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Psychogeographical counter-tour guiding: Theory and practice

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Abstract

In this paper, will be outlined and explained a mode of tour guiding referred to as ‘psychogeographical’ counter-tour guiding that has been conducted in Manchester, Huddersfield and Leeds with groups such as the Huddersfield Psychogeography Network, the Loiterers Resistance Movement and the Leeds Psychogeography Group. The usage of psychogeography here draws on elements of the situationist practice of playful wandering without destination in order to: experientially make sense of and creatively engage in group dialogue about the changing form of towns and cities and to creatively consider what sort of societies we would really like. In doing this type of counter-tour guiding, it will be explained how the author’s methodological approach to this work is conceptualised as a psychogeographer, counter-tour-guider and as a critical psychologist drawing on situationism and reflexivity theories. Connection will also be drawn with other individual and groups doing similar adventures and journeys such as Walk Walk Walk, Wrights and Sites and also the Manchester Area Psychogeographic. Key analytical data and conclusions to the work will also be discussed.

Key words: psychogeography, counter-tour guiding, walking

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Introduction

In this paper will be explained an approach to counter-tour-guiding that draws on elements of situationist psychogeography. Key concepts will be discussed including psychogeography, counter-tourism and critical psychology. Those are the three main areas, which are the foundations to this approach in counter-tour guiding and it will be explained how this can be mapped in relation to conventional tour-guiding practice. In this paper will also be discussed some recent counter-tours that have been conducted as well as providing some critical reflections on past work and this will be concluded with consideration of future plans (Bridger, 2011, 2013 and 2014).

It is necessary to begin with the necessary question of how to define counter-tour guiding and why it is a different approach to conventional tour guiding. A key book on this topic is *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*, written by Antony and Henry (2005). This particular book provides a range of fun, playful and creative activities which can be used to engage with, explore and experience things in quite different ways to that which would be suggested in more conventional guides offered by Lonely Planet and other book series such as the Rough Guides. The Lonely Planet Guides to places such as Portugal, Amsterdam and New York would tend to highlight important landmarks, places to eat and shopping districts and readers would be directly 'guided' to these places with maps and address information. Whereas Antony and Henry's (2005) book does not aim to orientate its readers in particular places nor does it aim to give historical, cultural and social information about various environments. Rather it aims to provide its readers with various gaming strategies, which can be used to creatively explore different places. This then brings focus to what should be considered as an important part of making sense of places and that is the question of doing tours and what sorts of changes that can be enabled. For most people, wandering around new places is an enjoyable pastime and it is why tourism is such a popular activity in that it is a break from work and enables people to enjoy some 'down time' from the humdrum of day-to-day work and other obligations.

In critical and feminist psychology, the use of the 'I' position and reflecting on our roles in research is crucially important (Hollway, 1989). In my work as a critical

psychologist, the idea of linking reflexivity with political practice is of crucial importance (Parker, 2007). Indeed, I position myself as a ‘critical’ psychologist, which means that I aim to be critical of the discipline of psychology and what it does in both its research and in terms of the productive effects in everyday contexts such as the workplace, education and health. In considering the relations of my position of psychology in relation to place, I have explored the environmental psychology and social psychology research. However, in both those areas of research, I have been discontented with the lack of a political analysis of places and in my recent work, I have argued for how and why a ‘politics of place’ is important. Indeed, in much of the research in critical psychology, it often means drawing on work from outside that discipline. In relation to my study of places, I have drawn on work from other disciplines such as feminism, cultural geography and politics as well as from outside academia.

In considering the value of work outside not just psychology but of academic work in general, this brings necessary focus to the work of the situationists and their practice of psychogeography (<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/>). They were a group of radical intellectuals, artists and activists that were opposed to the capitalist gentrification of towns and cities and they conceptualized what is known as a psychogeographical approach. In the words of Guy Debord (1955), the leading member of the Situationist International, he explains that, ‘Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise law and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.’

The core aim of their work was to enable people to stop identifying with routine modes of behaviour and to create ways, which would help people to break out of standardized modes of thinking and movement. In the works of Kotanyi and Vaneigem (1961), they argued that the first task should be to ‘enable people to stop identifying with their surroundings and with model patterns of behaviour’. However, in presenting the work of the situationists and their psychogeographical approach it is important to avoid simply replicating their work and arguing simplistically that their way would be most appropriate to undertaking studies of particular places. It is important to consider the extent to which their work is useful and applicable to the contemporary context, to see what other work has been produced in recent years and

then to consider what further work needs to be done. These debates and questions have been addressed in recent years by various psychogeographical inspired individuals and groups such as Iain Sinclair, Will Self and other groups such as the Manchester Area Psychogeographic, London Area Psychogeographic, the Loiterers Resistance Movement, Leeds Psychogeography Group and the Huddersfield Psychogeography Network. Indeed, a recent edited collection of papers by Richardson (forthcoming) highlights a variety of approaches to psychogeographical work in the United Kingdom. This text complements the rather London-centric, but still most excellent introduction to psychogeography written by Coverley (2006). In a recent project by Iain Sinclair and Andrew Kotting (2012), they undertook a biographical journey from Hastings seaside to Hackney in London via the English waterways on a swan pedalo. The point of such activities is to explore the geographical and psychological effects of the changing form of places but what differentiates this from environmental psychology or other similar related research areas and disciplinary approaches is that the aims are to carry out a radical political analysis of places with a view to considering alternatives to the capitalist order of things. In other writings by the situationists, they referred to strategies such as the *dérive* (Debord, 1958), which is a method of wandering around places in order to chart the changing form of environments and to explore the effects of environments on individuals. Also, situationists such as Debord and Wolman (1956) referred to the concept of *detournement*, with the aims being to take existing mediums such as text, photo and film and altering and subverting the original intended meanings. *Dérives* and *detournement* were meant to lead to the creation of situations, with such situations leading to what would be revolutionary social change. This obviously is quite a grand aim and difficult to achieve though ultimately, the situationists believed that real social change would take place by people rather than by leaders.. At the very least, it would be useful to consider the political implications of tour guiding and the extent to which it is useful and important to link such practice with social change.

At this point, it is important to discuss some recent psychogeographical counter-touring work, conducted in Manchester city centre. It is necessary here to revert to the 'I' position to explain how this research was conducted as I want to be transparent in the claims made and to evidence my role in this work. At this stage in drawing on psychogeographical work in my tour-guiding practice, I was very new to the approach

of situationist psychogeography and so I was basically using that approach as close to how it was originally used by the situationists. In order to do that, I referred to key situationist papers on psychogeography such as Khatib's (1958) account of the Les Halles district in Paris and also Debord's work (1958). These works can be considered as exemplars of psychogeography work and so what will now be discussed is a 'methodological' approach to the work conducted in Manchester.

A 'Guided-Tour' of a Psychogeographical Method

I chose to conduct the first psychogeographical project in Manchester for two reasons, with the first reason being ease of access as it was where I was living and studying at that point in time. The second reason was that this project was part of my PhD thesis where I was analysing representations of terrorism as well as using psychogeographical methods to investigate the site of Ground Zero four years after the September 11th 2001 attacks. So for the second reason, it made sense to undertake a pilot study in Manchester in order to test out how a psychogeographical project would work in practice. Manchester city centre had also experienced an Irish Republican bomb attack several years earlier and since that time much of the central areas of that place had been rebuilt and redesigned with new shops, restaurants and bars. So in terms of the next steps in designing the psychogeographical study in Manchester, I then decided on key themes for exploring that place and decided to consider surveillance and control (closed circuit television cameras), consumerism and capitalism (layout of the shops in the aftermath of the Irish Republican Army bombing) and the historical context of Manchester, i.e. the Peterloo Massacre. With the themes decided on, I chose the particular exploratory approach that I would use which involved a dice walk. Using a six sided dice, I replaced the numbers on the dice with directional indicators such as 1=go straight on, 2=take the first left and so on. The use of the dice was meant to provide an exploratory, random feel to wandering around Manchester city centre. It should be noted at this point that in qualitative psychology research we often use research questions to underpin our work, so I decided to conceptualise some questions which were based on Khatib's work (1958): what does it feel like where I choose to walk? How do I engage with my surroundings? Do I notice any changeable ambiances? What do I think needs to be

changed in the environment? What should the environment look like? These questions were designed to explore my personal, affective responses to environments as well as to consider what I think needed to be changed in the environments in terms of thinking beyond the ordinary capitalist order of things in society. The latter questions are of course, rather utopian in nature though that is precisely the aims of situationist psychogeography in that it is not simply about exploring how we feel in particular places but it is about understanding and working out what we think needs to change in society. So the aims are rather more political than conventional tours in that we are using the mode of wandering to explore formations of space and place, which lay beyond the current capitalist order of things. Such work is quite different to conventional tour guides that operate in Manchester city centre such as the Manchester Guided Tours (<http://www.manchesterguidedtours.com>) where fixed routes are taken in the city to explore various histories such as the relations of the cotton industry to slavery and the symbolism of street names. The other part of such project work is to produce analytical data and conclusions, and it is this to which will be turned to next.

Analysis and Conclusions

In previous psychogeographical work produced, this has been written in form of first person narrative accounts which are interspersed with photographs and poems (see Bridger, 2011, 2013 & 2014). In relation to the Manchester psychogeography study, the themes of privacy and consumerism and also surveillance and control were drawn on to inform an account of that walk. This account was based on ideas such as spaces of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. drinking zones and no skating as well as the idea of all public spaces as being consumer spaces, i.e that there was limited scope to engage in non-consumer activities. In that work, I take readers on an account of the psychogeography walk that I conducted (Bridger, 2013). It is important to consider what the implications are of psychogeographical counter-tour guiding and what sort of future work needs to be done in this area. First of all, it is important to conduct work, which critiques the form, function and use of neoliberal environments. Secondly, much of the current research in the social sciences does not directly focus on the political analyses of environments and thirdly, it is necessary to connect research with political practice and social action. Arguably, there are interesting and

relevant connections that could be made with participatory methods, counter-tour guiding and psychogeography. However, this would require re-theorising various concepts and practices such as situationist theory and psychogeography to make it fit with the current political order of things (Bridger, forthcoming). Finally, it is important, to continue with teaching, writing and with further psychogeographical counter-tour guiding events and with various plans for the future rebuilding efforts in towns and cities. An interesting example here is regarding a recent consultation process with Stockholm residents using the Minecraft computer game, where some members of that community were asked to redesign that city as to how they would like that place to look like (<http://www.blockholk.com/participate>). These sorts of consultation processes are crucially important as ways to enable communities to envision what sorts of environments they really want. It should be an aim to consider what we want tourism studies to do for us and to consider what environments we really want to live, work and play in.

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