



Impact 2.0: The Production of Subjectivity, Expertise, and Responsibility in a Necrogeographical World

Lakhbir K. Jassal¹

Institute of Geography,
School of GeoSciences,
The University of Edinburgh,
L.Jassal@sms.ed.ac.uk

Impact 2.0: The Transformation of the Postgraduate Subject

In the postgraduate world some are fearful or indifferent in thinking about the impact of their research project. My own experience of impact was brought on by my PhD research on governance and death. That research investigates matter out of place (and on the move), particularly how what I refer to as the technique of necropower and its opposite, the art(s) of not being governed, are manifest in funeral and disposal practices amongst non-Abrahamic Indian and Chinese residents in Great Britain.² In all, the study traces the ways in which necropower operates over the doubly abject (raced and culturally different dead), specifically the corpse, the dead body and bodily remains in institutional and social contexts structured by the logics of care, and the extent people will go to towards challenging the clutches of the state.³ It was through this project I encountered both a fearful and indifferent attitude towards this thing called impact.



¹ Published under Creative Commons licence: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works

² Disposal refers to the action or process of getting rid of something. The term has become contentious of late however it remains a popular expression (coupled with scattering or dispersal) to describe the action involved in 'sending-off' the decomposing corpse/body and bodily remains in a manner that is both scientifically and culturally safe.

³The concept of necropower takes Michel Foucault's (1978, 2008) notion of biopower, usefully extended by Nikolas Rose (1999), and applies it to the dead. To this end I also expand a concept of necropolitics identified

Death is not an altogether fashionable topic, although it is powerfully impactful in and of itself. How to make necrogeography impactful, and for whom, is something that concerns me. It is the kind of question that concerns all PhD students. It is one of the norms which shapes postgraduate subjectivity, imposed upon our bodies and souls (and our research) by those with vested interest in us and our findings. Here I argue that impactful research operates with what Jane M. Jacobs (2011, 412) refers to as “irreconcilable grammars”, and in many respects impact is irreconcilable to the expectations and meaning of PhD research. I refer to this type of outward facing effect as a governmental technology, a conceptual tool, known as *Impact 1.0*. In 2011 Noel Castree described how the impact agenda includes issues of public engagement and training undergraduates. This outward facing *Impact 1.0* ignores postgraduates who go out to take up external positions. Indeed, I propose that the impact of postgraduate research should be framed by different parameters, and calibrated by distinctive inward facing measures. I refer to this alternative, as *Impact 2.0* a conceptual tool that can facilitate an understanding of how postgraduate subjectivity is shaped by diverse actors. Most striking about this version is the assumption that training a PhD student is in itself an impact. The criterion and parameters of *Impact 2.0* include personal growth as postgraduate students, the development of expertise in training, and the cultivation of responsible citizens. *Impact 2.0* calls for research assessment exercises to recognize new forms of postgraduate subjectivity.

Postgraduate subjectivity is shaped by a variety of institutional academic norms. We are ‘governed’ experts-in-training in this sense. Many of us are in areas that are not by their nature high profile. Take my own sub-field of research, that of necrogeography; this was, to use a pun, a dying field in cultural (and political) geography. My taking an interest in this area at the start of 2009 created an impact, resuscitating necrogeography as a sub-disciplinary field and bringing to it questions of governance. The cultural and political geographies of death, dying and disposal warrant attention in order to survive in the discipline.⁴ So the very first act of creating impact with my own research was to make the case for its relevance in the discipline.

Postgraduate subjectivity and its impact potentials are further shaped by institutions and organizations with whom we deal in the course of our research. In my case, the Death Care Industry was a significant stakeholder with respect to the funeral and disposal practices I was researching.⁵ These industry professionals positioned themselves as ‘experts’ yet they often viewed me as the expert in their field. They looked to me for very practical information about how their services

by Mbembe (2003). My PhD study introduces necropower as a concept where state power is exercised not through violence or explicit violation, but through the logics of care; whereas, counter-strategies are what I called after Foucault (1997) and Scott (2009) the art of not being governed.

⁴ This was also pointed out by Kniffen (1967) and Kong (1999).

⁵ In recent times the funeral profession is euphemistically called the Death Care Industry (funeral parlours, morticians, and commercial enterprises etc.).

might better meet the needs of their targeted clients. They wanted my research to have impact on their global operations, however, there were limits on what I could or could not do as a result of my position as a postgraduate research student. Thus, the management of subjectivity is central to organisational cultures, such as the Death Care Industry, which seeks to transform postgraduate subjectivity through a variety of professional norms.

Research participants also shape postgraduate subjectivity. In my fieldwork phase there was mutual reciprocity: my respondents helped me and they did so with no explicit or immediate benefit to their lives. They took part in my research for a range of indefinite returns, which included the belief that they were helping a student move forward and simultaneously contributing to social change. They also participated because they thought it would make a difference to how their own and others' practices and preferences of funeral and disposal would be recognized and accommodated. For instance, one participant commented "no matter how hard to implement that practice [the right to funeral and disposal specific to all minority and marginalised groups] it's part of human rights. Yeah. If you make that part of human rights policy, world policy, international laws that would help" (Interview, Chinese Community Member, 31/08/2010). For the diverse participants being a research subject was an attempt to have an impact. For me, this faith and expectation created additional responsibilities and worries that my research circulates beyond the academy.

The impact effect is a technology of state institutional landscapes associated with the academy and new cultures of auditing and accountability, as hinted in the editorial introduction (Rogers et al., this issue). This impact agenda inevitably will shape postgraduate subjectivity and research, but to what extent and by what moral compass? Creating an 'impact-o-sphere' depends a great deal on how we, as postgraduates, transform ourselves through a variety of institutional and cultural norms which steer our bodies and souls into productive subjects. I believe postgraduates should strive for achieving impact, but for myself and the participants in my research the question of 'what is impact?' has many answers. This multiplicity is part of the "irreconcilable grammars" of impact talk (Jacobs, 2011, 412). *Impact 1.0*, is in many ways an outward facing tool, which connects academics with the aspirations of research assessment 'authorities'. *Impact 2.0* is an inward facing tool which allows postgraduates to create space for user-friendly connectivity. This includes recognising and being conscious of the fact that we are governed by different vectors of power. So rather than just subscribing to the demands of state authorities, *Impact 2.0*, is a conceptual tool that can help facilitate a creative platform to connect with the lives of participants, organisations and others.

This alternative 2.0, tool allows postgraduates to create impact through creative engagement. In order to facilitate active engagement with those who govern our research lives the ideas below offer a way to bring together practices of self-management with the rendering of creativity.

1) *Being emotionally equipped*

- self-reflection on the delicate networks that connect us to different lives
- develop an inventive plan and have the flexibility to adapt it based on diverse encounters to achieve your personal goals

2) *Reset button*

- continuously reinvent yourself through personal and politically engaging practices. This will help one think differently about who we are becoming as subjects governed by different vectors of power

3) *Cocktail recipe*

- there are a range of ways to “conduct [or improve] ourselves” (Rose, 1998, 159) through a mixture of self-governing techniques that cultivate new forms of *knowing*

Although it is a great affirmation for people to know who you are by creating a publication record, that in my view is not the sole point of the PhD journey. Instead we need to be equipped to create our own ‘impact-o-spheres’ and *Impact 2.0* allows us to do that.

Impact 2.0 is a conceptual tool that always measures personal growth as postgraduate students, expertise in training, and responsabilization as citizens, active in the lives of others. This is one way of navigating through the rich complexity of expertise and responsibility shaped by a variety of disciplinary norms in an impact driven age.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express sincere thanks to my supervisors Jane M. Jacobs, Elizabeth Olson and Eric Laurier for their support and encouragement to think outside *Impact 1.0*.

References

- Castree, Noel. 2011. Commentary – the future of geography in English universities. *Geographical Journal* 177, 294-299.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. London: Penguin.
- Jacobs, Jane M. 2011. Urban geographies I: still thinking cities relationally. *Progress in Human Geography* 36, 412-422.

- Kniffen, Fred B. 1967. Necrogeography in the United States. *Geographical Review* 57, 426-427.
- Kong, Lily. 1999. Cemeteries and columbaria, memorials and mausoleums: narrative and interpretation in the study of deathscapes in geography. *Australian Geographical Studies* 37, 1-10.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15, 11-40.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1998. *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1999. *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Free Association Books.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.