



---

# Confessions of a Desk-Bound Radical

Don Mitchell

Department of Geography, The People's Geography Project, Maxwell School,  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA;  
dmmitc01@maxwell.syr.edu

---

On a field trip organized as part of a recent conference in Hong Kong, I found myself seated on the bus next to a graduate student who had read a fair amount of my work on homelessness in public space. Sharp as a tack, he had also spent a fair amount of time in the US, and was passionate about the plight of the homeless both there and in Hong Kong. Rooted in a deep religious conviction, he was particularly interested in the elderly homeless and the ways in which they get caught up in the great maw of redevelopment, gentrification, and the privatization of public space. What he wanted to know from me were two things: my experiences working with homeless people in shelters and soup kitchens; and the specific actions that he and his comrades should take, *now*, to make conditions for the homeless elderly better. I did not know how to respond. While I have spent a little time in shelters and kitchens, I do not, in fact, work *with* homeless people—either as a worker in a shelter or as an activist in anti-homelessness movements.

This is a fairly common experience for me. As my work has become known as both radical and political, students, colleagues, and lay people frequently turn to me in expectation and hope. They expect that not only am I an activist (in the sense of someone engaged in organizing on the ground and seeking transformation through direct action), but also that I can provide useful ideas about how to be a more effective activist. Even more, they look to me as someone who will have good ideas about how to meld activism and academic work. In response, I always feel poised to disappoint, especially since on a fieldtrip bus, or in the hurried correspondence of email, it always seems so impossible to justify why I am not, really, an on-the-ground activist. In fact I think there is a real need for what could be called “desk-bound radicals” in any struggle for social change, and I hope that in this short essay I can provide some justification for this stance.

## The Activism–Academics Divide

Debate and worry over the relationship between activism and academics is perennial. In my email inbox right now, for example, is a note from a student outlining his concerns that progressives and radicals have “retreated” to the academy, pulled back from direct engagement with the problems of the world, sought refuge in intellectual debates and the shallow politics of “theory”. There is much of substance in this concern. There is no doubt, for example, that the defeats across the globe of the activist and revolutionary Left in the period after 1968, and the repressions that were part of these, led many into the relatively safe precincts of the university. Michael Watts, following Rudi Dutschke and others, argues, however, that such a move should not be seen only as a “retreat”, but also, and perhaps more accurately, as part of a “long march through the institutions” that has instigated wholesale social change, not only of the academic universe, but equally of so many aspects of everyday life (Watts 2001). These include the mainstreaming of women’s rights, environmentalist discourse, multiculturalism in the schools and the workplace, etc. None of these advances are complete, none are uncontested, none are fully secured, but all are real.

Several years ago I gave a paper at a session organized by the Working Class Studies Caucus of the American Studies Association at its conference in Detroit. The organizers asked me to present a paper on class and landscape. To do so I studied the history of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and its successor the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Active in the 1960s, both organizations were instrumental in the transformation of the Detroit industrial and racial landscape. They had worked through direct action, through the ballot box, and through propaganda. There was a moment, in the late 1960s, when revolutionary change really seemed possible. Even if revolution never happened, the transformative effects of the movement were clear.

One of the organizers of the session invited General Baker, one of the founders of DRUM and the League, to hear my presentation. He was graceful in his correction of my historical errors, but what I remember most from meeting him was a conversation we had later. By the time I met him Baker had been a revolutionary activist for four decades. He had been jailed, blacklisted, and hounded by state and corporate police and provocateurs. When I met him he was working the graveyard shift at the River Rouge steel mill (part of Ford). He said he preferred working that shift so he could spend his days in education—in organizing Marxist study groups, primarily—and in community work. He said that, at the current moment, there was nothing more important than study, nothing more important than the hard work of thinking through tough concepts to come to a better understanding of the world, how it is shaped, and where there might be opportunities to intervene.

For Baker, Marxism provided precisely the analytical tools needed both to understand the current moment and to anticipate future opportunities. Indeed, he told me that the most important lesson he had learned as a revolutionary was that one had to pay attention to historical time and circumstance. Conditions in the 1960s were ripe for direct revolutionary action; now they are not. But that did not mean one should do nothing. Rather, the most important task now was to prepare the intellectual (and organizational) ground, so that revolutionaries were ready—ready to be active rather than reactive—when circumstances changed. Study, research, thinking, working out analyses: these were the crucial tasks of the historical moment, so that the next historical moment would not be missed. Refocusing revolutionary activity from action to academics, as it were, was a historical necessity. Activism and academic work—and Baker made it clear that he saw aspects of university research and teaching and his study groups as part of a continuum—were not, *or should not be*, divided, but different aspects of revolutionary praxis.

### **The People's Geography Project: An Intellectual as much as an Activist Endeavor**

Activism takes many forms. One we rarely think about is the popularization of knowledge so that knowledge may be better oriented towards and aligned with popular struggles. In 1995, I wrote a review essay on the social history, "Who built America?" Reading these volumes, which tell the history of the United States from the bottom up, got me thinking about what a popular radical geography might look like. Could geographers, more than 25 years after the explosion of radicalism in the field, really answer the question, who built America?

A few years later, in the hopes of beginning to answer this question, I began the People's Geography Project (PGP). The idea of the PGP was to bring together radical and critical scholars to work collectively in the project of popularizing radical geographical knowledge. It was my conviction then, and it remains my conviction now, that the theoretical, political, and empirical work that radical and critical geographers have conducted over the past generation is important not only intellectually, but also practically. It is also the case that geographic ideas and theories are little known outside the discipline. There was, I thought, a great need to *translate* geographical knowledge into languages more immediately available to those not steeped in our own traditions, ways of thought, and intellectual discourses. So the PGP was founded, first, to address this need.

It was founded, in other words, as an explicitly *intellectual* project: a project for bringing *ideas* into popular consciousness. It was therefore also an *activist* project in the sense that it sought to orient geographical knowledge towards programs of radical social change, towards the

struggle for social justice. In that regard, the PGP was also rooted in an argument David Harvey made long ago. He wrote:

The geography we make must be a *peoples' geography*, not based on pious universalisms, ideals and good intents, but a more mundane enterprise that reflects earthly interests, and claims, that confronts ideologies and prejudice as they really are, that faithfully mirrors the complex weave of competition, struggle, and cooperation within the shifting social and physical landscapes of the twentieth [and twenty-first] century. The world must be depicted, analyzed, and understood not for what we would like it to be but as it really is, the material manifestation of human hopes and fears mediated by powerful and conflicting processes of social reproduction. Such a peoples' geography must have a popular base, be threaded into the fabric of daily life with deep taproots into the well-springs of popular consciousness. But it must also open channels of communication, undermine parochialist world views, and confront or subvert the power of the dominant classes or the state. It must penetrate the barriers to common understandings by identifying the material base to common interests. Where such a material base does not exist, it must frankly recognize and articulate the conflict of equal and competing rights Harvey (2001:116–117).

The goal of the PGP was to begin a process of translation, to weave new worlds of popular consciousness by bringing radical geographical knowledge to the fore. To meet that goal, a dozen geographers met in New York City in 1999 to map out the contours of the Project. We decided on several goals: a book-length *People's Geography of the United States*; a comic book of radical geography; a series of pamphlets examining particular events or processes (eg the geography of the United Auto Workers strike of 1998 or the geography of the global anti-war protests of 2003). We also discussed the use of other media like film and the web, and we organized sessions at national and international meetings.

Ultimately we have achieved few of these goals. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 reoriented our work. Those of us based at Syracuse University (including a lot of students) responded to the attacks by creating a clearing house of materials for progressive teachers and professors seeking to understand and explain the attacks—and the reactions they called up—in their historical–geographic and geopolitical context. That project was as intensely time-consuming as it was urgent. (We repeated this effort in the run-up to the war against Iraq.)

There were other reasons for failure as well. One of these was intellectual. We never figured out, or I should say we have not yet figured out, how to tell the story of the people's geography of the United States. All the pieces are there, and we know where to find them. We know the components—the processes and struggles, the relations of power, the

imperialist endeavors—that go into producing American geographies. But we have not been successful in apprehending how to *limit* those components so as to tell a compelling yet still relatively complete story.

The great advantage of social historians is that they can use the inexorable unfolding of time as a scaffolding upon which to hang a narrative. The great disadvantage of geographers is that we know that space does not simply unfold, but constantly collapses, and folds over on itself, and that it *internalizes* processes in all their complexity: that is its very production. This is an enormously difficult story to tell, except in fragments.

Another reason for the failure was structural. University work is time-consuming. The demands of our classes, our own research projects, and our administrative work, while all important, also limit the amount of time available for working out a complex project of popularization. It was hard for us to meet and it was hard to carve out time to devote to the *People's Geography of the United States* book. Unlike writers, we cannot work at our craft fulltime.

In the midst of this two important things happened. First, innumerable others—in the US, Japan, the UK, Hong Kong, Italy, Australia and elsewhere—picked up on the idea of a people's geography and took it in new directions, turning it into their own project. The very idea of a people's geography has had resonance and traveled effectively around the globe. Meanwhile, the notion of a people's geography has changed in the process (as two examples, see <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/empire/> in Washington State and <http://peoplesgeography.com/> in Australia).

Second, the hard work of thinking critically about reaching popular audiences has proven vital in the way I have rethought local political engagements. I helped shape the Syracuse Hunger Project, which is a project of social service providers, activists, and academics seeking to analyze the changing geographies of food insecurity in Central New York so as both to better address immediate needs and to find ways to rethink the structural roots of hunger in our city. Second, I aided in the creation of a “community geographer” position at Syracuse University. This person's job is to work with local organizations in similar analyses of other significant social, economic, and political processes and problems.

In both these cases a significant portion of the work is devoted to showing how and why critical geographical knowledge is now vital to a good understanding of those structures of injustice against which we fight. For me, personally, the work of the Hunger Project and the Community Geographer ties me even more tightly to my desk: it is my responsibility to shift departmental funds to support such work (and thus to do the necessary work of winning consent within the department); to schmooze administrators who provide funding and resources; to write grant proposal after grant proposal (and go to meeting after meeting with

foundation directors) in order to keep the projects going. As part of that process I have had to find ways to articulate, very quickly and briefly, just why critical (and even radical) geographical knowledge *matters*—that is to do verbally (and in the context of grant applications) exactly that which the People's Geography Project set out to do: to explain just how and why thinking geographically and radically makes a difference to how we understand the production of the worlds of which we are a part.

Both the Hunger Project and the Community Geographer are limited in their transformative goals and I have had to learn to negotiate a fine line between a set of reformist and sometimes even paternalistic projects and relationships on the one hand, and the radical politics to which I am committed on the other. In so doing it helps me to recall the lesson that General Baker sought to instill, the lesson of learning to assess the moment and prepare the ground. Remembering that moment helps me recall why my deskbound work, problematic as it sometimes can be, might also be critical in the current moment.

The Hunger Project *has* changed the geography of food security (helping to shift the locations and opening hours of emergency pantries, for example, to better meet the needs of the working poor); its analyses have proved vital in statewide advocacy; and it has led into more direct community organizing efforts (directed by neighborhood activists) by doing the analytical groundwork necessary, for example, to jump-start a community gardening program that has organizing as well as food growing as its central mission. The Community Geographer project, for its part, has led to the formation of a coalition of activists seeking to understand the structural effects of incarceration—and its racist geographies—on sending and receiving neighborhoods, a project that promises to be, in fact, a quite radical intervention into business as usual in our city. In both these ways, the Hunger Project and the Community Geographer in fact meet just those goals—of popularizing radical geography and reorienting it towards structural transformation—that the People's Geography Project established nearly a decade ago.

## Conclusion

It is not hard to feel guilty when one's comrades are out on the line, marching against the war in Iraq, escorting doctors into clinics that provide abortions, or doing the hard work of organizing a movement in favor of the right to housing, when all you are doing is sitting at your desk trying to find the right words to describe the worlds these comrades are actively working to change. It is even easier to feel guilty when you are spending too many hours beseeching some foundation or another to give you a few thousand dollars to sustain such an obvious position as the Community Geographer. Such guilt makes it hard to remember, too,

just why student activists in Hong Kong want to talk with me, want to seek advice and validation for their causes. They sought me out precisely because I do take the time to search for those telling words, to undertake the research that gives those words their force, to find those few thousand dollars, and to orient my explanations of the world towards exactly the change they hope to make. That intellectual work, and that bureaucratic work, it seems to me, are both vital parts of any activism even when, or especially because, it so often feels like the opposite of the kinds of direct engagement with the world, the throwing of lives on the line, that so many others so selflessly and effectively do. It is time to stop seeing the different roles we may play in social movements as a divide between activists and academics, and see it instead as an important and necessary division of labor.

### Suggested Reading

- American Social History Project (1989, 1992) *Who Built America*. Volumes 1 and 2. New York: Pantheon. A remarkable and accessible social history of the US that could be a model for similar work in geography.
- Harvey D (2001 [1984]) On the history and present condition of geography: A historical-materialist manifesto. In *Spaces of Capital* (pp 108–120). New York: Routledge. Lays out an agenda for geography that is still relevant more than 20 years later; argues that geography must be historically grounded and oriented towards peoples' real needs.
- Watts M (2001) The progress in human geography lecture: 1968 and all that. . . *Progress in Human Geography* 25:157–188. Traces the evolution of leftist thinking and activism after 1968 and the effects that the migration of much leftist politics into the academy has had on the nature of social movements.

**Don Mitchell** is a Distinguished Professor of Geography and Chair of the Geography Department in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. After receiving his PhD in Geography from Rutgers University in 1992, he taught at the University of Colorado before moving to Syracuse. He is the author of *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996); *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Blackwell, 2000); and *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (Guilford, 2003) as well as numerous articles on the geography of homelessness, labor, urban public space, and contemporary theories of culture. His latest book, with Lynn Staeheli, called *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public*, has just been published by Routledge. He is currently working on a new NSF-funded project called: *Bracero: Remaking the California Landscape, 1942–1964*. Mitchell is a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and has held a Fulbright Fellowship in the Institutt for Sociologi og Samfunnsgeografi at the Universitetet i Oslo. He is the founder and director of the People's Geography Project (<http://www.peoplesgeography.org>) and a member of the Syracuse Hunger Project.