

Geographies of the agenda: public policy, the discipline and its (re)‘turns’¹

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Abstract: In the 1980s and 1990s, poverty and inequality in Britain increased, yet the discipline of (human) geography was apparently disinterested. This paper poses the question as to why part of the discipline turned its back on public policy and particularly issues of poverty and inequality. The aim of the paper is to encourage students and advocates of geography to think a little about what they are involved in (and to think about the role of academia more generally). Recent publications in a number of geography journals have revealed much angst among prominent geographers concerning the state of human geography and, in particular, its links to contemporary policy debate. However, while geographers discuss the debate, we argue that they are not a significant part of it. We take a critical turn and look at the debate that two geographers – Ron Martin and Doreen Massey – have raised within the light of wider debates on public policy, politics, quantification, academia and the policy agenda. We conclude that for many reasons there is unlikely to be a large shift towards policy-orientated research within human geography.

Key words: geography, policy, inequality, poverty, quantification, disciplines.

I Introduction – what is a polemic?

Polemic is in the eye of the beholder, and relativism is very much alive and kicking – and occasionally screaming – in geography today. However, relevance, and in particular relevance to public policy, we would argue, is rather less prevalent in current geographical work. In this paper we discuss why this might be so; we leave it up to the reader to decide whether our paper constitutes a polemic.

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II A tale of discontents

Our story begins in the mid-1990s where many of us have been: on the back row of the hypothetical conference lecture as one geographer mutters to another: 'We seem to have lost the plot somewhere . . .'. Only rarely are such mutterings articulated (Mohan, 1996: 122):

A plausible case could be made that academic geography is contributing very little to debates on some key contemporary issues facing British society such as social polarization, the future of the welfare state, and the collapse of 'community'. In few disciplines is there a greater contrast between the deconstructionist bickering and mandarin practices of the academy, and the decaying urban fabric surrounding many academic institutions. If one were to contrast the most recent Institute of British Geographers (IBG) conference's agenda with the urban fabric of the city which hosted it one would support this conclusion. A couple of miles away from the conference are located some of the most depressed parts of urban Britain, locations which are gladly vacated by families even when the cost of doing so is to become temporarily homeless; locations where three generations of mass unemployment has devastated the male working class and directly or indirectly led many of them into crime; locations which despite one top-down initiative after another remain immune to or marginalized from the economic mainstream . . . the former concerns were simply not addressed in the conference and were largely bypassed by its focus on identity, culture and difference, as a glance at the conference abstracts would confirm.

In the year before that to which John Mohan was referring in his report on trends in Britain and British geography (1995) the Association of American Geographers annual conference was held in San Francisco (1994). The abiding memory of the conference that one of us has is of sitting in a huge lecture theatre listening to a plenary session on 'poverty in America' attended by only half a dozen of the 5000 delegates to the conference. In California, inequality and poverty are among the worst in the affluent world, worse still than that seen in northern England (which is among the worst in the European Union), yet geographers were not interested (or at least other topics were deemed to be *more* interesting). Since then poverty and inequality – and the apparent disinterest of the discipline – have all risen. This paper asks: why has part of the discipline turned its back on public policy, and particularly the issues of poverty and inequality?

More broadly, the aim of this short paper is to encourage students and advocates of geography to think a little about what they are involved in (and to think about the role of academia more generally). Recent publications in a number of geography journals have revealed much angst among prominent geographers concerning the state of human geography and, in particular, its links to contemporary policy debate. However, while geographers discuss the debate, we argue below that they are not part of it. Why might that be? A great deal has happened in Britain since John Mohan expressed his unease with the state of British Geography in 1996, the year when Will Hutton published *The state we're in* (Hutton, 1996), and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation produced definitive evidence that inequalities were wider than ever before. Two general elections have come and gone, for British academics two Research Assessment Exercises have taken place and, within human geography, two very influential writers, Doreen Massey and Ron Martin, have rekindled the debate on geography and the policy agenda.

In this paper we argue that a great many geographers think that what they are doing or saying is of relevance when its impact is in fact minimal. We would include much of our own work in this category and think that it is a salutary lesson to step back for a

moment away from the 'continuous party of celebration' (i.e., acknowledging and citing each other's contributions and generally being supportive of each other's efforts within the discipline). Instead, here we take a critical turn and look at the debate that these two geographers have raised within the light of wider debates on public policy, politics, quantification, academia and the policy agenda. We begin with the IBG (now RGS-IBG) conference five years on from that to which Mohan was referring above. We both attended that conference and our own thoughts about the discipline of geography, the direction of public policy and the lack of any substantive link between the two were even darker than were his in 1995. If you want to understand how we came to this pessimistic predicament and how we think it is possible to climb out of it, let us first refer you to what prompted us to write this paper.

On 6 January 2000, Doreen Massey gave the annual *Progress in Human Geography* lecture at the RGS-IBG conference on 'Geography on the agenda'. So keen was the audience to hear her that we did not manage to get seats for that lecture, but fortunately what she had to say was reproduced in this journal a year later (Massey, 2001). In early December 1999, Massey too had been 'distinctly fed up' (2001: 5). The cause of her melancholy was the debate over the nature and extent of the 'North-South divide' following the release of the New Policy Institute's report on poverty (Howarth *et al.*, 1999). Massey referred to Tony Blair's subsequent mini-tour of the North and noted that: 'In the same month that the North-South divide burst once again upon the political scene the National Policy Unit [sic] documented continued increasing inequality nationally, and a health report came up with similar conclusions' (2001: 6).²

One issue of *Progress* later and another well-known geographer is concerned with the agenda. Ron Martin's 'Geography and public policy: the case of the missing agenda' (Martin, 2001) starts bluntly (p. 189): 'The fundamental problem, I argue, is that for a variety of reasons much contemporary social and economic geography research renders it of little practical relevance for policy, in some cases of little social relevance at all.' We largely agree with Martin, but do not share his optimism that an effective 'policy turn' in the discipline is likely. His approach differs from Massey's in that Martin feels that most of the blame for geography's irrelevance lies within the discipline, whereas Massey appears to feel that the outside world has changed for the worse. Both advocate a greater engagement with policy, a policy turn or return, if you like.

We contrast Massey's and Martin's approaches to this issue below, to try to illustrate why the proposed policy turn may turn into a cul-de-sac. We believe that there are good reasons as to why geographically orientated policies are on the agenda while geographers generally are not. We argue that the fashion for 'better conceptualization' within human geography that Massey advocates³ has led to a disdain within sections of geography for the kind of work that policy-makers listen to and a disdain for work that actually influences policy of the kind questioned by Massey's paper. We advocate taking part in debates outside of geography as a way both to be more contented and to contribute to (rather than simply conceptualize) policy debate, but this is not a path that many geographers (who have remained geographers) have taken before – nor, we suspect, are many likely to take it in the future, even given current trends (within a discipline which ignores the outside calls for policy-relevant research). Below we try to explain why we think that if you want to move towards a 'geography of public policy' you should neither start where you are (i.e., within geography) nor expect the easy development of such a subdiscipline.

III Geographers off the agenda

A key element of Massey's distress was that the work of (some/most) geographers was being largely ignored by the press and policy-makers in the debate over the North–South divide despite the fact that (she claimed): '... regional uneven development and the question of how to conceptualize the (unequal) geography of the economy have been a major theme of our work in human geography over the last 25 years at least' (2001: 6). Similarly, Martin comments '... that – with some notable exceptions which serve to prove the more general rule – geographers are infrequently consulted or used by governments or other policy bodies to advise in the policy-making process' (2001: 191). At the same time Martin is anxious to acknowledge the contributions that have been made. We think he is perhaps being a little too kind. Most of the 'notable exceptions' will be geographers involved in government ministry research required to maintain 'soft money' employment contracts (it is hard to be critical of those who pay your – or your associates' – wages). Interestingly, Martin also sees a 25-year perspective as appropriate (2001: 192–93):

Obviously, this is not to argue there has been no notable work by geographers on public policy issues over the past 25 years. Any such suggestion would be untrue and unfair. Important contributions to the public policy field have been made in a variety of areas and by several individuals.

Again, perhaps Martin is being too kind. We would argue that it is difficult to produce a list of geographers that could be held up to the light of the policy achievements of academics from disciplines such as sociology, politics and economics (let alone subjects such as physics, engineering and medicine), over the same time period. What has surprised us is the extent to which geographers will offer up a list of names of geographers, without any reference to how poor their contribution looks in the light of other disciplines. We also note that Massey and Martin ignore physical geography – so we will too.⁴ Finally, we wonder just what did go on in 1975–76 which makes it such a seminal 'moment'? See Coppock (1974) for a lesson on how we have been here before.

Perhaps it is time to consider for a moment why geographers have 'argued again and again' for 25 years that regional inequality needs to be reconceptualized. Perhaps geographers have been arguing too much just with geographers in the academic geographical journals, largely oblivious to developments outside of their discipline. Massey laments that the 'knowledge-claims' and 'scientific practice' of social scientists (though she is mainly referring to human geographers and their understanding of the 'truth' of regional inequality) have been persistently ignored by successive governments. She is clearly frustrated that this debate has not had wider political influence. Martin's frustration is equally apparent.

IV Not the best place to start?

We would argue that many, if not most, 'geographers' are focused neither on achieving political change nor on communicating with the world 'out there'. They are not conveying their messages (if they have any) to policy-makers or politicians. They *are* concerned with thinking about (and understanding and explaining) spatial relationships, not with changing them, and that is precisely why they are geographers. Those

with an interest in their research being communicated to a wider audience, we would argue, are far more likely to be found a more congenial home in other academic disciplines (sociology, social policy, social medicine or planning, for example) or more likely outside of academia altogether.

Suppose that some geographers do actually want to convey their message beyond the academic journals (which are each, on average, read by a tiny number of people – the majority being undergraduates who have been told to read them). How should they go about it? Where are Massey and the regional reconceptualizers going wrong? Why might Martin's pleas not result in policy work of substance? To start with the basics, we argue that in order to have an impact 'out there' researchers need to consider more carefully (a) what they say, (b) how and in what form they say it, and c) to whom they speak – quite simply, the message, its medium and its audience.

In terms of what is being said, Massey listed three key arguments that the mainstream of geography has been endlessly making. We take each of these in turn and suggest reasons for why they are 'endlessly ignored'. We confine ourselves to Britain here as it is this geography to which Massey appears to refer.

(1) Massey argues: 'That the geography of the economy might be better conceptualized through the lens of the functioning of the economy and society as a whole' (2001: 6). A well-informed policy-maker's reply could be: yes, of course – but this has been known for over a century (Blair, 1999). 'Moreover, as we had also argued, "national" economic strategies will have geographically differentiated implications . . . ' (Massey, 2001: 6). Again, yes of course – in Britain the 1934 Special Areas Act recognized that – but, instead of repeatedly arguing it abstractly, we need to show evidence of it continuing to matter. We give an example below of how this might be done, showing how different government policies could have very different effects upon different parts of the country to reduce the North–South divide in the future. Abstract arguments about conceptualization do not make a point well. Far more concrete arguments, backed up by examples and (more often than not) some statistics, are a great deal more convincing (to people with power). They get reported in the press, and can eventually have an impact on policy. Such studies have been more convincing in the past. They remain more convincing now.

(2) Massey goes on to argue that: 'Moreover – we have also endlessly argued – the fact that this high level of inequality manifests itself geographically really does matter' (2001: 6). Again, a well informed policy-maker could respond: 'Who says it doesn't?' Since parliamentary reform in the nineteenth century, governments of every political hue have accepted that geography matters (how many politicians celebrate geographical inequalities?). What you need to do is show just how much it matters and how it has and can be influenced. Quantify your argument. As David Demeritt (2001: 459) states (although he would not necessarily agree with us): 'Unfortunately, the practical implications of quantification have largely been passed over by the epistemological flavour of debate in geography. By focusing so much attention on the (un)truth and (mis)representation by (dis)interested quantifiers, critical geographers risk losing sight of the practical effects of quantifying power.'⁵ Where a child is born today matters far more for their future chances in life than did the birthplace of their parents or grandparents (but not, interestingly, of their great grandparents; Dorling, 1995). These changes matter, not in that life is unfair (people generally grudgingly accept that), but in that life is becoming more unfair (people are far less happy when they hear that). The health

report that Massey referred to did just that. It was reports such as this that forced the last government to admit (following the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's *Inquiry into income and wealth* in 1995) that society was becoming more divided. That admission of failure partly contributed to the Conservatives' demise. It is work now being produced – almost all outside of 'geography' – which tells the current government that the trend is against them and that they will have to work harder if they really wish to achieve their stated aims.

(3) Massey's last key point is that: '... regional inequality is not most productively conceptualized (if the aim is to change things) simply in terms of geographical patterns of different levels of per capita income, different levels of unemployment and so forth. What is much more at issue ... is the geography of relations of control and the geometries of power and the discursive dominance of the South East over the rest of the country' (2001: 7). A cynical policy-maker might well respond: 'Perhaps one reason people have ignored you is because you were wrong.' It is not hard to show that London and the South East were most dominant, for instance, in the planning of the economy and control of the nation in the period during and following the second world war – the period when the North–South divide was at its narrowest during the last century.⁶ Immediately before then, in the 1930s, local councils (and other élites) had far more power and the geography was far less equal. We currently have increasingly devolved government, and again some of the greatest geographical inequalities ever measured (Scotland is a fine example of this – both within that country and when it is compared to England and Wales; Mitchell and Dorling, 2002). Yes, the concentration of economic power in London and the weaknesses of the regions matter. But, we argue, it was national government that ensured jobs for nearly all after 1945, not an increase of power in the 'periphery'. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman presents very different possible reasons as to why inequalities have increased that have nothing to do with Massey's geometries of power (Bauman, 1997). Most simply, he argues that the rich no longer need the poor. Whatever the case, when you argue again and again – and are ignored – give some credit to those who are ignoring you.

V Not the best way to talk?

Regardless of what is in the message, how is that message to be conveyed and to whom? It is possible that geographers are being ignored because people can neither hear nor understand them. This is a crucial matter – the proverbial tree falling in a forest where there is no one to see or hear it crash to the ground may as well still be standing. Regardless of what they have been saying, the language and expression of the 'reconceptualizing geographers' has often become an élitist jargon. We often wonder whether people writing in this way actually want to be taken seriously (indeed if they really wish to be understood) outside their small peer group. Martin states: 'In one sense there is a conscious lack of knowledge on the part of many policy-makers as to what, exactly, geographers do' (2001: 194). This is not our impression. Whenever we have talked to policy-makers they have known only too well what most geographers do (many were geography undergraduates themselves) – they are simply not interested by it or did not see it as relevant to their concerns – and usually too polite to say so until pressed.

Martin recognizes some of the problems of much of human geography's currently weak grasp on reality (2001: 196):

... postmodern geography disengages itself with movements and practices which might challenge material power and so change outcomes. This trend is not unique to contemporary human geography, but reflects a malaise that typifies much of cultural studies and social science more generally. As a result, as Philo and Miller (2001) point out, much of cultural studies has lost its critical edge and is no longer able to comment on the central issues and problems of its own society. A significant part of recent research in human geography is guilty of the same offence.

Cultural studies may be generally moribund. But it shows a lack of appreciation of the majority of social science (particularly that outside of the UK) to believe that it has lost its critical edge – geographers should get out more. By this, of course, we mean out into other disciplines – not necessarily into 'the field' (although that does no harm to armchair theorists).

It is hardly surprising, given the tone in which some academics write and speak, that Massey reports: '... at a *Marxism Today* weekend ... a prominent advisor to the (then new) New Labour government had accused academics of being, politically, a waste of time' (2001: 11). The advisor may have been being arrogant, but may well have had a point. Gone are the days when, as Sir Humphrey claimed in the TV programme 'Yes Minister', that Ministers would sanction the building of the M11 and M40 motorways so that they could travel easily to the high tables of Oxbridge to be fed, watered and advised. Many of the current generation of policy-makers have sat through the dreary conceptualizing lectures of the 1970s and 1980s. To reiterate, they were clearly not impressed.

We were both 11 years old when Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979 (our memories of 25 years ago are of a long hot summer and Olga Korbut). We were socialized under one of the most right-wing governments Britain has ever seen, and left school with the first generation of young people who were faced with the most appalling job prospects since the 1930s. We now realize that part of the blame for that government coming to power and staying in power so long lies with the weakness of academic arguments some 25 years ago (and before) – a weakness to convey an understanding of how the world can work, how it is not necessary, in a very rich country, to allow millions to live in poverty, and a failure to explain the alternatives. We believe that academic work on progressive social policies was weakly articulated during the 1970s in Britain, but it need not be again. Similarly, academic work in the 1980s failed to burst the bubble in which most people felt they were better off (the numbers who thought they would have to pay inheritance tax is one staggering example of just how well the Conservative government of that time conveyed its message). Whether or not geography or geographers chose to try to be relevant at that time is another question. What we argue next is that a relevant, well-articulated and well-informed social science community is a necessity for subsequent improvements in public life. Geographers are generally not particularly active parts of that community.

VI To turn or not to turn?

To end our initial argument, we agree with most of what Martin advocates and much of what Massey wishes for. Listing points on which you agree, however, tends not to

take debates much further forward. Perhaps where we disagree most with both Massey and Martin's arguments is where they agree with each other (Martin, 2001: 194, our emphasis):

No doubt some will argue that our social and policy relevance and influence as geographers are best and most fundamentally brought to bear through our own political practice and daily academic lives – how we incorporate, represent and practice our social and political values in what we do, write and say not just as *professional geographers* but as members of society (see Massey, 2000). I acknowledge the vital importance of linking one's academic work, personal politics, and everyday life in this way. But as Doreen Massey, a leading example of this fusion herself admits, it is not at all that common. In fact, in general there is a surprising lack of political commitment in the subject.

Take out the words 'professional geographer' and then see if the above quote makes more sense. What is being said here that is specifically relevant to, or indicative of, geographers and geography? Why the concern with being a '*professional geographer*' – what is there to gain from it (personally or for society)? If you begin with a concern about 'How can I have a good career?', or be a 'professional' geographer and then ask 'How can I be relevant?', you might well be going about things the wrong way. Ask first 'Can I do research that is of social and policy relevance within a university?' If the answer is yes, then is the time to ask 'Is a geography department the best place for me to do that work?' Many researchers have asked themselves these questions. Most of those that we know who answered 'Yes' to the first (and were in geography departments either as students or staff) answered 'No' to the second question. We wish this did not have to be the case so often, but also think it is an important starting-point for geographers to realize that it is the case.

Massey ends her paper by stating that: 'The nature of spatial imaginations is central to some of the major issues of the day. Perhaps we could – even more than we currently are – be engaging in those debates' (2001: 16). We could, and some of us are to varying degrees, but we will not be at all successful unless we engage in a very different way to that which Massey advocates above.⁷ Whether greater engagement is a good thing depends on the nature of that engagement. Martin recognizes these weaknesses in the discipline but implies that some of them could be resolved by 'a turn'. In the rest of this paper we consider a particular topic area – the issue of inequalities in health as covered in the 'health report' to which Massey referred – to illustrate how research outside of geography has contributed to a different approach to the policy debate 'out there'.

VII Academic work which influences policy

How can you measure whether academic work influences policy? Not easily. One approach might be to look at who contributed to some of the key reports of recent years. In health (with which Massey's paper began) there were no geographers providing written evidence to the *Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health* (1998), for instance. No one working in a geography department contributed to the Rowntree *Inquiry into income and wealth* (1995). Over 420 people were acknowledged in the Commission on Social Justice Report that was so influential on New Labour policy. Only one of these was a geographer (Mohan, 1996: 122). We could go on; but instead we have a longer-term view of a debate that has been running for centuries that, at least in the last century, one would have thought would have involved geographers: poverty,

inequality and health. We have recently been involved in selecting some 30 seminal pieces of writing in this area spanning the last two centuries (Davey Smith *et al.*, 2001).

Our criteria for inclusion was no more than selecting pieces which we considered to be important contributions of their era and worthy of a second look today. Despite the fact that two of the three editors of this collection worked in geography departments at the time of writing, it transpires that we subconsciously did not choose a single work by a 'geographer' of any description. We were trying to choose texts which had had an influence upon events and policy, which had been before their time or which had changed people's lives for the better. Many of the writings involved geographical elements – from William Farr's report (1837), to Edwin Chadwick's detailed descriptions of cities in 1842, to Engels' statistics of 1845 and Mayhew's writing on London in 1851–52, from Rowntree's survey of York published in 1901 to Booth's survey of London published in 1902–1903. However, it is perhaps a little unfair to despair about the lack of writing by geographers at a time when hardly anyone called themselves a geographer! Halford Mackinder (1902) was writing on war policy, for instance (hardly socially progressive; nor was his work on university expansion – Mackinder and Sadler, 1890).⁸ That geography today is not well integrated into progressive social debate has a great deal to do, we suspect, with the fact that it was a conservative discipline from its inception.

Who do we include in our *Reader* from the twentieth century? Among others, we include William Beveridge (1942; economist), Professor J.N. Morris (1944; epidemiologist), Richard Titmuss (1943; historian and professor of social administration) and Peter Townsend (with Brian Abel-Smith in 1965, and as an author of the Black Report of 1980; a professor of social policy). Much has, of course, been written by medical (or 'health' depending on your preference) geographers on the North–South divide – but could any of this be said to have had a seminal influence? We did not set out to exclude the work of geographers – but the fact that in the end we did is quite telling. Geographers have never really been on the mainstream social science agenda as far as policy debates about inequalities have been concerned – in terms of health or otherwise. Other disciplines dominate – social policy, public health and sociology, for instance. We would argue that this is because geographers have often failed to tell other disciplines things that they did not already know. We can make a unique contribution – but not in teaching others how to suck eggs. We would be far better off doing what we could be good at – good at what others in related areas cannot do. But, of course, like any other interested party we believe our approach is sensible. For examples of our work in health see Shaw *et al.* (1999), Department of Health (1999), Mitchell *et al.* (2000) and Dorling *et al.* (2001). The chance of any of these publications having much impact on policy is of course low; but not – of course – as low as, for instance, a journal paper such as this!

VIII Conclusion

Academic research does influence policy. Looking back over two centuries, that is clear. It also helps to form the values of both individuals and institutions. Most current policies are informed in some way by findings which were derived from university-based research at some point in the past. Most individual views are now very much informed by what children learn in schools from teachers, almost all of whom are to

some degree influenced by what they learned at university. Similarly, academics in universities may perhaps have their greatest impact through their teaching rather than publication. But, turning to research, the question is not so much does academic research make a difference but does *my* research or *my* discipline make a difference? If you want to make a difference, think about what you are saying and how you are saying it. Massey says 'the assumption was that the only way [for the academy] to be politically or socially relevant was to come up with advice or answers on government policy' (2001: 12). Of course it is not the only way, but it may be one of the most obvious and effective, if that is your aim. If you want to skin a cat, it is usually good first to catch your cat. 'We need to see research not simply as a mechanism for studying and explaining change, but – by following our investigations through to their implications for possible policy intervention and action – as an instigator of change, as an activist endeavour' (Martin, 2001: 203).

It takes time for academic work to influence policies and lives, but it has happened in the past and will happen again. The likelihood is that it will not be geographers who have this influence because they do not really value this kind of work – hence they are in geography departments where to an extent they feel valued in their irrelevancy. If you think we are being cruel, how often do you proudly admit you are a geographer when a stranger asks what you do? More cynically, it could be argued that geographers are usually not very good at influencing policy when they try.

There is an alternative interpretation as to why geography fails to be on the policy agenda. It is that the discipline of geography is not well suited to stampeding this way and that, following whatever turn is currently fashionable – being relevant when what is seen as relevant can change so quickly. A more charitable way to view geography is to see it as an intellectual safety net, an academic refugee camp – a place where academics can work on whatever they wish to work on and not be disturbed by the need to conform to the traditions of other disciplines. Thus, if you are interested in studying inequalities in health, but do not want to be bound by the rules of medicine, work in geography rather than public health. Similarly, if you are interested in economics, politics or sociology, like planning (but do not want to be a planner), like rivers (but do not want to be an engineer), like oil/tectonics (but do not want to be bound by the rules of earth scientists/geophysicists), are interested in the environment (but do not agree with environmental science), prefer to study transport or housing outside of transport or housing studies . . . and so on. This charitable view of the discipline sees geography as a home for intellectual anarchists – researchers who do not wish to play by the rules of the disciplines to which they would otherwise have to conform. Disciplines are called disciplines for a reason – they exert it. Could geography be the discipline without discipline?

If you like the sound of the above account, what hope then for a 'policy turn'? Getting anarchists to agree to something is more problematic than herding cats (let alone catching them). Start with a smaller goal. Agree not to penalize those who do take part in and contribute to policy debates. Respect what they produce and do not look down your noses at it as 'not being geography' (or being inadequately 'theoretical'), because once you think you know what geography is you may no longer be a geographer by this definition of geography. There may be a policy turn in geography. If there is, it is unlikely to have a great effect on policy. Anarchists rarely change the world, but they tend to think they are very important people. Out of anarchic thinking, however, can

come some very interesting (and occasionally very influential) ideas.

We end this paper with one optimistic and one pessimistic note. On optimism, a Research Assessment Exercise has just passed within Britain. For the next couple of years academic geographers need not concern themselves with trying to publish in the journals or on the subjects which the RAE panel might consider to be 'geography'. This distraction will in all likelihood rear its head again in less than five years' time. But, as the story above shows, five years is a long time. Doing work that might be useful in influencing policy is also far harder than writing four papers in four years in geography journals.

Our pessimistic note concerns whether geographers are likely to take up this opportunity of a respite to 'do something useful' in between the bean-counting. Academic geographers are conditioned as much as anyone else by the society in which they live, what they are taught to value and what their colleagues tend to value. In short they, like everyone else, want to feel valued. The discipline tends not to support the anarchist ideal espoused above, although it is – fortunately – usually quite kind to mavericks as long as they publish somewhere. However, given the opportunities to get out of geography to more conducive places, is tolerance enough to keep those who are interested in policy within geography? Is there any chance that those who have left geography to conduct policy research might ever (re)turn?

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Notes

1. By (re)'turns' we mean returns both to the individual and to society generated by geographical work, the conceptual turns within the discipline and the 'turns' that geographers take as actors on the academic stage.

2. The 'National Policy Unit' is, we believe, the report by Howarth *et al.* We were two of the authors of the 'health report' (Shaw *et al.*, 1999). The health report came out four days before Tony's rapidly scheduled trip north which was followed by the Policy Unit's report. Massey concluded that: 'What was depressing about this flurry of interest was that the whole rehearsal of the issue was so old. It was a simple repeat of the 1970s' (2001: 6). A different interpretation of these events from outside geography was given at the same time: 'When Tony Blair tours the North to show wide variations within regions as well as between them, and when Alan Milburn declares commitment to tackling inequalities in heart disease as part of making a fairer society generally, then you know something has touched a chord. It is rare for an academic work to have such an effect on media and ministers, but *The widening gap* has done just this' (John Nicholson, Chief Executive, UK Public Health Association).

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A geography for policy, or a policy for geography? A response to Dorling and Shaw

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The purpose of my recent paper 'Geography and public policy: the case of the missing agenda' (Martin, 2001a) was to spark off a debate about the lack of policy relevance of contemporary human geography. Reactions have ranged right across the spectrum. At one end, cultural geographers have complained that I heaped undue and misplaced blame on them for subverting the discipline away from socially relevant and policy-orientated research (I remain unrepentant). At the other end have been those who have criticized me not for going too far but for not going far enough, for being too kind on the subject and too optimistic about its future prospects. Danny Dorling's and Mary Shaw's (2002) paper 'Geographies of the agenda: public policy, the discipline and its (re)turns' in this issue takes me to task on this count. Their provocative contribution deserves extended discussion, but an imposed word limit means that I can only make one or two brief comments by way of response here.

My reason for arguing for more policy-orientated research within geography was essentially threefold. First, because if human geography is supposed to be a critical social science we should be addressing key social, economic and environmental problems (see, for example, Martin, 2001b) and shaping policy interventions in order to improve outcomes. Second, because policy-making itself seems increasingly to be 'going local', involving the decentralization of state interventions to urban and regional agencies and partnerships. Third, because the present political climate provides a major opportunity for geographers to engage with this new policy-making regime. Thus, in the case of the UK, the New Labour government has explicitly called upon both researchers and policy-makers to work together to ensure that official thinking on policy issues is informed by academic work (David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 2000):

Social science should be at the heart of policymaking. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what

types of policy initiatives are most likely to be most effective . . . if researchers become more streetwise in handling partial findings and politicians and civil servants are more relaxed about welcoming radical thinking, I am sure we can get it right.

As an example of this desire for much closer interchange with social scientists, the Department of Trade and Industry has initiated a series of major seminars to learn about academic research on contemporary processes of uneven regional economic development in the UK. Hence, I tend to agree with Dorling and Shaw in their criticism of Doreen Massey's (2001) paper that the problem is *less* that politicians and government policy-makers are unwilling to listen to social scientists such as geographers and *more* whether geographers are willing to respond to such calls for policy-orientated research and debate, and whether in fact they have anything distinctive or informative to say.

Dorling and Shaw are extremely doubtful on both fronts. They are highly pessimistic about the prospects for a 'policy turn' within the discipline. Echoing many of the complaints I raised in my paper – but going much further – they argue that recent developments in the subject have led to a disdain for the sort of work that policy-makers listen to. They suggest that if there are geographers interested in policy-relevant research they are best advised to look outside geography or even to leave the subject altogether to work with social scientists in other disciplines. While Dorling and Shaw fail to give due recognition to those geographers who do undertake policy-relevant research – and, as I pointed out, there are some significant examples, not least in urban studies, development studies and environmental studies – their overall conclusion may be right. Other social scientists do seem to be much more policy-conscious and to be consulted by policy-makers much more than are geographers. It is interesting, for example, that only one geographer, Sir Peter Hall, was singled out in the recent ERSC roll call of 'heroes of dissemination' (Walker, 2002). Equally insightful are Peter Hall's criticisms that geographers (and other social scientists) too often 'talk only to each other in hermetically sealed languages' and that there is too much pressure to 'publish only in recondite journals using . . . the approved, restricted speech code' (Walker, 2002: 6). While I agree that collaboration with other social scientists may be the most fruitful route for those geographers interested in policy-relevant work, such collaboration (with economists, sociologists, lawyers, criminologists, etc.) will require a major culture shift among most human geographers.

To pick up what I think is an underlying, if not explicitly stated, *leitmotiv* in the Dorling and Shaw paper, the relative lack of policy-relevant work in the subject and geography's poor visibility in policy-making circles fuel a more general worry that I have about the state of the discipline. The lack of policy-relevant research and policy influence is in many ways the tip of a much larger iceberg: geography's inferior standing and profile in the wider academic, educational and public domains. Such a comment will doubtless strike as heretical to many. Surely, it will be argued, geography is stronger, more vibrant and more diverse than ever before. Surely, it will be refrained, as evidence of this strength, other social sciences are increasingly recognizing the importance of geography, and borrowing and applying its insights. Yes and no. One can turn these claims round. Increasing diversity can also be viewed as increasing fragmentation and compartmentalization, as intellectual dilettantism. Much of what passes for, or is claimed to be, geography is hardly geography at all, but amateur sociology, amateur economics, amateur psychology, amateur cultural studies, amateur media

studies and so on, cast into vague and often barely discernible geographical language. To the extent that other social scientists are 'discovering geography' (and this should not be exaggerated), this too is worrying since they may well come with a distinct comparative advantage: they *are* experts in sociology, economics, psychology, etc., and acquiring a 'geographical imagination' is perhaps not that difficult after all.

To add to these concerns, geography is under threat within the UK educational system. Unlike history, geography is excluded from the national curriculum, which presumably says something about how the subject is perceived within the political establishment. Nor do we have the successful popularizers to be found, for example, in history, archaeology, earth science, biology and cosmology. Meanwhile, within the UK university sector, the subject's relative performance in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise – though a welcome improvement over the 1996 assessment – was disappointing alongside other cognate social sciences, earth sciences and arts and humanities disciplines (Martin, 2002). As if all this was not enough, there is disturbing news that in a number of UK universities, geography departments face absorption into environmental or geoscience 'superschools', a development that may well gladden the hearts of our physical geography colleagues, but should send a shudder of alarm among human geographers, who will have to work hard not to be marginalized or sidelined as a consequence.

No doubt Dorling and Shaw will be accused – as have I – of 'talking the subject down', and thus of contributing to the very image and credibility problem of which we complain. Yet to ignore the issues, or to pretend that none exist, is, in my view, the greater offence. Not only do we need a debate about policy relevance in the subject, we also need a thoroughgoing discussion about what geography is – or should be – about more generally. David Harvey (1974) once posed the question: what kind of geography for what kind of policy? Perhaps the more fundamental question is: what kind of policy for what kind of geography?

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Geography, policy and politics: a response to Dorling and Shaw

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Umm . . . I feel somewhat bemused. Our authors have clearly worked themselves up into quite a lather. In fact, apart from a persistent misunderstanding (wilful?), a scatter of insults (gratuitous) and a total inability to detect irony, there is much that unites us as well as divides us. Most of all, perhaps, our differences arise from entirely different conceptions of 'the political' and, I think, from very different political positions and policy engagements. This in turn relates, of course, to the wider, but central, issue of how 'geographers' should place themselves in all this.

Yet I promised to reply, so here are just a few thoughts.

First (in the gratuitously insulting category: an example), they write that I 'ignore physical geography'. (a) I do not (see the section on pages 13 and 14), but anyway (b) as I point out there, this was the lecture on 'Progress in *Human Geography*'.

Second, the main fora where I have made these arguments are the Labour Party Home Policy Sub-Committee (of which I was a member from 1973 until its abolition) and non-academic journals such as *New Statesman*, *Marxism Today*, etc. – hardly élitist academic writing to other academics. What the authors seemed to have done is equate my formulation in *Progress in Human Geography* with the way I would argue, say, with a Minister. No, a very early lesson must be to know your audience and to write/talk accordingly – start from where your audience is now.

Third, I think they have things the wrong way around. Most of my (intellectual, theoretical – *ergo*, according to our authors, élitist) arguments developed precisely *in* political activity. It is not a case of sitting at one's desk, having an idea, and rushing out to tell a politician. For me, what I have always found most productive as a way of working is an endless moving-between. This has been my whole trajectory. I learned more, on this particular range of issues, from working in 'Ken Livingstone's' GLC, with Labour Party regional policy-makers, with the ANC, and with a whole range of community groups, all the while mulling things over, relating them to wider arguments, writing, talking, thinking, arguing, than I ever could have done in an academic arena alone. So I think the authors and I have very different understandings of the nature of these relations.

Fourth (perhaps this comes into the category of *wilful* misunderstanding), I totally agree with our authors that there is in academe too much writing to each other alone, much of it driven by individual competitiveness (see pages 11 to 12); but that is in no way the same as theoretical work or blue-skies thinking. Indeed, I would argue that pressure from government and from funding sources has dangerously cut down the scope for this kind of research. Without it, intellectual engagement stagnates.

Fifth, moreover, Dorling and Shaw equate 'better conceptualization' (for which I was arguing) with '“sexy” philosophical linguistic and theoretical issues rather than . . . practical social research'. No; it is just a commitment to rigour, to good research which may make a difference.

Sixth, they conclude with an argument for policy engagement as a prime means of making our research 'relevant'. I am not so sure. This is a larger argument than can be engaged in here, so just a few points. To begin with, influencing policy can be done by other means than direct access to Ministers and such (though I continue to believe and engage in that). Rather, one might believe it to be more effective to work with campaigning groups, to engage in wider ways of influencing public opinion, to participate in a more embedded way within 'civil society'. For me, this has been particularly productive. Further, one's decisions on these things will depend on the situation. In the Thatcher years, I did not judge highly my potential influence in the corridors of Whitehall (hence, in part, so much writing in radical journals, the founding of *Soundings*, etc.). The current situation, for me, is more ambiguous, and the possibilities for direct 'policy advice' are greater. Working in the GLC and Nicaragua were yet other relationships to the state. There is also the question of intellectual integrity and intellectual advance. Just bringing in loads of contracts is not the best means, necessarily, to advance debates nor to produce original thinking that will change ideas. Moreover, and here there is another disagreement with Dorling and Shaw, rarely is policy change a question of simply providing technically correct answers. What is always also at issue – and this is one reason why it is important to work more widely – is political will. Precisely part of what I was trying to get at – though this was entirely missed in the response – was that our wider role is not confined to answering already-specified questions ('the answer's "42", Minister') but is inevitably engaged in a contest between different understandings of the world. In all the authors' talk of *policy* there is a curious absence of *politics*. That complex articulation of intellectual responsibility with political engagement is a far more difficult, multifaceted and delicate matter than Dorling and Shaw's intemperate counterposition can, perhaps, allow for.