



Us and Us: Agonism, Non-Violence and the Relational Spaces of Civic Activism

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Introduction

This paper is a brief reflection on our involvement with the Civic Geographies exhibition and session at the 2012 RGS-IBG conference, and what this has to say to conceiving ‘civic geographies’. Our contribution to the exhibition comprised a ‘PEACE CAMP THOUGHT TREE’, specifically linked to an ‘academic seminar blockade’ (ASB) we were convening the following day at Faslane Peace Camp (see http://www.faslane365.org/faslane_peace_camp), in northwest Scotland. The following sign was attached to the tree²:

*As part of 30 days of action at Faslane nuclear base, Scotland,
commemorating 30 years of resistance against nuclear weapons at the*



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² While we envisaged taking some tree-like structure, logistics and time-constraints resulted in the ‘tree’ actually being two free-standing clothes rails connected with string from which people could tie their messages as ‘leaves’ – an exercise in imaginative geographies!

Peace Camp, an academic seminar blockade is being convened on Fri. 6th July.

In relation to this year's RGS-IBG conference theme 'Security of geography/geography of security', this seminar blockade is an intervention to transform the everyday practice of the academy into a creative act of resistance and solidarity with the Peace Camp - inviting critical reflection on the complex issues surrounding (and not restricted to) nuclear weaponry, governance, securitisation and discourses of 'terror', as well as issues of environmental and social justice in an era of 'austerity', by holding a peaceful academic seminar in front of the naval base gates. The seminar is open to all, and so far there are a range of academics, practitioners, campaigners and local residents coming along.

The idea of this Thought Tree is to productively bring academic work/reflection/ questions from conference space, to be part of positively re-making public space to reflect on the world, and reclaim the intellectual commons of democratic debate and accountability. Thus, you are warmly invited to leave notes/thoughts/questions on a range of related topics, which we will take to the Peace Camp and the seminar to bring into discussion.

Our intention was to offer space and opportunity for conference attendees to connect to Peace Camp campaigners and those attending the ASB – to enable non-bodily presences and open up relations across space and between people around the issues mentioned above. Details regarding the organisation and unfolding events during the seminar blockade at Faslane are discussed elsewhere (Mason and Askins 2012).

Our main argument here relates to discussion at the ASB regarding how we envisage and enact 'peaceful geographies' and protests: that civic activisms must engage with difference, thus such activism is always an ongoing negotiation of tensions which require continued work; and that civic geographies should be intertwined with non-violent geographies to enable equitable debate and action. In this intervention, we suggest that central to this argument is the need to conceptualise peace as non-violent consensus building, through an agonistic democracy, as critical to inclusive, fluid and sustainable civics/civicness³.

³ We are using civics/civicness here to signal towards both 'civics' as connection ones feels with a larger community and 'civicness' as a capacity or potential to develop such connection or identity, neither in any narrow, essentialist or fixed way but as always emergent and plural – and recognising the interconnections between having a connection and becoming new connections ...

Civic geographies

The call for participation in the Civic Geographies exhibition highlighted ‘civics’ as referring to “*connection ones feels with a larger community*” or “*relating to the person as a member of society or to civil affairs*”; that to understand the civic involves exploring what produces/enables/empowers “*people to feel connected to something*”; and that civics are always spatial/spatialised, in that belonging to or identifying with any group involves certain geographical imaginings – albeit complex, contested and interconnected across scales and places.

Our interest was linked to academic concerns regarding how we act in the world. There is an ever-growing literature on the relevance of the discipline and, more recently, public, participatory and activist geographies (eg. Cahill 2007; Fuller 2008; Pickerill 2008). Specifically, academic or scholar activism is often argued as inherently germane to ‘justice’ issues, foregrounding a politics of engagement with and for communities (Mrs. C. Kinpainsby-Hill 2010). The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, 262) outline such a politics as intertwined with the notion of collectivism, as “*the acceptance of human interdependence and the belief that society will be bettered through the achievement of collective goals ... and the importance of the commons*”. This collectivism requires horizontality in organisation, emphasising co-operation, consensual decision-making, an awareness and rendering visible of power relations, and solidarity. We would argue that these ideas/politics pertain to civic-making more broadly: understanding, (re)constructing and enacting civics/civicness can be aligned to a broader geography of responsibility (Massey 2004) and a feminist ethics of reciprocal care (Lawson 2007).

For us, then, thinking about civic geographies is linked to how we understand our role as academics, in positively re-making public space to reflect on the world by acting in it, by reclaiming a commons of democratic debate and accountability (and there are parallels here with Hudson and Cook, this issue, regarding bringing insurgent civic geographies into academic space). Hence our interest in ASBs (more detail in Vintagen et al. 2012; Mason 2013). Crucially, what is central to conceptualising and making an ASB is opening spaces up to discussion, and negotiating our civics/civicness. Thus we understand civics/civicness as political and as relational (in terms of accountability and ethics) across time and space. It is about our relations with others – other bodies both human and non-human – elsewhere and in the past, present and future. Such negotiations are always plural, relational and contested, and involve enacting democracy in fuller, more open-ended ways. That is, our understanding of civic geographies has to critically engage with difference alongside connection/commonality, and thus we move on here to discuss the notion of agonism.

Agonism and consensus (building)

Agonism, or ‘agonistic pluralism’, can be conceived as rejecting all attempts to negate what it considers the inherently conflictual nature of society, acknowledging instead the ineradicability of adversarial belief systems and the impossibility of reaching agreement across society/ies. As Chantal Mouffe (2000, 93) explains, in the dominant forms of liberal democracy practiced in the west, “*what is misguided is the search for a final rational resolution*”. This quest for resolution is mistaken because it denies the fundamental tension between the logic of liberalism and the logic of democracy, refusing the possibility of a value-pluralistic society – the ‘democratic paradox’. Agonism does not signal an end to liberal democracy, rather it calls for a process of *constant negotiation*, and a project open to opposition and non-resolution (Sen 2010). Mouffe (ibid.) stresses that agonism should not be equated with the acceptance of a ‘total pluralism’ as certain limits remain necessary for legitimate confrontation in the public sphere: the key to agonistic pluralism is that it is *the political nature* of such rules or limits which must be recognised, rather than these limits being presented as requirements of morality, or rationality, or as an inherent quality of some fixed/normative culture.

Such an agonistic approach to civic/civiness resonates with our experience at the ASB, which was not one of agreement, either between seminar participants and other present groups (police, local residents, naval staff, peace campers), or among the seminar participants as ‘a group’ themselves. Instead, it involved *negotiating towards* consensus, and we emphasize here *consensus building* as distinct from bland conceptions of consensus as resolution, that, e.g., Swyngedouw (2010) signals as the death of politics. We were conscious of those Others – other bodies, human and non-human – to which our discussions referred, to whom we were/are relationally connected across time and place, including those who had written messages on the Peace Camp Thought Tree and who were physically absent at the ASB. That is, our understanding of the civic, exploring what produces/enables people to feel connected to something, had to consider heterogeneity, and the simultaneous differences that are woven through any broader connection. One ASB participant commented afterwards:

I was struck by the difference in feeling between giving my paper in a university room in Edinburgh the day before, and giving it in such proximity to those whose livelihoods depend on working to continually reproduce Trident and all of its supporting assemblages/infrastructure/power dynamics.

Useful here is work on spaces of protest as ‘convergence spaces’, to understand the political meeting of different resistant groups, wherein “*movements need to develop a politics of solidarity capable of reaching across space without abandoning their militant particularist base(s)*” (Routledge 2003, 337). This politics of solidarity is not about abandoning difference, but about building consensus across relational particularisms, holding onto the local and context-

specific, as a critical part of producing wider solidarity across movements for social and spatial justice (see also Featherstone 2005; PyGyRG 2012). Rather than oppositional politics, then, which remain caught in a dualistic loggerhead and mired in reductionism, convergence and consensus foreground the simultaneity of connection and difference, and are mutable across place and time.

These ideas were threaded through the discussion and direct action of the ASB, and connected to concerns with keeping power relations visible, and the idea that civic spaces are conflictual. All the while, the key questions that the ASB set out to address were: what do we mean by peace, how is peace enacted, and what might 'geographies of peace' pertain to? Thus we now turn to briefly consider the growing literature on peace, and what it has to say to an agonistic approach to civics/civiness.

Peace and/as non-violence

While several themes emerged through debate at the Faslane ASB, there was underlying deliberation among participants regarding the ontologies that give rise to nuclear weapons as an extreme expression of violence, which in turn perpetuate an everyday culture of violence. Simon Dalby (2011) has critiqued the neoliberal model of peace at the global scale, deconstructing the ways in which 'peace' is sought/made through violent means: the west's power to dictate a specific version of peace tied to a hegemonic economic system of capitalism, with dominant discourses and material inequalities sustained through conceptualising an 'axis of evil'.

Such issues are connected to feminist thought and praxis: of conceiving violence as inequality, because violence enacts power over, and a feminist framing of justice is about equality for all, not some. As Stephanie Van Hook (2012, n.p.) writes, regarding the Occupy movement, waging nonviolence is crucial because "*we are not just protesting what we don't want; we are building a new culture from the grassroots up, from our experiences of gender, poverty and violence*". This echoes Audrey Lorde's (1984) contention that we cannot dismantle the Master's House with the Master's Tools (sic), and debate at the ASB (as at many activist convergences) grappled with the difficulties of what direct action should and should not involve.

We need to think carefully (care-fully), then, about what model of peace we mean regarding 'geographies of peace'. Reflecting on the ASB, we follow George Lakey (in Rai 2012), who argues that "*The nonviolent revolutionary tradition is one in which the emphasis is not on harmony, it's on conflict*". This conceptualisation draws on Martin Luther King's insistence that peace is about conflict because peace is a concept that centres on justice – and justice has to be struggled for, justice involves conflict. It also aligns with notions of agonistic pluralism, in that struggles for justice also involve adversarial belief systems and the potential/probable impossibility of reaching agreement. Key for both King and Lakey is the non-violence: once violence occurs, the potential of civics/civiness is

shut down, in a post-democratic sense (c.f. Arendt, 1969), since ‘power over’ is being employed, and the struggle is returned to inequitable oppositional relations/politics. Importantly, foregrounding peace as *non-violent process*, rather than peace as end product, keeps open a more ethical, reciprocal and, we think, sustainable notion of civics/civicness, in line with feminist epistemologies mentioned above.

That is, peace can be conceptualised as involving democratic, debated conflict that requires a politics of equity: in which there is movement towards consensus, but crucially enacted through non-violent relations. We must recognise, however, that civic conflict is sometimes violent, and there are complex arguments made regarding violence towards whom and what: e.g. the material property of capitalism is often considered ‘fair game’ for anti-capitalist protest; and Danielle Allen (2009) highlights the distrust evident in imperfect democracies, caught up in (re)producing exclusionary forms of association, which arguably justifies less-than-peaceful struggles for equality. Ostensibly, non-violence may be that political limit which remains necessary for legitimate confrontation in the public sphere (*vis-à-vis* agonistic pluralism) – yet governments themselves enact multiple violences through structures and systems of governance. Getting beyond this impasse is difficult, but central to our understanding of a progressive civic geography.

To this end we are inspired by places such as the Peace Camp. To function as the welcoming, inspiring and internally safe space that it has been for 30 years, the Peace Camp embraces non-violence, hope and trust. It does not preclude difference and disagreement, but works towards the potential to (re)make spaces of negotiation differently. Such spaces enable civics/civicness as emergent, plural and relational, and we end with some reflections on how political action can be an intrinsic part of making such civic geographies.

Us and us

Quite profoundly, as we debated the philosophical reorientation to non-violence-as-process, specifically in considering ‘spatialities of and for peace’, the nature of the ASB was affected. The relational distinction between seminar participants and police, who were warily encircling the participants and with whom there had been a more oppositional relationship, began to blur and shift: no longer were we captive and surrounded, rather the police were fully welcomed into the seminar circle. We did not all suddenly agree on anti-nuclear issues, but there was recognition across seminar participants and police of humanitarian and environmental concerns, and of being part of a civic/ness together.

The ‘us and us’ of this article’s title, then, is intended to highlight this shift, wherein both difference and the potential for commonality were simultaneous. Not an ‘us and them’, and not only ‘us’; not oppositional, but not a flattened out universalism either ... Recognising that civics may never be any singular, homogenised grouping but an ‘us and another’, filled with tension *and* the potential for consensus building ... Invoking a broader democracy open to disagreement,

and requiring a careful unpicking of entanglements of power (Sharp et al. 2000), making visible those hierarchies and exclusions within dominant models of democracy which instead work to subsume and dominate ... And drawing on feminist work that:

look(s) to global scales of analysis without abandoning their attention to the importance of the everyday experience of peoples in different locations in the worlds economy [...] theorizations that see the body, nation and global as indicative of the same processes rather than as different scales. (Sharp 2007, 381-2)

As geographers, we can/should look to our own praxis in and beyond the academy, and how we act in our multiple worlds, across places and in relation to multiple others. We have no space here for detail, but would mention paying attention to the emotional and embodied aspects involved in enacting civics/civicness; the affective dimensions of political world-making (see www.protestcamps.org); critical pedagogies that develop wider disciplinary understandings of, and work towards building, civics/ness (Megeran 2011); and learning and teaching and research that disperse power more equitably and horizontally, viewing academia as a continuum, and acknowledging that we are all continually negotiating our ways and our places in societies.

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