

“Fucking” Geography: an interview with David Bell

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Fifteen years ago the British Geographer, David Bell published a text in the journal *Environment and Planning D, Society & Space* under the title *[Screw] ing Geography (censor's version)*. This title was the result of editorial censorship of the original title *Fucking Geography*, a paper previously submitted to the scientific meeting of the American Association of Geographers in 1994. This personal/professional David Bell's experience was the subject of discussion in another article published in 2009 with the title “Fucking Geography, Again”. In the latter text, the author brings into discussion elements that go beyond the scale of his personal experience, making visible the forms of power that shape the geographic discourse and produce the alleged scientific truths.

Exploring the personal and scientific path of this impetuous Geographer, is an exciting challenge for us, geographers in places beyond the Anglo-Saxon world, at the moment that we are building our own struggles, in other space/time to assert sexualities as a component element of geographical analysis.

David Bell obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham in 1995 and he is currently a Geography Associate Professor at Leeds University in Critical Human Geography Area. Bell is also a member of the Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies, developing research in the areas of Human and Cultural geography. David Bell, focus on urban and rural geography, and approaches consumption, lifestyles, technologies and sexualities in his academic production.

The opening of the geographic academic context for studies on sexuality was an arduous job, to which David Bell actively participated, with important scientific partners like Gill Valentine and Jon Binnie, among others. Bell and Valentine organized the volume "Mapping Desire - Geographies of Sexualities" in 1995, which is the first collective work on

geographies of sexualities. Bell and Binnie wrote the dazzling seminal volume "The Sexual Citizen - Queer Politics and Beyond" (2000). The results of his intellectual work, certainly contributed to the growth of studies on sexuality in Geography.

The results of pioneering and provocative attitudes to the established scientific fields are always, paradoxically, composed of pain and delight. This interview is about David Bell's geographic and scientific path, merged with his personal perceptions.

Joseli Maria Silva and Paulo Jorge Vieira: Screwing Geography/ Fucking Geography was the source of controversy around the forms of scientific knowledge production, as well as the power relations that involve the validation of some approaches and languages in the academic. What is your opinion about the results you got from publishing these ideas?

David Bell: At first, the idea of “fucking geography” was mainly a joke and a provocation. I wanted it to be a bit offensive or controversial, as a way to shake things up – specifically, to shake up the Association of American Geographers’ conference, where the paper was to be presented. I hoped to make a splash. And, of course, the story got better (or worse, depending on your view) because the AAG committee refused to let me use the f-word in the conference programme. So, after some letter-writing back and forth, the paper was retitled, and that in itself became a way into thinking about what we can and cannot say in geography. And the title was a play on words, with fucking both a verb and an adjective, signalling both a desire to fuck (with) geography, and exasperation at the discipline. The whole paper was originally inspired by a great picture by Tom of Finland, which shows a

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man literally fucking the globe. I used that image, and one by Della Grace, in my talk at the AAG.

Anyway, some people say they like the paper, and it did get some attention because of the title – the conference session was packed out. But in the end, it’s known more for that one word than for the rest of what I was trying to say. The paper itself was just the start of an engagement with queer theory and politics, really – maybe part of the ambivalent process of *queering* geography. Like I said, a joke and a provocation.

So I was pleased to revisit it in “Fucking Geography, Again”, and to be able to reassess the incident and the aftermath, as well as considering the broader project of fucking geography. But in terms of the impact on the discipline, it’s negligible. Any “shock” was soon absorbed; I was invited to publish a version of the paper in a mainstream (if sometimes “edgy”) journal, and then that was that. I don’t think it really opened up a space to debate issues such as language or what’s appropriate to talk about in an academic context – that debate was being had all around, anyway. Geography retains a squeamishness, as Bob McNee put it. I wanted to draw attention to that, to toy with it a bit. A lot of my earlier work was like that, to be honest. The question, therefore, remains: was geography fucked? I’m not sure it was.

JMS and PJV: Landowners were the focus of interest in your masters and doctoral studies. How did sexuality begin to attract your intellectual attention?

DB: Well, my early career was a series of accidents; I never intended to become an academic, but ended up falling into it. I got a job teaching geography part-time at my local polytechnic, and was offered the chance to study for an MPhil at the same time. I started working on landownership on the advice of my ex-tutor, the great historical geographer Tony Phillips. I think he really wanted my findings, but didn’t have time to sit in the archives for months on end reassembling the patterns of landownership. It was a very enjoyable and straightforward Ph.D., with lots of maps. I may return to the topic in my old age!

Anyway, I had mainly studied physical geography before – I was destined to become a scientist, and in fact really wanted to be a geologist, but that’s another story... I certainly had never thought about sexuality as a topic in geography, and never came across it as an undergraduate. But then I began teaching social and cultural geography, and was generally looking around at new and interesting areas of work, cruising the journals, and I read a piece by Larry Knopp (1990) in the *Geographical Magazine* – a piece which generated

a lot of hostile responses of the typical narrow-minded “what’s this got to do with geography?” sort. The responses made me very angry, but I also saw that sexuality could (and indeed *should*) be a topic in geography, so I started to gather together what had been published so far – Larry’s work, Barbara Weightman’s, other odds and ends, plus lots of work in other disciplines that was about geographical topics – urban sociology, women’s studies, and of course work from lesbian and gay studies. I put in handfuls of inter-library loan requests, which was also part of the fun – maybe a legacy of my time in the archives. And I wrote an article reviewing that work, and urging geographers to take sexuality seriously as a topic – that’s “Insignificant Others”, published in the Institute of British Geographers’ journal *Area* in 1991.

That’s when I made contact with a lot of other people working in the area, such as Gill Valentine, Jon Binnie and Julia Cream. We then formed the Sexuality & Space Network, as a way to keep in touch with each other about research and so on, and we organized a one-day conference in 1992, called ‘Lesbian and Gay Geographies?’, held at University College London. The conference attracted a lot of interest and support, and some of the speakers would later contribute to *Mapping Desire*. There was a lot of exciting work being done on sexuality at this time (mostly outside geography) – queer theory was beginning to gain prominence – and it also chimed with the ‘cultural turn’ in human geography. Sexuality was definitely on the agenda, then, at least among a small group of (mainly) cultural geographers, those interested in topics like identity and approaches like post structuralism.

JMS and PJV: Throughout your academic career you were a professor at the Cultural Studies Department. How do you see the relationship between Cultural Studies and Contemporary Geography?

DB: As I’ve just mentioned, there is an idea in the recent history of human geography (at least in the UK) of a “cultural turn”, that happened some time in the 1980s. This meant, in fact, that lots of human geographers began to read cultural studies, which was a big growth area in academia at that time. It was also at this time that postmodernism was a hot topic, and the two intersected in interesting (and sometimes frustrating) ways. When I moved from geography into cultural studies, in 1995, I was partly taken on because I had a geographical background, which my new boss thought was a really good addition to the more traditional cultural studies, which was quite textual.

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Cultural studies was moving away from texts, to look more at cultural practices and cultural identities, so a geographer working on sexuality was easily remade as a cultural studies professor!

And it's also true that some ideas from geography were seen as a bit “sexy”, thanks mainly to the “new” cultural geography (which was, in large part, a geographical adaptation of cultural studies, so there's something a bit narcissistic about cultural studies finding “new” cultural geography interesting). I think that human geography was revived and enriched by its encounter with cultural studies, though lots of people disagree, and see the “cultural turn” as a distraction, an annoyance even. But my view, as I have outlined in an entry for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* on precisely this cultural studies-geography intersection, is that the encounter was productive, and pushed geography into interesting new areas. Nowadays, you can still see that impact in the kinds of work being done in human geography; sadly, cultural studies has declined as a discipline, at least in the UK -- a victim of its (inaccurate) reputation as a kind of uncritical cultural populism (or as applying high theory to low culture). But I am pleased to have been becoming a geographer during the “cultural turn”, because I learnt a lot!

And my ten years teaching cultural studies was a really wonderful experience, which I can now bring back into my teaching in geography. I had the privilege to work alongside some remarkable colleagues in cultural studies, most notably in my time at Staffordshire University, where I had the freedom to develop teaching and research in whatever areas I wanted – ranging from cybercultures to consumption to cultural policy.

JMS and PJV: In 2000, along with Jon Binnie, in your work “The Sexual Citizen” (Bell and Binnie, 2000), the issues of sexual citizenship and sexual rights acquire a spatiality that many previous researches, from other social sciences, had neglected. How do you see the importance of this work as part of queer research today? How do you see the current debate on sexual citizenship in a global level, where visible forms of identity protection of rights (as conjugalities and homoparenting) coexist with a growing post-identity criticism?

To us it seemed obvious that sexual citizenship had a *geography* – or a series of geographies, at different scales. All aspects of citizenship have geographies, in fact. Maybe that's just the way geographers think – but the way we approached sexual citizenship resonated

with a lot of other scholars in that area. That book is quite highly regarded by people working on sexual citizenship and related topics, for example in queer legal studies, and I think a large part of that is due to the inevitably geographical approach that we took.

Clearly, a big part of the debate about sexual citizenship has been at the global scale – the notion of a “global gay citizen”, or of what Lisa Duggan has called the “new homonormativity”, which is a kind of globalized western model of “good gay citizenship”. But we didn't want to see this so simply; as geographers, we were aware that global flows don't just produce homogeneity. How they “land” and interact with specific places produces a variegated landscape. The problem with the globalizing of the new homonormativity is that it comes with a script about how to be gay. And this is met with resistance as well as acceptance.

At the same time, “tolerance” is taken as a sign of being modern, and this has been used effectively in some places to argue for rights claims based on the desire to be seen as modern (or western, or European, or whatever). These are really interesting and important issues, and they are profoundly geographical. Jon has written a lot more on this question in his book *The Globalization of Sexuality* (Binnie, 2004), and is exploring it in a project he's currently working on with his colleague Christian Klesse, looking at transnational LGBT activism in Europe. Recent debates about gay marriage in Argentina have also traced a familiar line, in terms of thinking about what legalization says about the nation – and, as we've seen elsewhere, bringing that into conflict with the church. Religion is turning out to be a major faultline in “advances” around sexual citizenship – something we didn't explore enough in *The Sexual Citizen*. Gill Valentine and some colleagues at Leeds have recently finished a project on the Anglican Church in the UK, US and Africa, which has reinforced this point; we don't only have to consider the state as the major influence on how sexual citizenship takes shape, but also powerful influences such as religion.

I still think debates about citizenship have been very important in queer scholarship and activism, even though they have also been subject to critique and deconstruction. Appeals to citizenship are nonetheless very powerful, though with strings attached. Citizenship is normative, too, and not everyone fits the profile of what a citizen looks like. And asking to become a citizen means accepting responsibilities as well as gaining rights. It's a bargain, and it's not always balanced in your favour. This has been one of the big debates about what queers should be asking for

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– what's at stake in asking to be allowed to be a citizen? In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner (2000) asks these questions in interesting ways, I think. And we tried to think them through in *The Sexual Citizen*, too. In 2006 Jon and I edited a special issue of *Political Geography* which revisited the geographies of sexual citizenship, and that volume included a paper by Michael Brown that picked up precisely on the theme of the obligations (rather than rights) that sexual citizenship brings (Brown, 2006).

But as you say, we now have new debates to think about, too, as we move "beyond" identity in some ways, and thus maybe also beyond notions like rights and citizenship. Identitarian politics, rights-claims, all these things have been critiqued – though they are still powerfully appealing, too.

JMS and PJV: One of the new elements of your research is the approach of minority sexual practices, identified as fetishists, as "dogging" (Bell, 2006) or the sadomasochism (Bell, 1995). What is the potential of the study of these practices for the construction of knowledge in Human Geography? Is the potentially conservative field of Geography prepared to discuss this type of research?

DB: A large part of my interest has always been in sexual cultures – about how different groups develop ways of doing sex, ways of identifying (or disidentifying). I think it's part of my cultural studies worldview, to see cultural formations as very interesting things to read with. And I always liked that urban anthropological/symbolic interactionist work from the US, places like the Chicago School, work on tearooms, highway rest stops, cruising grounds. I like the attention to detail, to looking closely at how different sexual cultures work, to see them as creative expressions (for an interesting discussion of the legacy of this work, see Irvine 2003). I'm interested in the interplay of place, bodies, desires and imaginings.

At one level, you can get away with working on these things in geography so long as you show that there's some kind of spatial dimension – that it is a *geographical* phenomenon. But, as I already said, there's also a lot of squeamishness, so it isn't always an easy ride. That said, I do think it's remarkable the range of topics that are written about now in geography, from bestiality to strip clubs, from the erotics of the library to the nudist beach. I think that's been a major achievement of the work on geographies of sexualities, that necessary pluralizing – that interest in the different ways in which bodies, desires, etc... can come together. In terms of broader issues of knowledge

production, well, it's part of an ongoing dialogue about what constitutes legitimate *things* to research and legitimate ways of *doing* research. And I think some real achievements have been made there, as part of a critical reappraisal of how we do geography. There does seem to be a greater acceptance (though clearly still with limits) about what can be geography.

And sometimes there are particular reasons for writing about sexual cultures. For example, my work on sadomasochism was motivated – theoretically and politically – as a way of responding to a legal case here in the UK, in which a group of gay men were charged with assault (and various other things) for engaging in consensual same-sex SM practices. This case became very well known among queer scholars in the UK, not least because it threw light onto the constructions of legal citizenship. The case was debated in the Law Lords, who said some incredibly strange things that enabled them to ignore the issue of consent – it didn't matter that these men had consented, the actual acts were still seen as assault. I was also interested in the politicization of SM, which offered a different way of being political than previous LGBT movements, precisely because it focussed on acts rather than identities.

The dogging paper came from a very different direction. It was partly a way to connect to my work on technology, which is an area I am still developing – the sex lives of technologies. More recently I have written about surveillance technologies (Bell, 2009), and am currently working on a chapter called "New sexual affordances", which looks at this issue, drawing on work in science and technology studies as well as sexuality studies. I'm interested in how technologies become incorporated into sexual repertoires, and augment or even help to build new sexual cultures – just as dogging arguably wouldn't exist without the car, the cellphone and in internet.

JMS and PJV: In your work "Queer country: rural lesbian and gay lives" with Gill Valentine published in 1995, there is an important contribution to dismantle the traditional approach of opposition and hierarchy between rural and urban areas in geographical science. What was the impact of this work in other Geography areas beyond the group of scholars of sexuality?

DB: Well, I think that rural geography/rural studies was also affected by the "cultural turn", and began to think differently about what the rural is. There has been a huge amount of interesting rethinking going on, as the rural has changed and as our ways of thinking

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about it have changed. And including sexuality as a legitimate topic to think about is part of that transformation. When Chris Philo wrote about "neglected rural others" (Philo 1992), he partly paved the way to turn a focus on sexuality. This has been, I think, one of the most interesting and welcoming areas of research.

At a broader level, I guess you can read the *queering* of rural geography as a symbol of how sexuality research has penetrated many of the subdisciplines. And that's also part of the mission that we set ourselves – so we went to political geography events and rural geography events, not just cultural geography events. We wanted to bring sexuality into as many different areas – as I have said before, the one that I'd still like to conquer is transport geography. There's so many interesting potential topics, from car cruising to air stewards, from "hiking dykes" to brief encounters at railway stations. One day I will find the time to write a paper and send it to one of the mainstram transport journals. We're also seeing the human/physical geography divide being breached, with work such as Cate Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson's (2010) collection, *Queer Ecologies*. That's a really exciting area at the moment.

JMS and PJV: The relations between feminist and queer geographies involve similarities and differences. What are the limits to be recognized and the productive relations between these two fields of knowledge ?

DB: I'd start by saying that some feminist geographers have been incredibly supportive and have contributed a lot to the agenda for geographies of sexualities. And we share a lot of theoretical terrain, too – feminist theory has been profoundly influential and important. Gender studies as a "discipline" has been one of the places where interesting interdisciplinary work on sexuality is being carried out. Of course there are differences, and sometimes tensions. We're not focussed on exactly the same concerns. But the phrase you use, "productive affinities", sums it up very nicely. A couple of years ago, we hosted a conference at Leeds exploring the intersections of queer and feminist geographies, which offered a chance to reassess those productive affinities. And journals like *Gender, Place and Culture* have been generally very receptive to publishing work on sexualities.

I have in fact recently been thinking about how the story of geography's engagement with sexuality gets told, for example in surveys or histories of the discipline. And sometimes sexuality is located as a

subfield of feminist work. I don't think that's exactly right; I think sexuality work emerged at the intersection of a number of subdisciplines. But it's certainly true that feminist work was inspirational, and helped point us towards useful and innovative theories and methods. Our work in *The Sexual Citizen*, for example, drew on a lot of feminist research. And it was in part feminists who reminded us (and we who reminded them) of the importance of studying heterosexuality, too.

JMS and PJV: The incorporation of queer theory in sexualities research made progress in geographical analysis possible. What are, in your opinion, the main theoretical and methodological contributions of so-called "Queer Geography" for Geographical Science as a whole?

DB: I doubt there have been many contributions to geographical science *as a whole*! Most of geography remains resolutely unaffected by queer. But in those areas where there has been an effect, I guess it's similar to what has happened in other disciplines. First, it's opened up new topic areas, and to some extent legitimated the study of sexualities, sexual practices, and so on. But queer has also moved from being a noun – an *object* to be studied – to being a verb, something *done to* the discipline. Has geography been queered? Yes and no. The great hulk of mainstream geographical science remains largely immune, though some people are trying – think, for example, of Larry Knopp and Michael Brown's (2003) work on diffusion theory or migration. Or some of J.K. Gibson-Graham's work in economic/political geography (eg Gibson-Graham, 1996). And certainly in the areas most affected by the "cultural turn". As Jon wrote in his "Coming out of geography" (Binnie, 1997) – which is one of the most important contributions to this debate -- there's a need to think about queer as an *epistemology*, and a *methodology*. I think more progress has been made in the latter, largely (as ever with geography) by importing and "geographizing" debates being had in other disciplines about "queer methods".

Epistemologically, queer theory is often bracketed in with things like poststructuralism, and so is seen to have provoked some rethinking of what geography is and what doing geography means. More broadly, of course, it's via "queer geography" that key thinkers such as Judith Butler have been popularized (if that's the right word) in geography. We've been part of a lively conversation, to be sure, one that has had an impact -- albeit not a universal impact -- across geography. As I said before, one of the most

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interesting possibilities, just beginning to be explored really, is to queer physical geography, or maybe to queer(y) the physical/human divide in geography. I feel like that’s an area we need to keep pushing at, and where there’s some great work being done (though not much of it by geographers). Ideas like “queer nature” seem to me to be well worth exploring.

JMS and PJV: The relationship between academia, social movements and the State are growing elements of discussion in the scientific realm. From your experience (Bell, 2007), how do you see the importance of building an emancipatory scientific knowledge as an element of contemporary societies transformation in this time of crisis? What is the role of Geography?

DB: I’ve been really interested by recent debates about so-called “public geographies”, which have reinvigorated the discussion about geography’s “relevance”, and about our impact beyond the academy. Clearly there are lots of different dimensions to this, from quite narrowly instrumental approaches (which seek to prove “impact” in order to score points in research evaluations or to win research grants, for example) to much more broad-ranging thinking about knowledge and its uses.

One strand of this concerns the activism-academia divide, seeking to find ways to make our work *politically* useful. And while I don’t think we should *expect* activists (or whoever) to simply take our ideas on board, I think we have a responsibility to think about ways our work might be able to make a difference. I don’t always feel particularly optimistic about this, however. I remember being at a conference which was trying to bridge this activist-academic divide, and Jeffrey Weeks was speaking about his conceptualization of identity as a “necessary fiction”. While this seems pretty self-evident and uncontroversial to any good poststructuralist, some of the self-identified activists in the audience were outraged. How dare he call their identities – around which they were struggling – *fictions!* So while we might tell a story of queer politics and queer theory working in harmony, there are always difficulties of translation and the danger of appropriation – look how Butler had to try to clarify her work on performativity, and had to try to persuade us that she hadn’t meant to infer that all dress (or all identity) is drag (Butler, 1993)

Beyond the specific issues of queer geography, there are bigger issues here. In the UK we have been debating the “relevance” of geography for some time; or, as Noel Castree (2002) nicely put it, we’ve been

worrying about “the spectre of irrelevance”. The public geographies debate is the most recent turn in that longer story. We shouldn’t see this as a matter of *entitlement* – that we *should* be listened to, or consulted – but instead work out where and how we want to intervene. I do think it’s healthy to remember the world outside the university, and that we do have diverse “publics” that we could (and should) engage with. In the UK, though, we’ve lost the role of the “public intellectual”, and higher education has been seen as unimportant, or only important for generating wealth. We need to resist that, but not by retreating into intellectual obfuscation. I like Michael Warner’s discussion of this, too, in an essay in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002).

My own experiences, related in the paper you refer to in the question, was somewhat different, and was more narrowly instrumental, driven by the imperatives of my employer. A key issue I wrote about was translation: how to make our ideas useful and useable to different audiences. And I still think that’s a key issue – which is why doing things like interviews is also useful. So I’d like to end by thanking you both for giving me this opportunity to explain, in a very personal way, some of the thoughts of this “impetuous geographer” about fucking geography (in all senses of the phrase).

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