



Civic Geographies: Pictures and Other Things at an Exhibition

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Abstract

This paper introduces an *Interventions* theme section of ACME exploring the possibilities raised by the notion of ‘civic geographies’, inquiring what it might mean to rework an older, sometimes conservative and even reactionary version of ‘civics’ into alternative ways of intervening in the world, ‘counter-civics’ perhaps, with a potentially critical and transformative edge. Taking seriously the connective or associational dimensions of civics, coupled to a sensibility of engaging with the



places, buildings and wider infrastructures of civic life, this collection does not seek to settle the matter of what civic geographies might entail, neither in the world nor as lens for critical-geographical theory-and-praxis. Nonetheless, it seeks to ask fresh questions through the medium of academic papers that initially grew from what might itself be deemed a practical civic intervention, namely contributions to an exhibition held in 2012 at an international Geography conference. The introductory paper that now follows will critically review the notion of civic geographies, underlining its unsettled and maybe unsettling dimensions, as well as elaborating the rationale for an exhibition that now becomes this theme section in *ACME*.

Introduction

This theme section of *ACME* devoted to *Interventions* pieces grows out of an exhibition and discussion, organised by the editors of this section, held at the 2012 Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG). In a smallish space within the academic premises of the University of Edinburgh – essentially an entrance area to two seminar rooms – we had the pleasure of hosting eight exhibits of varying sizes and substances². Some included pictures, notably Owain Jones’ vanishing ‘stick people’³; some were poster-based, designed to be informative but also educational provocations, notably Anna Davies’ and Ruth Doyle’s visual invitation to contemplate alternative water washing futures; others were more object-based, notably Kye Askins’ and Kelvin Mason’s Peace Camp (clothes-rail) Thought Tree; while others again were complex assemblages of objects, people, texts and images, notably Carlus Hudson et al.’s ‘Occupy RGS(IBG)’ tent. Most dramatically perhaps, the Occupy tent was counter-pointed by another tent, a traditional bough tent used by Scottish Travellers, accompanying displays of tin-working and exemplars of traditional story-telling, collectively the exhibit by Isobel MacPhail and her colleagues. For the single day of the Conference when the exhibition ran, this space was a throng of people and a hum of conversation, a tiny instance of *civic* encounter (even where the ‘civic’ in question was primarily a body of academics in an essentially private space; see Figures 1 to 3).

We emphasize the *civic* because the exhibition was expressly designed as an engagement with the notion of *civic geographies*, even to be itself an attempt at making civic geographies. It was hence an occasion to contemplate whether a revisiting and reworking of ideas about the civic could have merit, maybe as a new

² Lawrence Berg spoke at a discussion session associated with the event, reporting on the civics of negotiating formal Community Research Agreements between indigenous peoples and academic research organisations (see Evans et al. 2013). Luke Dickens and David MacDonald were unable to make the event on the day, despite having prepared an exhibit, but they do contribute a paper below.

³ More detail on Owain’s ‘stick people’ project can be found in Jones (2014), which was already under consideration for publication when this theme section was proposed.

departure to complement extant moves to take seriously (variously) public, participatory, activist and autonomous geographies, all heralding different prompts for what an engaged, grounded geographical sensibility can bring to both thinking about and acting in worlds beyond the academy (see Askins and Mason below). Arguably, though, the civic contains problematic residues of something more ‘establishment’, conservative (with a small-’c’), reactionary or even staid than lie within these other geographies. Nonetheless, in that staidness – in hailing certain constituencies outwith the academy whose interests and contributions to shaping local (and sometimes wider) worlds have yet to figure much on our radar; in possibly suggesting other compartments in the connecting together of worldly embroilments, large and small, heavily- or lightly-politicised – we are wondering about strange new alchemies conjured up by a return to the civic. In no sense are we wishing to ‘settle’ debate about civic geographies, and indeed this theme section precisely underlines their unsettled and maybe unsettling dimensions, with contributions here ‘exhibiting’ rather different ways in which civic geographies might be constituted.

Civic geographies?

The notion of ‘civic’ has varied meanings⁴: as ‘civics’, it can mean the comparative study of government, but more typically perhaps it starts to refer to something like “*connection one feels with a larger community*” or “*relating to the person as a member of society or to civil affairs*”; or even, acquiring some spatial specificity with reference to urban locations, “*relating to, or derived, from a city or citizen*”. The references to ‘civil affairs’ and ‘citizenship’ wheel in further terms with varied genealogies and disputed meanings, replete with theoretical and ethical charge, and we immediately acknowledge linkages to other debates within academic geography, political science and elsewhere about citizenship, civil society and public space (e.g. Painter and Philo 1995; Mitchell and Staeheli 2008; Staeheli 2010). A specifically civic thread nonetheless emerges, suggesting that to consider the civic is to explore what makes – enables, empowers – people to feel connected to or associated⁵ with something ‘larger’ than themselves, an assembly of others who might be regarded as a ‘community’ or a ‘society’, likely with some sense of *placed-ness* involved. To engage with the civic, to be civic-minded, is hence to engage with *places*⁶ – particularly city places (neighbourhoods, squares,

⁴ Here, we draw upon a range of dictionary definitions found in hard copy and on-line; there are many other definitions again.

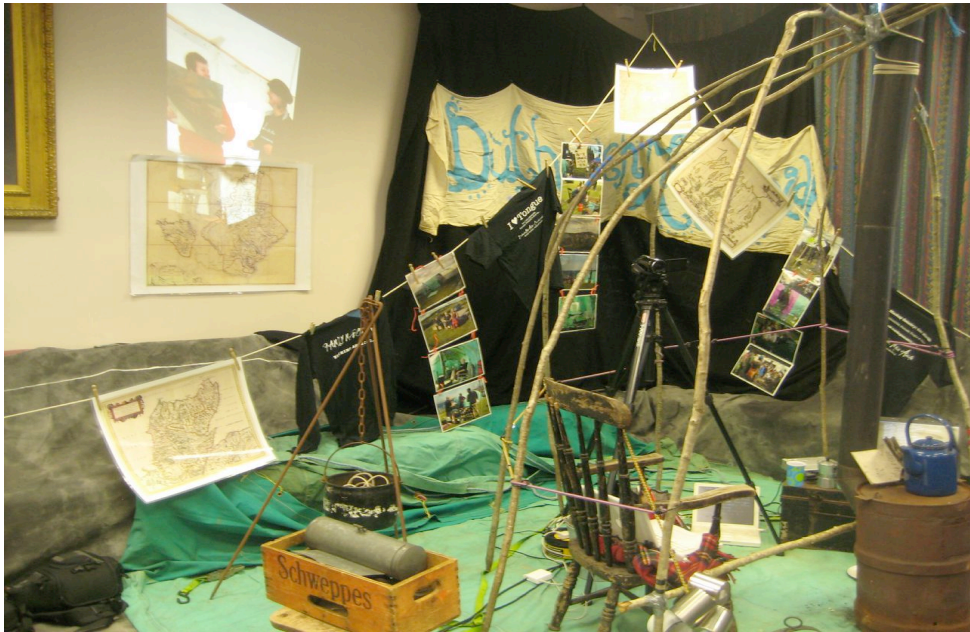
⁵ We also draw inspiration from recent attempts to reclaim ‘the arts of *association*’, and thereby to inject new (generous) life into social capital theorising (see below), as found in Allen’s 2013 lecture to the British Library/British Sociological Association (Allen, 2013; also Crane, 2012).

⁶ Intriguingly, the organisation *Civic Voice*, “the national charity for the civic movement in England”, explicitly positions itself as concerned with *places*: “We make places more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. We promote civic pride”; and a maxim here is “Keeping places distinctive”. This organisation is an umbrella for numerous local ‘civic societies’, ‘action groups’ and ‘Friends of’ bodies, and hence serves to network a whole array of mini-place-defence activities. See <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk> and below.

high streets) alongside buildings (grand or humble) and infrastructures (notably water supplies, sewerage systems and similar amenities) – but always in the process of expressing, or striving to foster, some quality of concern, belonging or at least identification prompted by these geographical entities and their dwellers-users.

Figures 1-3: Pictures (and other things) at the *Civic Geographies* exhibition (RGS-IBG Annual Conference, July 2012) (source: Joy Haywood)





The places need not be urban, and there seems warrant for contemplating not just ‘urban civics’ but also ‘rural civics’ (see MacPhail below) or civics played out across different spatial scales (local, regional, national or even global). It is to imagine a diversity of investments made by all sorts of peoples in places that matter to them, from the immediacy of a town square, village green, railway line or power plant to the immensity of the planetary environment and its pathways of

mass and energy. These are investments where the crucial thread is indeed that of *connectedness*: of feeling associated with others, human and possibly non-human, in such a manner that sentiments of concern, pride and even enthusiasm arise. Such are clearly the sentiments stirring in the exhibit/paper about The Twentieth Century Society provided by Ruth Craggs, Hilary Geoghegan and Hannah Neate; they recur in the Luke Dickens and Richard MacDonald paper, lovingly recreating what has been deposited in the ‘civic archive’ of the Salford Lad’s Club; and again in MacPhail’s exploration of a Mackay Country civics associated with its travellers, tin-workers and story-tellers. Maybe also coded into these civics is a hint of impulsion, almost an obligation to be civic, to make and to defend connections in such a way that transcends narrow self-interest. Although this is to risk a utopianism about civics, then, we feel that the outcomes of civic-mindedness are likely to be care-full, generous and accepting of collective responsibility: they might be construed as earnest, perhaps even a touch eccentric, but rarely, we would propose, are they willfully chauvinistic, hurtful or vengeful (also Askins and Mason below).

As such, the history of civics can become an account of diverse moments when given peoples and places have more-or-less consciously cultivated ‘civic pride’ as an attachment which simultaneously melds itself around that people and a place. It is in this guise that we might reference studies of civic history, documenting attachments to ‘civic architecture’ (maybe grand public buildings) or ‘civic institutions’ (the likes of museums, galleries and other infrastructures provided by local municipal authorities and/or paternal philanthropists, often themselves set in grand city premises). There could be here a *first cut* through civic geographies, one hailing the landscapes that appear to embody civics, especially but not exclusively urban civics, but which might also consider the geographical knowledges/practices integral to the raising/running/mission of the places, buildings and infrastructures involved. Arguably, this is the sense of civics tackled by certain inquiries into the historical-cultural geographies of/in civic life (e.g. Finnegan 2009; Morin 2011; also Craggs et al. below).

Without wishing to enter into simple polarities, there is nonetheless warrant for contemplating other, supplementary and more oppositional civics. Perhaps there is indeed something a touch ‘establishment’ about our usual impressions of civics: a sense of them being mobilised by ‘powerful’ elites as a dimension of engineering social compliance and moral rectitude; or a sense of them being rather ‘conservative’, as when informing the defence of ‘nice’ places against the forces of change. Certainly, the efforts of national and local civic societies risk acquiring a ‘not-in-my-backyard’ (NIMBY) flavour of local elites defending their favoured places from developers, unwanted land-uses and unloved potential new

inhabitants⁷; or a sense of them as endemically ‘polite’, shaped by a liberal-communitarian tradition where the emphasis is aesthetic-edifying rather than more deeply transformative. As Mauro Cannone (2009) has implied, there is a risk of over-stressing such ‘virtuous civic spaces’ that “exclude all the seemingly ‘uncivic’ attitudes and relations of protest, conflict or resistance in all its heterogenous forms” (Naughton 2013, 11)⁸.

Yet such defences of the local can also become, and be regarded as, radical, progressive, anti-state, anti-capital and effecting instances of resistance in a social movement sense (e.g. Featherstone 2005; also Tomaney 2013). Thus, we would argue that a cautious *counter*-critique can be mounted in defence of civics, reading in them challenging potentials for questioning establishment, conservatism and politeness, and it is revealing to learn what *Civic Voice* (see footnote 6) says in this respect about the history of what is here termed the ‘civic movement’:

Civic societies can be provocative, stubborn, forceful, inspiring and outspoken on behalf of the places they care about. They are fiercely independent and grassroots organisations, often providing the grit in the oyster which stimulates people to think, reconsider and widen their horizons. They will celebrate and encourage positive action and be forthright in resisting damaging change. They are also a store of knowledge and expertise about local places which is an essential starting point in recognising and strengthening their identity.

There is a glimpse here of being, if not squarely in-your-face oppositional, but rather ‘grittily’ subversive, maybe appealing to a British tradition of radical-local dissent, but also demanding recalibrations of wider ‘horizons’. Seen in this vein, moreover, it might even be appropriate to claim that the likes of the contemporary *occupations* – occupying public spaces, berating the established orders of social life – comprise a version of civics, always meaningfully placed but also more widely networked, insistently challenging placeless-/careless-ness wherever it is manifested (see Hudson and Cook below; also Burton et al. 2013). There could hence be a *second cut* through civic geographies, one taking seriously the places integral to these gritty civics, but which also explores the geographical knowledges/practices mobilised in the fashioning of what might then be deemed a *counter-civics*. These are precisely the civics addressed in the contributions below from Askins and Mason, and Hudson and Cook; and might also be identified in Davies’ and Doyle’s paper, wherein the travelling exhibition that they discuss is *itself* a counter-civic intervention ‘occupying’ conventional civic spaces but there

⁷ Examining the *Civic Voice* website is instructive in this respect, for it seems to embrace both possibilities. The Craggs et al. paper below speaks directly to such issues in the context of debating ‘architectural enthusiasm’.

⁸ Naughton is also critiquing the limitations of ‘civicness’ as a concept central to Robert Putnam’s social capital theorising (Naughton 2013, Section 2; also Allen 2013).

questioning established orders of social life (here in terms of ‘normal’ [Western] practices of water consumption for washing). Further, Larch Maxey et al. provoke thinking about how civic engagements may be constantly working/brokering *between* the first and second cuts as we outline here. The papers below have been ordered to reflect a shift from studies addressing first cut civic geographies through to ones more attuned to second cut civic geographies, but then deliberately finishing with Maxey et al.’s piece as a window on how the two ‘cuts’ may indeed run together.

The exhibition in Edinburgh

It was apt to investigate notions of the civic in Edinburgh, given the city’s close association with Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), the – as Dave Matless (1992, 464) calls him – “Scottish biologist–sociologist–geographer–dramatist–educationalist”. Geddes, whose vision of the region was physically embodied in the Outlook Tower, established in 1892 on Castle Hill, Edinburgh, talked at some length about civics. Indeed, he cast them as “to do, not with U-topia, but with Eutopia [“Eu”-topia]; not with imagining an impossible no-place where all is well, but with making the most and best of each and every place” (Geddes 1904, 3; in Matless 1992, 466). A powerful, ringing construct, then, Geddes positioned civics as place-building and -enhancing, immediately suggesting positivity about what places can be and become. It was also a refusal to countenance redundant spaces (Anderson et al. 1983), useless, left-behind places: in a more contemporary vocabulary, a refusal to allow that retreat of economic, political and social concern from certain places (and their peoples) now viewed as somehow ‘surplus’ to requirements (McIntyre and Nast 2011; Tyner 2013). Such a formulation echoes the sensibility snaking through our previous remarks, and we would argue that the exhibits at our event tellingly embodied both this positivity and this refusal.

Nonetheless, we have to admit that never has a session perhaps mutated so much from its original conception. Charlie Withers proposed to Chris Philo, the Chair for the RGS-IBG Conference in Edinburgh, a vision of drawing inputs from various municipal/civic institutions based in the city – libraries, galleries, other public buildings and services – to consider the kinds of geographical knowledges that such civic bodies create, cultivate, disseminate and promote. Arguably, this was a vision inspired by the first cut at civic geographies described above: an attractive vision linking back to the scrupulous, and not uncritical, historical-geographical scholarship of Withers himself on the transforming spaces of ‘civic science’ (in part as a chronicler-interpreter of Edinburgh’s [and Scotland’s] changing civic-public sphere of letters and chambers: e.g. Withers 1995, 1999). Once we began to run with the idea of civic geographies, however, it quickly bumped up against a rather more overtly *critical* edge on ‘establishment’ civics in the guise debated earlier. Therefore, and in part this reflected Chris’ wish to get

Kye and Ian involved⁹, the take on civic geographies to be pursued necessarily arced away from the municipal/civic institutions¹⁰ towards a rather different focus on what could be construed, following the statement above, as counter-civics - or, better, a politico-ethically progressive civics demonstrably in line with Geddes' insistence on making places, *all* places, matter and thrive. The materials that so wonderfully ended up being assembled in our exhibition did – in imaginative and challenging ways – hinge around alt-, counter or subversive civics, at the same time as folding back into that distinctive British tradition (with global reach) of radical-local civic involvement and even dissent (again as noted earlier). They were duly largely lodged within the second cut at civic geographies described above, but still with echoes of the first, perhaps most obviously in the contribution by Craggs et al.

For us, moreover, our exhibition vibrated meaningfully with other contributions at the same RGS-IBG Conference addressing the radical potentials of local peoples and communities residing in their access to, use of and negotiations over 'commons' of all kinds. Here we are thinking particularly of Kathy Gibson's *Antipode* lecture on 'Pedagogies for securing common economies' (Gibson 2012), where the simple but evocative notion of 'inventory-ing' – literally listing all of the 'things' comprising the locally placed (and maybe more distanced) connections that matter to the most marginal of peoples and communities – might plausibly be cast as a radical-critical update of Geddes' 'civic surveys'. We were also reminded of a point that Matthew Hannah (2012; 2014) made in another session, arguing that contemporary states may actually engage in a politics not of knowledge¹¹ but of ignorance: of willfully *ignoring* many peoples and places, denying knowledge of them because it suits diverse biopolitical agendas to do so. Ironically, then, for such peoples and places, documenting or investigating their own lives (their own civic geographies) may indeed be a crucial way of countering a politics of ignorance, forgetting and abandonment. Most of the exhibits spoke (and the papers below speak) precisely to a form of civics that embarks upon a politics of retrieval, deliberately creating 'civic archives' or rescuing 'civic treasures' of multiple kinds, human and non-human, as well as an entangled politics of defence and protection or transition and renewal – thereby fostering knowledge in the face of ignorance,

⁹ Chris well remembers his first phone call with Ian, when the latter started to discuss Occupy as a possible form of civics: suffice to say that Chris' anticipation of what the exhibition might entail could then never be the same again. What might be underlined, however, is that seeds of the prior vision *did* continue to weave their way into the exhibition: the whole concept was undoubtedly stronger for having come from this particular origin-point.

¹⁰ Yet being careful not simply to label such institutions in any simple-minded vein as 'the enemy'.

¹¹ Hannah deliberately played off the common assumption that what modern nation-states (and other governmental forces of capital and civil society) seek is ever more detailed *knowledge* about the peoples and places in their territorial jurisdiction (and sometimes beyond it too). On many occasions, Hannah speculated, the reverse is true: the aim is *ignorance*, not wanting to know about 'stuff' because it potentially imposes an obligation to respond constructively, to assist in overcoming disadvantage or righting wrongs.

offering intuitions of other/better worlds in the face of neglect/dismissal. Such, then, is the hope and spirit of exhibiting these new civic geographies.

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