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Non-linear pathways of/for social and spatial justice research

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Abstract

'Research, engagement, activism' appears to indicate a linear path in action-oriented geographical scholarship. It imagines a researcher, bringing their scholarly question/interest to a process of engagement with an issue or place, which then contributes to existing or new activism. In practice, this linear narrative is often disrupted and complicated by what counts as research, outside and within formal education and research institutions, as well as by non-linear personal and collective trajectories. Research, engagement and activism can co-exist, overlap, vie for attention, cut across us, pulling in many directions, undoing the grounds on which we stand, our certainties, and forms of subjectivation, through specific and at times incompatible geographies and rhythms. Reflecting on my non-linear trajectory as a human geographer and as activist in the UK and Spain, in this commentary I tease out some tactics, possibilities and constraints of radical engagement in/with the 'field'. Drawing on a feminist politics of/for social and spatial justice, I discuss ethics and positionality, radical openness in research, working collectively (within) and collaboratively (across), the difficulties and privileges of engaging with place-based research and action, the possibility of radical research beyond the academy, and the importance of valuing and supporting radical research praxis through, among other practices, the editorial work of the *Radical Housing Journal*.

KEYWORDS

activism, engaged research, feminism, fieldwork, non-linear pathways, spatial justice

Radical geographical praxis can take many forms. The potential to enact incisive critique, transforming thoughts and the realm of action, is informed by multiple contingencies. Radicalness can be broadly defined as the ability to engage with root causes to enact social change. While these roots are long, intertwined and thickened around old and sedimented oppressions, how such issues are defined can be highly conjunctural. In the old adage about understanding the world to change it, engagement with how issues are envisaged and produced as *issues* is the chief challenge of a praxis that claims to be radical. Often, the possibility of engagement does not depend on researchers alone. For this reason, I arrange this short intervention around the idea of non-linear feminist politics of/for social and spatial justice research. I understand

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this non-linearity not solely as a challenge to the straitjackets of professional career legibility and the fantasies of traditional social research design, but also in terms of the subjective trajectories that geographers sketch as they move towards, through and sometimes away from engagement and activism with/in 'a field', and the multiplicities of forms taken by these relations and *their radicalness*.

With all the uncomfortable roots of the term 'fieldwork', there is a powerful lineage of geographical reflection on the implications of engaging in/with the 'field'. Starting from a critique of distance, feminist approaches have urged us to move towards a more hopeful proposition of a politics of engagement beyond compartmentalised social actors (Katz, 1994). Such decompartmentalisation requires a thorough engagement with positionality and situatedness. This cannot be captured by a singular, fixed account of being an insider or an outsider, which 'ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space' (Sanyal, 2020, p. 28). Holding on to feminist principles that acknowledge historical and contemporary material and epistemic violence, '[f]ieldwork entails fundamentally interrogating the work done within fields of inquiry, including radical geography, to produce legible and legitimate objects and subjects of knowledge and action' (Asher, 2019, p. 123). In this sense, the construction of that legibility should itself be a site of critique and struggle, enabling a collective questioning of the very contours of 'ideal' research, and the kinds of gendered and racialised labours and knowledges that it so often hides or overlooks.

The desire to redress epistemic violence through knowledge production about spatial (in)justices remains valid whether radical geographical praxis takes place within or outside the field of academic research, especially given the blurred boundaries between the two for those who have been privileged enough to have our work recognised by formal institutions. Interrogating the effects of this work, during and afterwards, involves inhabiting uncomfortable spaces and crossing boundaries and frameworks of legitimacy, in relation to dynamic scholarly debates and politics.

Inspired by Kye Askin's proposition of 'critically holding onto *feminist politics of/for social and spatial justice*' (Askins, 2018, p. 8), such holding can revindicate a processual openness in frameworks and approaches as a necessary starting point to view and transform power relations. The openness emerges from a loyalty to root questions, in all their messiness and complexity, and from a fundamental proposition, or hope, that thinking and acting in relation to a 'field' can be transformative for researchers too. Feminist and queer research journeys that embrace humility and dialogue, taking risks and opening to the possibility of failing, should continue being praised even if they appear 'chaotic' (McLean, 2018). Extending the form of radical openness to a method (Wolch, 2003) can be reinterpreted in terms of openness to the political situation driving a piece of research that would otherwise be deemed 'descriptive'. Radical accounting for, bearing witness to, and reconstructing detailed histories of dispossession undergirding predictable injustices and tragedies are fundamental to the enactment of forms of epistemic justice.¹

In my research practice, individual and collaborative, these principles have led me to ask not solely what kinds of knowledge should be produced, and how this production should take place, but also how this can foster and accompany processes of resistance to social injustice, and of empowerment for alternatives. As I think back to different experiences over the past 15 years, I wish to bring two reflections to this debate. The first is that not all radical geographical research is undertaken through activist research (and cognate terms such as scholar-activist, action research or committed research). The second is that not all radical geographical research takes place within or through academia, especially when researchers are placed within institutions or national academic traditions that have embraced more forcefully neoliberal principles running counter to non-linear temporalities and logics. I will illustrate these points with two examples of activist-informed research within geographies of housing justice.

The first relates to my trajectory into housing geographies in London, which started with engagement with a long-term activist archive project and a blog² documenting gentrification in the neighbourhood where I lived by asking the ostensibly benign question 'whose regeneration?'. Innumerable encounters with other residents, activists and researchers, and with multiple sites of power and dispossession at the intersection of state-led gentrification, transnational capital and local authority austerity, raised questions about the 'field of inquiry' and the relevance and role of research, as I recount elsewhere (Ferreri, 2020). Sometimes the most relevant research is not radical per se and may require 'simply' a close reading of the epistemic violence of technocratic processes, and the work of holding open multiple spaces for organising and for learning together how to enact *parrhesia* in the Foucauldian sense of 'speaking the truth to power', within formats such as a town hall debate or a planning inquiry (Figure 1). Staying within spaces of power, even while acknowledging that litigation is rarely the most effective political strategy, can lead to a fresh questioning of the relevance of geographical research when faced with definitions of what constitutes admissible 'evidence' of injustice, troubling the position of academic research vis-à-vis the more strategically targeted work of organisations whose activities straddle the boundaries of activism and academia, such as the membership-based organisation Just Space.³



FIGURE 1 Heygate Estate Compulsory Purchase Order Public Inquiry, February 2013.

The second example too concerns research that was radical in terms of its methodological openness, but not necessarily, perhaps, in term of its methods, and which wilfully engaged with the production of ‘evidence’ of social injustice; in this case, by embracing the ‘strategic positivism’ of a quantitative survey. The project was developed entirely outside of the academy, lasted 18 months and emerged in collaboration with Obra Social Catalana, a regional commission of the Spanish Platform for Mortgage Affected People (PAH). The research was undertaken as the basis for a wider campaign to decriminalise ‘organised’ squatting, and as a response to the wilful production of ignorance (or agnotology, see Slater, 2018) about lived experiences and rationales of squatters in contemporary Spain, which was widely instrumentalised by political parties and most of the media to generate moral panic and support punitive measures. The result was the first large-scale quantitative and qualitative survey of housing occupations in Catalonia, Spain. Movement-relevant research in this context challenged our assumptions and technical skills as researchers (Ferreri & Garcia-Lamarca, 2024) and we used a number of strategies to address these disparities and facilitate mutual learning within the collective. For example, we teamed up to conduct interviews in pairs to include people without prior experience of research. We organised collective workdays and broader public discussions to devise recruitment strategies, to pore over the data, to take decisions about the language to be deployed and the representations of quantitative and qualitative materials, leading to a final public report online and in print. Those of us in university positions (all on temporary research contracts) benefitted from relative freedom and work flexibility, and from access to training on statistical and spatial analysis software, a key issue in developing ‘rigorous’ research and datasets in projects that straddle academia and activism (Graziani & Shi, 2020).

Both projects are examples of working collectively, within ad-hoc groups that involved traditionally trained researchers alongside activists who may not have engaged with research before, but also collaboratively, across groups, sectors and different scales of organised resistance. Both involved a commitment to equity in research work, which always requires multiple negotiations, none of which is ever frictionless. The pace of conducting these kinds of research existed at the interstices of the hectic temporalities of permanent housing crisis and mobilisation. This is a committed scholarship that is deeply aware of being ‘interdependent with others’ oppressed spatio-temporal situations’ (Meyeroff & Noterman, 2019). Maintaining a feminist and decolonial ethics of solidarity required labour. The energy, the strain, showing up at solidarity events, at unsociable hours and at weekends, and being ‘on call’ if ‘something’ happens. And, in these kinds of ‘fields’ something always happens, someone is detained at a protest, someone loses an appeal and their home, somebody’s hearing in court is postponed for five months, someone attempts and at times succeeds in taking their own life. The ‘gaps in the cv’ of those who continue holding on to this kind of practice within academic research may be precisely the times when we enacted feminist politics of/for spatial justice; that is, relational ethics of care through acts of caring for ourselves and others.

This leads me to one final complication faced by many early and not-so-early career committed geographers with non-linear committed pathways: the difficulty of maintaining *place-based* social justice research. Within increasingly pervasive logics of competitiveness, grant chasing and academic mobility, a commitment to place can become a real unacknowledged additional entry barrier to entering and remaining in *this* academia, from short-term contracts to the intersection between precarious employment and stable or secure housing. As I wrote somewhat angrily in 2016, it is hard to fight gentrification and housing injustices—and their epistemic powers of erasure—when committed researchers are in the weakest position to remain engaged with local communities of reference (Ferreri & Glucksberg, 2016). These

barriers are compounded by intersecting discriminations encountered by precarious women and gender-nonconforming people, as well as Indigenous, Black and people of colour researchers in the discipline, as highlighted by initiatives such as the Race, Culture and Equality Working Group of the RGS.

In the chaotic pathways and meanders between research, engagement and activism, a commitment to emplaced radical scholarship becomes a luxury. Sadly, some of the authors cited in this short commentary have now left academia, their non-linear pathways illegible and undervalued by (most) established institutions and funders. This is why we must continue to be wary of performative acts of institutional recognition that often rely on undervalued classed, gendered and racialised labour, while the punitive and exclusionary disciplinary powers of research metrics and competition remain unquestioned. The issue requires a careful understanding that is specific to place and time. In settler-colonial contexts, for example, institutional recognition of Indigenous scholars has been denounced as offering a spectacle of reconciliation underwritten by, and reproducing, settler colonial relations (Daigle, 2019). In a small, self-organised way, transnational platforms such as the *Radical Housing Journal*—with its core value of radical housing and home research beyond academic boundaries—are a step towards valuing and foregrounding such profiles and works.⁴ However, more needs to be done to increase support, from editorial boards, funding bodies and academic and research institutions, to recognise and value non-linear and radical pathways in and for spatial justice research and to make space for ‘less legible’ scholars and scholarship. The discipline of Geography still remains a potentially fertile and theoretically open place for the approaches and works discussed above; yet more remains to be done to materially and symbolically support non-linear feminist politics of/for social and spatial justice research and expand the remit of what it actually means to be a radical geographer today.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For example, in work that has emerged after the Grenfell tragedy in London (Hodkinson, 2021; Rozena, 2022).

² <https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/>.

³ In this project we had the support of a funder sympathetic to radical geographical research, the Antipode Foundation. One of the outputs of the project, *An Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London* (2013), has since been translated and adapted to anti-gentrification housing struggles in Sweden, as the booklet *Rätt att bo kvar – en handbok i organiserad mot hyreshöjningar och gentrifiering* (2016), <https://www.rattattbokvar.se/> and in Southern Europe, through Sandra Annunziata's *Staying Put! An anti-gentrification toolkit for Southern Europe* (2016) <http://www.eticity.it/w/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Toolkit-Staying-Put-English.pdf>.

⁴ <https://radicalhousingjournal.org/>.

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