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Walking as a ‘radicalised’ critical psychological method? A review of academic, artistic and activist contributions to the study of social environments

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Abstract

The study of social environments is a neglected site of research not only in psychology, but across academic disciplines ranging from human geography to cultural studies. This paper will review contributions to studying social environments through academic writings, situationism and psychogeographical groups. It will be argued that disorientating walking practices can be used as a means to reflect on experiences of places in order to begin to think how social environments could be radically changed. It is important to question the taken for granted ways that people make sense of urban environments. It is argued that psychogeographic practice can be used to extend qualitative epistemologies and methods to argue for a ‘turn to place’ in psychology and to open up new methods and approaches in critical psychology. Finally, the implications for radicalising critical psychological research methods will be considered in relation to the current status of critical psychology, which suffers from an apathetic vision of radicalism and criticality.

Introduction

The study of how walking can confer particular types of experiences and how it can be a political practice is a neglected site of study not only in psychology, but across academic disciplines such as human geography and cultural studies. Before the 19th century, it was the poor, young and criminals that travelled by walking and it was only with the literary writings of for example, Coleridge and Wordsworth, that walking became a popular pastime (Jarvis, 1997). In order to study social environments it is important to work across disciplinary boundaries and to draw on disciplines such as geography, history, urbanism and architecture (Barthes, 1967). This work argues for linkage to be made with critical psychology to psychogeography and early Marxist theory. Walking should be used as a method to interpret social environments (Hayes, 2003). The work of the situationists is particularly important in that they critiqued social change in cities through various methods of walking, writing, film making and radical public interventions. I am particularly interested in the phase of their work from the late 50s to the early 60s, where they developed a walking method called psychogeography to explore what social changes were taking place in Paris. Now although the situationists were not academics, what they wrote about and what they did has informed some academic work in cultural studies, human geography and more recently in critical psychology. What is particularly important with the work of the situationists is that they had a revolutionary agenda where they wanted to completely transform everyday life. One of the aims of this article is to revive the political radicalism within critical psychology by explaining how psychogeography can be used as a radical method and epistemology, ‘*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 behaviour of individuals’ (Debord, italics in original, 1955 n.p). The starting point of

this work is with how particular events shaped the development of situationist ideas and how this later went on to shape academic writings and psychogeography groups.

Situationism

In the mid 1950s, Paris was undergoing urban gentrification and whole districts were rebuilt. A group of working class writers watched in disdain as 'their' Paris was destroyed in front of their eyes and they formed the Situationist International. Much of their work and practice has been documented in the form of historical accounts (Marcus, 1989; Plant, 1992; Sadler, 1998) and their writings archived as an anthology by Knabb (2007) which is also accessible online at the Bureau of Public Secrets (www.bopsecrets.org/) and Situationist International Online (www.cddc.vt.edu/).

Sadler (1998: 96) a historian of situationism, argued that the situationists were appalled at how cities were being rebuilt according to values of 'capitalism, rationalism, modernization, the 'Puritan work ethic' and spectacle'. The situationists decided to walk to explore what was changing in cities and they documented this through poetry (pseudonym: Ivain, 1958) and investigative accounts (Khatib, 1958). They referred to a French term, the *dérive* (drifting), and they made walking a distinctly political act to disorientate themselves, to study particular areas and to see how they were drawn to particular areas of cities (Debord, 1958). The aims of these walks were to break with habituated ways of walking through the city (Kotanyi and Vaneigem, 1961). Bonnett argued that the reason for what the situationists did was because they mourned the loss of the old Paris and that *dérives* were almost like a 'heritage survey' (2006: 36). Sadler argued that the situationists studied working-class districts, 'recording them for posterity, fastidiously avoiding the fluid traffic of the boulevards in favour of the still pools and backwaters of the city' (1998: 56).

Therefore, *dérives* were not aimless walks but were 'a response to inducement, albeit unplanned and unstructured' (Jenks and Neves, 2000, 7). The aims were to give up 'conscious control' (Bassett, 2004, 399). Pinder, a radical geographer, argued that 'chance encounters and uncanny resonances could disrupt dominant ways of seeing and potentially reveal the marvellous buried within the everyday' (Pinder, 2005, 404). Spontaneity was important to the practice of *dérives*, 'Debord's basic idea is that this project of wandering through the city should be determined not by any preconceived plan, but by the attractions or discouraging counter-attractions of the city itself' (Wollen, 2001, n.p). The situationists renounced the normal intentions of movement and function in social contexts and challenged this through exploring the possibilities of dream-like encounters in places (Wollen, 2001).

Psychogeography groups and artistic practice

Many people have wanted to keep alive the activist, artistic and intellectual elements of situationism through creating psychogeography groups and so in the 90s, groups formed such as Manchester Area Psychogeographic and the London Psychogeographical Association and then post millennium, the Bored in the City Collective and the Loiterers Resistance Movement. These groups have sought to engage with the public through advertising walks via the local news media, radio, online and via involvement in festivals such as Conflux (see www.confluxfestival.org/2009/), Provflux (www.provfluxwordpress.com/) and

Territories Re-imagined: International Perspectives (TRIP) (www.trip2008.wordpress.com). The Bored in the City Collective (<http://boredinthecitycollective.blogspot.com/>), the Loiterers Resistance Movement (<http://nowhere-fest.blogspot.com/>) and The Shaping are groups based in the North West of England and they have focused on the political analysis of space in relation to CCTV surveillance, guerrilla gardening, social gentrification and observing equinoxes and solstices. The Materialist Psychogeographic Affiliation (<http://www.materialistpsychogeography.co.uk/>) renounces any psychogeographical practices that focus on the occult and they argue that psychogeography should be a site of intellectual inquiry only directed by concerns of materialism and radical politics and inspired by writers such as Debord (1977, 1991), Lefebvre (1971) and Vaneigem (1967, 1983). Iain Sinclair (1997, 2002 and 2006) is also clearly synonymous with the 'cult' of psychogeography, writing numerous books on his travels around London and the M25. Matthew Hyde, Aidan O'Rourke and Peter Portland (2004) similarly to Sinclair, wrote an account of a motorway *dérive* and their work drew on a literary mode of writing, drawing influences from mythology, folklore and history. Their writing used a combination of text and photographs. Following on from the Sinclairian tradition of psychogeography are films by Patrick Keiller (1994, 1997), where both films narrate Robinson's journey through London and the suburbs. This work documents social change in England through footage of building works of shopping centres, car parks and service stations and critiques the Thatcherite government.

Interestingly, Bonnett argues that British psychogeography is struggling over a 'politics of loss' (Bonnett, 2009: 46), which is set 'Against the superficial trend towards modernity – millennium bridge and riverside apartments – the stronger current is for a gloomy nostalgia. The London imagined by Ackroyd, Sinclair and Moorcock is, above all, a backward looking one. The Londonnostalgics adore everything arcane and archaic about the city' (Heartfield, 2005). This is also reflected in the writings of Manchester Area Psychogeographic and the Nottingham Psychogeographical Unit.

However, one of the problems with how situationism has been used by some individuals and groups is that it has been used to record experiences of places without the radical intentions of why the *dérives* were done in the first place, which was to lead to the complete transformation of everyday life. Many psychogeographers have been content merely to record their experiences of *dérives* and to position themselves in the surrealist, literary tradition of flaneur as opposed to the situationists' radical and political use of psychogeography to record their experiences to intervene and change social situations (Coverley, 2006). Therefore any engagement with psychogeography should be done to theorise how experience can be used to catalyse social change.

Academic work

The social sciences have been slow in conducting research based on the study of place and how walking could be used as a radical method. Initially, philosophical questions were posed as to what is the role of place in human experience and how are meanings developed through being in places (Tuan, 1974; Buttimer, 1976 and Relph, 1976, 1981 and 1993). It has only been recently that phenomenologists have begun to study the meaning of place in everyday life and experience (Milligan, 1998) and how a

sense of being is situated in place (Casey, 1993). More recent work on the study of place has focused on concepts such as routine and everyday life. Routines are ‘the mundane process by which meaning is created and maintained even in the face of the chronic flux and disturbance of experience’ (Martin, 1984: 23). Cities can be considered as dynamic, moving bodies composed of rhythm and movement (Highmore, 2005). If we take as an example, the daily commute to work, this can be quite monotonous and boring, but it is also one of the only times in modern life when one can be alone and can have time to reflect (Highmore, 2005). The commute to work can be seen as a central aspect of everyday life, yet everyday life has only recently begun to be studied by writers such as Lefebvre ([1947] 1991) and Debord (1961). This notion of the everyday needs to be opened up for questioning as to what it means (Highmore, 2002). Furthermore, Debord (1961) argued that the aims of interpreting everyday life should be to completely transform everyday life. The aims of any academic research into the study of place should be concerned not only with understanding the meaning of place, but also with deconstructing how meanings are created and for power relations. For this reason I now turn to work from critical psychology (Burnett, Cudworth and Tamboukou, 2004; Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 2005), cultural studies (Pinder, 1996, 2000, 2005) and urban studies (Sadler, 1998).

One of the limitations of the majority of academic contributions to the study of situationism and psychogeography is the sole focus on the history of the Situationist International and the epistemological basis of their ideas (for example, Plant, 1992; Sadler, 1998). It is important to consider the extent to which situationism and psychogeography could be integrated into critical psychology. Pinder (2005) has written on how artists and activists have drawn on situationism in their practices. Bonnett (1989, 136) argued for the importance of *the Situationist International* of ‘a new form of geographical investigation that can enable the revolutionary re-appropriation of the landscape’. Much of the applied work on situationism and psychogeography has argued for a conglomeration of theory and practice. Pinder wrote on one international psychogeographical festival, *Psychconflux* in New York, where artists and activists did walks, performances and other interventions to experiment with peoples’ experiences of place and how that could be documented:

Experimental arts and modes of exploration can play a vital role in the development of critical approaches to the geographies of cities, where they may challenge norms about how urban space is framed and represented, and where they may help to open up other possibilities (Pinder, 2005, 385).

This interrogation of the ‘everyday’ is an important aspect of psychogeographical work. Moreover, to question what constitutes everyday routines that people do in their day-to-day lives should raise significant social, political and historical questions. The act of walking as a subversive practice can therefore be used to explore the geography of cities and to challenge assumptions of:

The centred, the panoptic and the hierarchical. It provides a means of engaging with urban spaces and experiences in ways that move beyond specialised arenas, whether those of art or academic institutions (Pinder, 2005, 402).

These arguments challenge de Certeau’s (1984) metaphorical argument that those whom can observe the city up above have a greater all-encompassing view than those

in the city and on the ground. Highmore (2005) argues that de Certeau's (1984) thesis provides a monolithic conceptualisation of power with the notion of above and below. Furthermore, Pinder (2005, 403) argues that the streets can actually provide locations for 'multiple and clashing viewpoints'.

This brings us to two feminist psychogeographical groups which have provided significant advancements in psychogeographical studies in terms of addressing feminist modes of walking: Precarias a la Deriva (2005) and Grup de Lesbianes Feministes (2005). A serious limitation of psychogeographical writings is that those engaged in such activities have typically always been male (Scalaway, 2002). One of the limits of Sinclair's popularised psychogeographical approach is that 'The city thus appears as something feminine, passively there for the taking, a wilderness-like space of adventure to be conquered or possessed' (Bassett, 2004, 403). In Scalaway's work, the concept of the *dérive* is theorised in relation to feminine modes of experience so that the act of walking is a means to theorise 'Otherness'. In this work, it is argued that further psychogeographical work should be undertaken to investigate notions of 'Otherness', to address women's experiences of social environments and to theorise how this is constructed along the lines of how gender shapes experience and how feminine modes of experience can be theorised along masculinist and feminist frameworks of understanding.

Grup de Lesbianes Feministes (2005) are a feminist lesbian psychogeographical group, concerned with how the systems of capitalism and patriarchy position them as women. They critique how everyday life is shaped by heterosexual assumptions, 'we do NOT want to be produced as consumer-market subjects ... public space should be vindicated as political space for collective creativity based on new forms of social, sexual and affective relations' (Grup de Lesbianes Feministes, 2005, 109). They achieve these aims by engaging with the public on the streets of Spain and by organising radical public interventions.

The second group, Burnett et al., (2004) can also be represented as a feminist psychogeographical group, though their approach is based on Debord's (1958) paper 'The theory of the *dérive*'. However, they directly call into question the male-centred assumptions of psychogeographical practice and also of the Higher Education system:

Our research question was the extent to which the *dérive*, as a psychogeographic tool, could be operationalised by women, whose time, and most usually, travels through space, were/are structured by the contingent demands of paid employment, and in some cases children and other dependant small animals (Burnett et al., 2004, 118).

They aimed to de-center themselves in the places in which they lived, worked and played in order to question the taken for granted ways in how they should think and act in particular contexts. They drew on Foucault's notion of heterotopia, in relation to theorising 'a kind of contestation both mythical and real of the space in which we live' (Foucault, 1988, 179), where heterotopias are 'real social places which surround us ... sites which juxtapose in a single real social "place", several places' (Marks, 1995, 69). They documented the *dérive* as a narrative story where they reflected on their experiences. The aim was to disorientate themselves emotionally. However, they did not agree with Debord that it is possible to conduct *dérives* either to simply investigate social environments or for complete emotional disorientation (1958):

In charting our daily journeys, what emerged forcefully, was the impossibility of disorientation within the structuring contingencies of our everydayness. The only way to disrupt that patterning of our everydayness was to create specific situations such as wearing an item of headgear throughout one day, or the ‘spoil yourself’ directive’ (Burnett et al., 2004, n.p).

The work of these feminist psychogeographers should be used as a catalyst to critique psychology and to envision and develop a radical and materialist critical psychology. Through walking in social environments, we can become more aware of the places which we can and cannot walk through. Further work needs to be conducted to explore the implications not only of feminist but also masculinist modes of experience in terms of theorising ‘Otherness’.

Conclusions

The situationists never wrote a fully concrete method as to how to conduct *dérives* and neither did they ever write a manifesto of their arguments. Debord discarded the concept psychogeography from his work in the 1960s, not even mentioning it in his classic work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Furthermore, the Situationist International (SI) was disbanded shortly after the revolutionary events of May 1968. One of the possible reasons why the SI was disbanded by Debord was that he did not wish for the group to become recuperated by the dominant power structures of society. Recently, Sinclair has argued that psychogeography is a dead concept and has been wielded for too long as a fashionable body of ideas (email correspondence), though it is also argued that he has contributed to its loss through his nostalgic writings on London city (Barker, 2006). Any engagements with situationism and psychogeography should therefore not aim to replicate the arguments of the situationists nor of others drawing on their arguments, but instead should aim to reconfigure these ideas in line with developments in contemporary capitalist society. What I argue needs to be done is to turn to the study of place and to radicalise critical psychology:

To think in a different register about the agency and functionality of what I propose regarding doing research in psychology. It is hoped that ... will disrupt our usual conceptions of theory and practice in psychology, as well as encourage us to re-think the relationship between “disinterested” observer and socially embedded actor (Hayes, 2003, 52).

Hence the aims are to rethink methodological and epistemological concerns of critical psychology and to attend to how the theories and methods that we use shapes the type of knowledge that can be produced. Psychological studies have tended to ignore how everyday life shapes peoples’ experiences and how walking could be used as a reflexive method (Hayes, 2003, 63). Bassett’s (2004) geographical work is particularly important to consider at this point as he was concerned with how psychogeography can be used as a fieldwork methodology for undergraduate geography students. He reflected on the extent to which situationism and psychogeography could be used as methodological resources to explore peoples’ experiences of places, ‘Such an exercise can thus raise issues both about how we *read* the city, and also how we can *write* and represent the city’ (Bassett, italics in original, 2004, 408). Clearly this statement reflects methodological concerns in how to conceptualise psychogeography as a methodology and epistemology. He also

considered the extent to which dérives are similar to other forms of urban ethnography and whether they complement or contrast with other ethnographic practices (Bassett, 2004). Bassett (2004) conducted dérives with his students and found that this was a useful means by which to reflect on how psychogeography could be used by geographers. He got students to use the language of situationism (for example, unites d'ambiances, plaques tournantes and pentes) to document their dérives. In terms of how dérives can be documented in critical psychological work, Burnett et al's., (2004) work is useful in that their dérive account is written as a storied narrative account which is interspersed with photographs depicting places visited. Themes which arose from their study included gendered relations, everyday life and power. Furthermore, an account of my methodological approach to doing dérives is featured in a forthcoming publication on *Visual Psychologies* (Bridger, forthcoming).

In this work I have traced the development of work on the study of place, moving from the 19th century writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth, to the situationists, psychogeographical groups and academic contributions from cultural studies, critical psychology and human geography. It is important to question the role of the body in making sense of place and the extent to which walking can be a political act. This paper argues for a turn to place in critical psychology and for a need to revive the radicalism of critical psychology through new methods such as psychogeography, which seek to make links with elements of intellectualism, art and activism. Pinder argues that the aims of radical work should be to completely transform the 'social organisation of place' (Pinder, 1996: 414) as well as the complete transformation of capitalist societies. However, to what extent is it possible to retain the radical aims of situationism in today's political climate? Bassett (2004) argues that the dérive was not just intended as a method for mapping, but was meant to prise open new liberatory experiences and to transform society. He raises the following important question, 'Can one use Situationist tools for an academic exercise in this kind of way without effectively de-radicalising them to the extent that they become lifeless and un-illuminating?' (Bassett, 2004, 408). Using such potentially radical arguments in an academic discipline is inevitably a compromise of some sorts. The question here to pose is whether capitalist society can detourn the potentiality of situationism to invigorate the radicalism of critical psychology or whether, we as critical psychologists can find new ways to combat the spectacular forces of society.

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Short Biography

Alexander John Bridger is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Huddersfield, teaching social psychology, qualitative methods and alternative psychologies. He recently completed his PhD which developed how the situationist practice of psychogeography could be used as a new qualitative methodology in critical psychology. Alex is also involved in psychogeographical activities in the North West of

England (see <http://boredinthecitycollective.blogspot.com>). He is also a member of the Centre for Applied Psychological Research at the University of Huddersfield (see <http://www2.hud.ac.uk/hhs/capr/topics.php#qua>), the Discourse Unit and Psychology Politics Resistance at Manchester Metropolitan University (see www.discourseunit.com and www.discourseunit.com/ppr).

Endnotes

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