

Walking the radical talk

Alexander J. Bridger introduces psychogeographical psychology

The majority of the general public – and, indeed, many psychologists – would probably not consider walking and getting lost to be ‘research’. Yet some readers may be familiar with readings of environments conducted by psychogeographers both past and present: Engels (1845) and his accounts of the poverty encountered by the working classes in cities such as Manchester and London; Chtcheglov’s (1958) reflections on Paris and how working-class districts were effectively dismantled to make way for shopping arcades in the late 1950s; or De Quincey’s (1821/1886) writings about his walks around Paris and London in an opium haze. In more recent years, television programmes such as *The Perfect Home*, presented by architectural theorist Alain de Botton, and *Grand Designs* with Kevin McCloud have encouraged us to think about how built environments make us feel and to consider what ideal living spaces could look like.

Such programmes may get audiences to consider how our living and working environments can be changed, with their emotional effects in mind. Yet such attempts only lay the foundations, stopping at immediate physical changes

rather than considering alternatives to the capitalist order of things. Environmental psychologists such as Uzzell and Rätzel

(2009) have argued that work that creates binaries between individuals and society is not helpful in considering how we create and are created by societies, and I agree. We must engage with the implications of the types of psychological knowledge that we produce and what such knowledge manages to change in the discipline, and also in society.

Such an approach is rooted in the definitions of psychogeography found in the pages of environmental psychology journals in the 1980s, when the term was coined to describe the interface of psychology with geography research and with connecting such work with political practice (Wood, 1987).

This chimes with definitions of environmental psychology more broadly as concerned with the ‘psychology of space’ (Moser & Uzzell, 2003) and the relations between individuals and social and societal processes (Gifford, 2014). For me, such definitions are the start point for an inter- and cross-disciplinary political study of environments that considers the interface between individuals, social processes and society.

Adventuring beyond our own disciplinary environment is key here. There has been much discussion in recent years outside of environmental psychology amongst critical psychologists, cultural theorists and performance artists in terms of defining what psychogeography means, both on social networking sites such as Facebook and in Richardson’s (2015) *Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British*



Situationist International slogan on Paris 1968 poster – Beauty is in the street

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Psychogeography. Guy Debord, one of the leading members of the Situationist International (www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline) came up with the definition of psychogeography as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals’ (Debord, 1958).

At first glance, one may think that this definition fits quite easily with the main premise of environmental psychology in assuming that environments causally affect people’s behaviours and cognitions. However, community psychologists such as Hodgetts et al. (2010, p.287) have argued that environments should not simply be viewed as ‘backdrops to social processes’. Any focus on environments needs to be connected with a political and historically located analysis of such spaces and places.

There may also be question marks over mainstream Euro-American psychological arguments, which can be said to reinforce and reflect neoliberal ideas about individualism and human experience (Corral-Verdugo & Pinheiro, 2009). What we need is an analysis of people’s ‘lived, everyday involvement in the world’ (Ingold, 1993, p.152) and how those experiences are positioned in and through particular discourses. People’s experiences of places are suffused with discourses of ‘capitalism, rationalism, modernization, the Puritan work ethic and spectacle’ (Sadler, 1998, p.96). Indeed think of recent public occupations of space such as Tahrir Square, Wall Street and Zuccotti Park and the British riots in 2011 – many people have challenged the foundations of capitalism, democracy and the consumerisation of modern life (Žižek, 2011).

This, then, leads us to considering the importance of studying the ‘social organization of place’ (Pinder, 1996, p.414), what places mean to people, how we make sense of our everyday environments and what alternatives there could be to consumer capitalist

environments. To address such questions, community psychologists have argued that we should consider how approaches such as walking practices could facilitate such work (e.g. Hodgetts et al., 2010). Indeed, if we consider places as discursive texts, we can then connect such ideas to the work of de Certeau (1974, p.97) who stated that ‘the act of walking... is to the urban system what the speech act is to language’.

The problem here is that much psychological research in psychology is arguably quite ‘sedentary’ (Sheller & Urry, 2000). Moreover, there is scant research that documents people’s experiences of walking (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Taking this ‘turn to place’ in psychology involves drawing on ideas and practice from other disciplines, such as geography (Pinder, 1996); urban theory (Sadler, 1998) and critical psychology (Burnett et al., 2004). With regard to mobile methods research, this would include ‘go-along’ methods, in which the researcher moves alongside informants to collect information (Kusenbach, 2003), ‘bimbling’ (to walk or travel at a leisurely pace: Anderson, 2004), photo-voice methods of elicitation (Hodgetts et al., 2010) and my own psychogeographical approach to walking (e.g. Bridger, 2010, 2011, 2015).

In psychological research it is important to consider how we collect data and what sorts of methods are best suited for research. Community and qualitative psychologists such as Hodgetts et al. (2007) have argued that we should develop visual methods of research and draw on work from other social science disciplines (Lykes et al., 2003; Pink, 2004). In recent years in the humanities and social sciences, there has been much debate about the ‘new mobilities

Meet the author

‘When I was younger I wanted to be a Formula One driver or an astronaut. In my teens I came across an autobiographical book by Carl Jung and that, along with various Open University social psychology books, got me interested in psychology, therapy and social issues.

In my first two years as an undergraduate, I didn’t feel convinced by mainstream psychological explanations about peoples’ attitudes and behaviours. It was only when I came across critical social psychological theories and qualitative research methods that I really became excited and inspired. That led to a PhD where I started out by conducting a political psychological analysis of word, image and place representations of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath. I became interested in the intersections of psychology with geography, cultural studies and radical theory, and how such work could potentially connect with political practice and with considering wider social changes in society.

My research now mainly focuses on “mobile” methods of research such as psychogeographical walking, “go-along interviews” and bimbling.’



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paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Therefore, mobility should be viewed as a key aspect of how everyday life takes place (Binnie et al., 2007). It is through this process of moving through places, that individuals construct lived-in stories of experience of being in particular places (Radley et al., 2010). As Edensor (2008, pp.136–137) says, walking ‘is suffused with a kaleidoscope of intermingling thoughts, experiences and sensations, so that the character of the walk is constantly shifting’. Others (Sotelo, 2010,

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p.61) talk of the lens of 'participation cartography', viewing walking not as a spatial practice but as 'a performance of self in spatio-temporal terms'.

The Situationist International, anti-capitalism and revolution

The situationists were a group of radical artists, activists and intellectuals who were disillusioned and angered by the capitalist gentrification and consumerisation of towns and cities. They aimed to create 'new situationist ambiances' which could potentially lead to 'permanent change' (Khatib, 1958). In my psychological research, I draw on their work to inform a critique of environments and to consider the question of social change in societies.

The situationists used specific strategies to initiate social changes via a critique of urbanism. These included *detournement* and the *dérive*. *Detournement* refers to the sabotage and re-appropriation of signs and symbols of capitalism. This involved subverting and changing the meanings of mass media such as newspapers, films, posters and comics. The second strategy, the *dérive*, was used in relation to the psychogeographical practice of walking. Often people reduce this to a random walk in a town or city, but it should mean much more than that. Debord (1958) wrote that:

Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior 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 their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think:

"the point is to turn 'research' into a kind of ludic, playful game"

Hence the aims of *dérives* are not to just walk from 'A to B' but to make playful sense of what effects the environment has on people and to reflectively interpret how one may be drawn or repelled from certain places. Khatib (1958), a leading situationist, argued that the ultimate aims of *dérives* should be to create 'direct, effective intervention' in order to build 'new situationist ambiances' that would create 'permanent change'.

In this way, the core aims of psychogeographical activities would be to call into question the 'dominant' ways that we see and make sense of environments, and to question the 'natural' linkages of consumerism with environments. Miles (2010, p.8) argues that consumerism is now a 'thoroughly cultural phenomenon that serves to legitimate capitalism on an everyday basis'. It is perhaps no surprise that a *dérive* can easily attract the attention of security guards and police officers, because one is not typically engaging in window-shopping or buying products.

In sum, the underpinning concerns of psychogeography are radical and political,



Consumerism is now a 'thoroughly cultural phenomenon that serves to legitimate capitalism on an everyday basis'

from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

involving a critique of urbanism and an envisioning of what non-capitalist built environments could look like. This question of radical social change is of central importance to critical psychologists, political theorists and activists – for example, Parker (2007), Barbrook (2014) and the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective (www.nskstate.com), all of whom draw on radical left-wing, autonomous, anarchist theory and practice in their work.

Doing psychogeographical 'research' in psychology

At this point, you may be wondering what a psychogeographical approach in psychology could look like. It is a new and emerging area of research: many individuals and groups are working with ideas such as mobile methods research, and grappling with how to use psychogeographical ideas in psychology.

In many previous *dérives* that I have conducted, I have often drawn on key papers such as Khatib's (1958) account of wandering around the Les Halles district in Paris. Some of the questions raised in his work can be usefully applied to psychogeographical psychological research, which includes asking such questions as whether you would usually visit such places, how you feel in particular environments, and what needs to be changed. I have conducted numerous psychogeographical projects, including at Ground Zero in New York, the Arndale Centre in Manchester, and Huddersfield (Bridger, 2014).

In this work, I like to take quite an unstructured approach. Understanding one's affective responses to environments requires techniques akin to the psychoanalytic approach of free association. One can use strategies to create spontaneous and unplanned movement by tactics such as map swap (using a map of a different city to orientate oneself) and dice walk (code the numbers on a dice as, for example,

Les Halles. Situationist International. Available at tinyurl.com/o65m466

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1 = walk straight on, 2 = turn right, etc.). The desired outcome is that one would get lost, and hopefully experience environments in new ways. One dice walk led me to parts of Huddersfield that I would not ordinarily go to, areas of the town that I was less familiar with and that I perceived to be 'less safe'. After that particular walk I wrote a paper where I drew on a psychogeographical approach to read towns and cities as gendered spaces (Bridger, 2013).

Those of you more accustomed to empirical methods of psychological study may be horrified by such methods. They certainly don't fit with the standard representation of what psychological research usually looks like. However, the point is to turn 'research' into a kind of ludic, playful game. Indeed, Debord explains how the playful practice of the Game of War board game can provide an important critique of social and personal relations in capitalist times:

I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in presenting the basics of its movements as a board game: the forces of contention and the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played The Game of War and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have utilized lessons from it... On the question of whether I have made good use of such lessons, I will leave to others to decide. (Debord, 1989)

More recently, Barbrook and the Class Wargames collective have re-engaged with Debord's Game of War and other wargames in order to explore how gaming can be used as a metaphor to explore social relations in contemporary capitalism; to re-enact past political struggles and also to consider alternatives to the capitalist order of things. I think such an approach encourages us as psychologists to consider strategy

and tactics in our work, and how this can connect with political practice.

Psychogeography also encourages us to consider a more playful approach to how research should and could be documented in psychology journals. It is worth reassuring readers that it is possible to go 'off-piste': in my research, I like to produce reports of walks that combine a range of first-person reflection, photographs of key contexts, situations and people (ethics permitting), creating artistic maps, as well as reference to previous theory and studies. I've also found previous psychogeographical work by the Situationist International, other psychogeography groups such as Manchester Area Psychogeographic, and critical psychology writings by groups such as Burnett et al. (2004), to be hugely inspiring in terms of formulating my approach to documenting psychogeographical walks.

Truly radical?

I hope that I have provided some first steps on a journey into how the work of the situationists can be of relevance



My psychogeographical map of Huddersfield

within environmental, social and critical psychology. Such work can enable us as psychologists to think differently about the type of work that we do and how our work connects with political practice and addresses the question of social change. The core questions and aims of a psychogeographical approach in psychology could include: how environments make us feel, what we need to do in order to change environments, what environments of the future could look like and finally, what psychogeographical research can change. There cannot be clear and fixed answers to these aims and questions: the central argument here is that revolutionary social change is not something that can really be designed and planned out. Instead, it is something that is realised by individuals and groups.

Some readers may question whether this sort of research is actually radical. Sadie Plant has previously pointed out that 'radical academics produce the appearance of revolutionary critique while similarly reproducing the specialisations of knowledge and the lucrative elitism of their roles' (1992, p.76). That's why I think it is important to do psychogeographical work that cuts across boundaries of academia, art and activism. We engage with local community groups, organise festivals, walks and various other psychogeographical events and talks. Indeed, within West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester there are a variety of different psychogeographical groups, such as the Leeds Psychogeography Group, the Loiterers Resistance Movement and the Huddersfield Psychogeography Network, not to mention other individuals past and present that have drawn on psychogeographical techniques and practices.

As Parker (2007) has pointed out, in order to change society it is important to work in and against social systems, institutions and structures (a theme also taken up in a recent edition of the *International Review of Critical Psychology on Marxism and Psychology*). The sorts of questions and issues that the situationists were grappling with in the late 1950s and 1960s are still of relevance in psychology and society. Political analyses of environments, and possible alternatives to the capitalist order of things, remain of great importance, and psychology must continue to explore these surroundings.

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