

# Critical Geography in the Age of the Social Justice Grift

James Esson

Queen Mary University of London  
j.esson@qmul.ac.uk

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## Abstract

This commentary offers a personal reflection on what Critical Geography is, what it can be, and what it must be. Rather than defining the field in prescriptive terms, I reflect on how Critical Geography functions as a praxis and orientation, one that can be dangerous and must have consequences. I explore the risks and responsibilities of critical work in an era of performative allyship and institutional co-optation. The piece ends by calling for continued inward critique, arguing that Critical Geography must challenge the discipline itself if it is to avoid reproducing the very structures of power and exclusion it seeks to contest.

## Keywords

critical geography, social justice grift, geographical praxis, disciplinary power

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## Introduction

When I applied for my current role, the post was advertised as requiring expertise in 'Critical Geographies'. During the interview, one of the questions was along the lines of: "What does Critical Geography mean to you?" I will admit, I hesitated before replying. Not because I had nothing to say, but because I was not keen to rehash the standard narrative on this topic. Do not get me wrong, Critical Geography's roots in Marxist traditions, and its association with anarchist, feminist, post-structural and postcolonial approaches is important (Blunt and Wills, 2000; Nayak and Jeffrey, 2025). This history matters. But the interviewer specifically asked what Critical Geography *meant to me*. That felt like a different kind of invitation. One that required something more personal, more situated. With the benefit of hindsight, I would say my hesitancy also chimed with sentiments expressed by Bauder, who



said 'I would rarely call myself a Critical Geographer anymore because it's kind of ubiquitous and part of everything I do, there is rarely any need to distinguish myself in that way anymore' (Bauder et al, 2025: 378).

I am going to approach this paper, and the editorial prompt to reflect on what Critical Geography is, can, and must be; in the same spirit that I responded to the interview question. Not by trying to define it in prescriptive terms, but by instead sharing a slightly rambling and personal reflection on what it has come to mean for my scholarship and how I try to navigate academic life. I will try to explain why I view Critical Geography as a praxis and orientation that can be dangerous and must have consequences. I have intentionally avoided naming any individuals or institutions, so please do not assume I am talking about any one individual or institution. But if the shoe fits...

### **What is Critical Geography? A praxis, an orientation**

In a presentation at the Geographical Association conference in 2023, I explained that one of the key roles I see for myself as an educator is to "enable people to use geography deliberately, for the betterment of themselves and the world." Some readers might view that as romantic or idealistic. I am okay with that interpretation, because a romantic perspective seems fitting for a discipline that has the audacity to 'occupy a distinctive place in the world of learning, offering an integrated study of the complex reciprocal relationships between societies and environments' (QAA, 2022: 3). So, for me at least, the idea of using geography deliberately to help transform the world for the better speaks to the heart of what a Critical Geography is about. A praxis and orientation that can shape how we understand ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we engage with the world. It should be underpinned by an awareness of the 'locus of enunciation' from which knowledge is produced (Grosfoguel, 2007), and a commitment to structural transformation in pursuit of justice.

In the job interview mentioned above, and on a few occasions since, I have argued that a geographical lens is inherently a critical one. Approaching an issue geographically helps us to ask sharper analytical questions and generate contextualised answers and conclusions. A contextual answer is not the same as an apologetic or neutral one; it is an answer attentive to complexity and nuance. I would challenge anyone to take a topic and meaningfully explore it through core geographical concepts such as space, place, scale, and time, and still arrive at a shallow conclusion. Used together, these and other geographical concepts produce seemingly simple questions that encourage us to think historically, relationally, and dialectically. Where is this happening, and why there? How does it connect to other places? At what scale is the issue produced, and at what scale can it be addressed? What histories have shaped its emergence, and how might it continue to matter in the future? In the process of engaging with such questions, we often find ourselves having to hold in tension the contradictions that shape our life worlds. Working through these tensions and contradictions can yield answers and perspectives that are reflexive and mindful of epistemic multiplicity. For me, this constitutes a core part of what it means to think critically with and through a geographical lens. In a period shaped by culture wars (Lester, 2022), such an approach is vital. It offers a counter to the reductive narratives that dominate public discourse, reminding us that complexity is not weakness but often a necessary part of thinking critically.

I also began with praxis and orientation because it is a reminder that Critical Geography shapes the breadth of my academic practice. The themes I work with in my

learning and teaching such as power, justice, resisting dehumanising structures, and accountability, are the same ones I bring into supervision and institutional life. I see Critical Geography reflected in my research which, inspired by bell hooks (1989), is rooted in working with Black populations located in what I call the 'conspicuous margins.' I use this term to describe people, places, and practices that, despite their importance and visibility, often remain on the outskirts of mainstream attention. These include, for example, young men trafficked through sport, older populations in West African cities, and youth from small island states engaged in climate activism. Such margins are not passive peripheries; they are sites of insight, resistance, hope, and renewal. To centre the conspicuous margins is to surface and contest the systems that dehumanise and displace, through methods grounded in listening, learning, and working with and for those impacted by erasure and structural violence.

### What can Critical Geography be? Dangerous

Critical Geography can be dangerous and that's both a warning and a possibility. Perhaps, first and foremost, it is dangerous because of its association with challenging injustice, unsettling supremacy, and building relations on more equitable terms within the subject and beyond. On a more personal note, as an academic in the UK, I find Critical Geography dangerous because it encourages asking questions. Asking questions tends to disrupt, rather than accommodate, the bureaucratic rhythms of university life. This disruption is rarely well received. As a praxis and orientation, it is also dangerous because it is often at odds with the 'thorough-going commodification of university life' (Ball, 2012: 25), and terrors of performativity (Ball 2010). I've also come to see how dangerous Critical Geography can be when we insist on not only questioning what is said and done, but when and why it is said and done. At times, it seems like critical interventions are only made once the risk in doing so has subsided or passed. Some progressive positions gain traction only after they have been rendered palatable or strategically valuable. Those who speak early, when the stakes are high, are often ignored, dismissed, or penalised, while others receive credit for safer, more belated versions of the same concerns. These dangers are not unique to geography, but they do raise important questions about timing, recognition, and power within the subject.

On a related point, I see Critical Geography as increasingly vulnerable to what might be called a social justice grift. By which I mean the strategic use of progressive discourse in public forums for personal or institutional gain, without any willingness to share in the costs of undertaking critical action. In an era of digital platform-based hyper-visibility, I doubt I am the only one to have witnessed individuals and institutions speak eloquently about social justice, anti-racism, or decolonising, yet act with indifference or even hostility when it comes time to turn those ideals into practice. At times, I get the impression that for some academics, more care goes into crafting social media posts or updating LinkedIn profiles than into supporting colleagues and students. What makes this especially dangerous is the asymmetry of risk. Those engaged in a *social justice grift* can accrue visibility, prestige, and opportunity through the language of criticality, while others face the costs of actually following through on a commitment to these causes. These costs may take many forms, including effects on a person's health and wellbeing, job security, and career progression.

In the age of a social justice grift, we must take seriously how the danger of doing critical work is distributed in ways that can place those who are already structurally marginalised at risk of compounded harm. This has been documented at the intersections of

race and gender (Johnson, 2020; Tolia-Kelly, 2017), and more recently in work that pushes geographers to reflect on the positioning of our trans (Brice, 2021; Todd, 2021) and Muslim colleagues (Sammar, 2024; Sidaway, 2023). Exposure to danger also extends to students, many of whom bear the consequences of taking principled political positions in public. Recent examples include UK students facing legal action or public vilification for pro-Palestine protests (Jack, 2024). It is also important to acknowledge that the dangers and costs of Critical Geography are not confined to academia. Critical geographical scholarship can expose communities and collaborators to harm through our presence, our framing of situations, or our silence. Interlocutors may be retraumatised by the revisiting of harm, misrepresented in our analysis, or strategically misused by others. This list could be far longer, but it seems important to offer at least a snapshot of the potential danger that can stem from scholarship that claims to be critical while failing to be considerate.

### What must Critical Geography be? Consequential

If Critical Geography is a praxis and orientation that contributes to “enabling people to use geography deliberately, for the betterment of themselves and the world”, then it must be consequential beyond the reproduction of critique. At the same time, I recognise that consequences can come at a cost. Earlier, I raised concerns about timing and the uneven ways critical interventions are made and received. But I also want to acknowledge that hesitation or delay does not always signal opportunism or partaking in a *social justice grift*. The stakes of speaking out can be high, and the consequences personal, professional, and enduring. The dangers I described earlier are real. Backlash, exhaustion, institutional vulnerability, and the uneven distribution of risk shape how, when, and whether people can act. If Critical Geography is to be consequential, it requires conditions that make critical action possible. This means building geographical communities that can sustain critical practice, where questioning and challenging are not individuated, but supported, distributed, and held in common.

A consequential Critical Geography must generate effects that inconvenience power and disrupt the structures that sustain injustice. This includes turning its critical lens inward. Many UK geographers work within institutions whose aspirations and expectations are shaped by coloniality and with capitalist logic. As such, a key consequence of Critical Geography must be to challenge the discipline itself: to expose and redress the ways in which institutional arrangements systematically advantage some while marginalising others, for example through the ongoing reproduction of ableism, patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity. A rich and diverse scholarship speaks to these dynamics in the UK, including: the deplatforming of Palestinian voices (Griffiths et al., 2024); intersectional barriers to career progression (Maddrell et al., 2019); the role of racism in shaping school geography (Puttick & Murrey, 2020; Winter et al., 2024); inequities in undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment and outcomes (Desai, 2017); and doctoral supervision (Okoye, 2021). Other work has questioned institutional demands for predictable and instrumental research outcomes, especially those tied to demonstrable utility to the economy (Rogers et al., 2015), and challenged the normalisation of precarious employment (Bruun, et al., 2025; Hughes, 2021; Mason & Megoran, 2021). This scholarship matters because if geographers do not challenge, expose, resist, and question the structural conditions of the discipline itself, then Critical Geography risks reinforcing rather than transforming the very systems it seeks to contest.

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