1.definitions.htm>.

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