A Queer Journey to Queer Geography: Interview with Lawrence Knopp

Joseli Maria Silva
Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa (UEPG) – Brazil

Paulo Jorge Vieira
Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território - Universidade de Lisboa – Portugal

Since July 2010, Argentina are the position of Latin American vanguard in recognizing the right of same sex couples to civil marriage. In addition to the legitimization of equality in the public sphere between homosexual and heterosexual, the fact implies the subversion of the heteronormative character of marriage and family formation, which creates a demand for change from the perspective of understanding of social relations that rules the bonds of dependency between people forming family units. The transformations in terms of citizenship and queer politics pose challenges to the various social sciences, including by geography. In this effervescent context that we have the honor of interviewing Larry Knopp, one of the most important geographers of contemporary queer theory, questioning what makes his practice on academic space, sexuality and citizenship also a political struggle.

Larry Knopp held a doctorate in geography from the University of Iowa in 1989 and is currently director of the School Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences at the University of Washington – Tacoma. Larry Knopp has as one of their most frequent partners in the production of numerous articles and book chapters the geographer Michael Brown. Together they have raised challenges involving the geography with social justice, politics and citizenship related to sexuality. From this interview we hope that the ideas of Larry Knopp will spread in the geographical community in Latin America, in order to establish a productive dialogue in various places where there is interest in the approach of Queer Geography.

Joseli Maria Silva and Paulo Jorge Vieira: The approach of sexuality in your work in geography has been present since the beginning of your scientific career in the '80s. How was the reaction of the scientific community in relation to this geographical field of research?

Larry Knopp: Well, first I want to say that I am uneasy about the characterization of my career as fitting neatly into the category "scientific". My intellectual agenda has always been to transgress the traditional boundaries of academia – including those between "natural science", "social science", and "humanities" (especially the latter two). In this respect I see myself as fitting into a long tradition of geographers who view their field as holistic and integrative, while also allying myself with more recent developments in critical social and cultural theory. That said, it is certainly fair to characterize much of my work as utilizing methods and even language typically associated with "social science", and as speaking to audiences that include (but are by no means limited to) people who conceive of themselves as "scientists". In other words, I think I have been reasonably adroit at speaking across philosophical, epistemological and methodological divides. However, as I explained in "Out in Academia: The Queer Politics of One Geographer's Sexualisation", I have also been sensitive to the social and political contexts within which I have worked, and strategic in the ways I have presented both my scholarship and myself as a gay man in a heterosexist world. This has entailed, among other things, acknowledging privileges that accrue to me by virtue of my race, class, and gender, and deploying them in service of what has been ultimately a contradictory (but, I believe, defensible) scholarly and activist agenda. As a consequence, my work has been generally well-received by my peers, including many who identify much more closely with conventional social science than I do.

JMS and PJV: In your article "On the Relationship

Between Queer and Feminist Geographies", published in the journal "The Professional Geographer", in 2007, you write about a series of challenges for geographers, theoretical and methodological, such as the use of emotion, bodily sensations of the researcher in the research process. How, in your opinion, these elements have been incorporated into geographical research?

Larry Knopp: Some very humanistic cultural geographers, like Yi Fu Tuan, have been open to this for a long time and have inspired followers. But in the realm of critical social and cultural Geography, including queer Geography, this is (surprisingly) still something relatively new. We still tend to write about emotion, sensation, etc. much more than we knowingly deploy them as techniques or methods. I think that is because we still do not really know how to deal practically with our own bodily/emotional experiences as sources of knowledge. British Geography has advanced more in this area than North American Geography has. The interest there in non-representational theory is one indicator of this, as is an interest in affect and emotion. Indeed, there is a new journal called Emotion, Space, and Society which publishes work using emotions methodologically quite regularly. One feminist geographer who has been particularly successful in this area is Liz Bondi. But let's face it: There remains deeply ingrained in the modern Western mind and culture, and most importantly modern structures of power, a real fear and loathing of anything that is perceived as beyond the ability of reason and the mind to control. Emotions, bodily sensations, yearnings, desire, etc. are, quite simply, still too threatening to dominant systems of knowledge-production to be allowed more than a token amount of space within them

JMS and PJV: In the text "A Queer Journey to Queer " published in 2000 in a book edited by Pamela Moss, your sexuality, as a personal element, it is frankly stated. What is your position on the relationship of subjective elements and intellectual output of a researcher in Geography?

Larry Knopp: Well, ultimately it seems to me that all knowledge is situated (socially, culturally, politically, etc.). So it doesn't really make sense to think in terms of "subjectivity-versus-objectivity" in research as an avoidable problem. I take as given that a set of values, associated in one way or another with a researcher's personal experience and location within various structures and hierarchies, always influence his or her intellectual output. The trick is to be as conscious as possible of the ways in which that is happening and as clear as possible about the ethical, moral, and/or political stance that one takes with respect to these processes.

JMS and PJV: In several papers as Knopp (1995), Knopp (1997, 2008), Brown and Knopp (2006), including in your PHD thesis, you write about critical issues related to lesbian and gay gentrification. Currently, urban gentrification promoted by these groups still remains the primary issue in a lot of research. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in Geography?

Larry Knopp: I'm not sure I agree that there continues to be a lot of work on the role of lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities – of even of sexuality – in gentrification. In fact, it seems to me that scholarly work on gentrification itself has gone somewhat out of fashion (at least in Geography). Of course, this perception is based on what I see published and that I read, which is disproportionately in English and in Geography, Urban Studies, Planning, and closely related fields. So it is possible that in Latin American scholarship there is more work on this subject than in Anglo-America. That said, I have struggled over the years to understand my own drift away from research on the intersections between gentrification and sexuality. While there are some personal reasons, I also think the work in this area has lost some of its allure as a topic where academic work might be seen as making a difference. The juggernaut of capitalist property development seemed so unstoppable by the mid-1990s that a lot of people may have decided to re-focus their energies in ways that seemed to have more potential for political impact (and perhaps career development as well). For example, developments in queer theory have infused sexuality and space studies with more of a humanistic cultural emphasis than they had before, leading to a broadening of such studies to include a much wider range of spatialities (many of them less obviously material) than before. Related to this, the tremendous increase in interest in cultural politics by the media and popular culture may have led a younger generation of scholars to believe that the cultural realm now has more radical potential as an arena of activist scholarship than other areas. Similarly, the rise of critical and participatory GIS studies and practice have provided lots of new opportunities for critical political engagements by activist scholars, including folks interested in sexuality and space (as Michael Brown's and my "Queering the Map" paper shows). The same can be said of political ecology and critical health

geographies, both of which offer opportunities for grounded political engagement from a critical cultural perspective. Of course, there is no reason that these kinds of developments cannot have an impact in the context of scholarship about gentrification. And indeed some valiant scholars are attempting to do just that. But I suspect that many scholars just see struggles around gentrification as too disheartening and demoralizing, and have therefore chosen to pursue paths that they see as more hopeful.

JMS and PJV: Your concern with power relations and the importance of sexual politics is present in some of you work as Brown, Knopp and Morrill (2005 and 2007). What are the contributions that the geographical production on sexuality has done to the social and political accomplishments in this area?

Larry Knopp: I would say that a concern with power relations and sexual politics is present in almost all of my work, not just some of it! Indeed, I am proud to have been among the first in my field to popularize studies of sexuality and space and of the fact that an understanding of power relations has always been central to my approach. At the same time, I am mindful that there were people before me who attempted to do the same thing but were much less successful, due primarily to the virulent homophobia, heterosexism, and squeamishness generally about sexuality and desire as topics of scholarly inquiry (much less sources of knowledge). Bob McNee, Jacquie Beyer, and Larry Wolf are among the brave early scholars of sexual geographies who profoundly inspired me. I'm sure they inspired contemporaries of mine like Gill Valentine, David Bell, and Jon Binnie as well. My sense is that the political impact of sexuality and space studies has been twofold: First, it has quite literally created space for new generations of scholars who face a substantially less resistant terrain within the academy than was previously the case. This is not to say that homophobia, heterosexism, and prudishness are not still deeply entrenched within Geography and academia generally, nor that scholars who work in this area do not take substantial risks in doing so. But sexuality and space studies are now generally recognized as legitimate if not equal in importance to other areas of inquiry. Second, sexuality and space studies have probably contributed in some small way to the broader acceptance of sexuality and sexual minority issues as topics of discussion in popular culture and civil society. I hope they have also contributed to changes in attitudes towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minorities. Whether or not this is the case I cannot say. I am cautious about claiming too much influence for this or any academic work that challenges entrenched systems and structures of power. The most influential social science remains, sadly, that which serves power rather than challenging it. That is in the nature of how power works – it reproduces itself by accumulating capital of all kinds (including intellectual and cultural capital).

JMS and PJV:: In your paper with Michael Brown on oral history and participatory mapping, on the historical geography of queer Seattle you highlights a concern over the social action of the researcher. What is the current role of geographers in academia in collaboration with social movements?

Larry Knopp: This question seems closely related to the previous one. I would say that the answer depends on the particular geographers in question, the social movements involved, and the opportunities for strategic involvement that exist. With respect to sexuality and space studies, my sense is that there is no shortage of researchers who would like to be engaged with community-based organizations, but the opportunities are limited by the resources available to both the community-based organizations and the researchers. For young scholars in particular, this can be a disincentive since career advancement is based, in part, upon the ability to secure resources to support one's research. The organization with which Michael Brown and I have worked in Seattle, for instance, is a small, very poorly funded all-volunteer organization. Fortunately, we have been able to secure small amounts of support for our projects and to execute them relatively cheaply. This has cumulative benefits, as each prior success increases our "career capital" and enables us to be more competitive in future competitions for funding. Still, the stakes are nowhere near as high as they might be if we were working with different kinds of community-based groups with different agendas and access to more resources. For instance, there do exist larger and more well-funded LGBT and queer organizations, but these tend to be more professionalized and bureaucratized than the grassroots ones. As a consequence, researchers like us face decisions about trading off influence at the grassroots level for influence within what may seem like already compromised, elite organizations. In some areas, however, such trade-offs may not be quite so dire. The world of critical and participatory GIS is one area with tremendous potential. That's because of the tremendous power of GIS technically, culturally, and

politically. Funding agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, tend to see GIS as a set of techniques and technologies with significant potential to "solve" real-world problems. They understand it as something very practical and applied, rather than as something esoteric or inconsequential. So to the extent that activist researchers can associate themselves with "applied research" – especially that which carries with it the perceived authority of very powerful techniques and technologies – there is tremendous potential to engage productively with social movements. For instance, some of the most exciting work of this sort going on now involves critical and participatory GIS scholars working with groups interested in environmental justice.

JMS and PJV: In which way queer theory will transform the ontology and epistemology of geography? At that stage the Anglo-Saxon scientific geographical (a pioneer in the approach) is at present?

Larry Knopp: This is a very big question! On the one hand, I see queer theory as already having transformed (or at least broadened) the kinds of ontologies and epistemologies that are taken seriously in Geography. There is much more acknowledgment, for example, of the contingency and fluidity of social categories now than in the past, and certainly more acknowledgment of sexuality and desire as implicated in a wide range of social processes and discourses. On the other hand, I see dominant ontologies and epistemologies as not particularly threatened by queer theory, and in many ways as consolidating their dominance in spite of it. The trouble is that queer theory works both with and against certain developments – some might say contradictions – in civil society and the broader political-economies of the societies in which it has some currency. Clearly queer theory speaks to the embodied realities of people's lives and experiences. It recognizes the multiplicity, fluidity, hybridity, and indeterminacy of categories like gender and sexuality. And it takes seriously the significance of bodily sensations, emotion, and desire in understanding human relations. At a moment in history when the traditional categories of science and related systems of knowledge production are widely perceived as having failed to deliver on their promises, non-traditional ways of thinking and framing issues like these are welcome. In this sense I actually see queer theory, critical race theory, intersectionality, poststructural feminisms, and even interdisciplinarity as responses to the failed systems of knowledge production that generally exist under the rubric of "science" (especially social science). But this is not to say that these are all equally welcomed by dominant interests nor that they are safe from manipulation and co-optation by these same interests. On the contrary, many of them represent clear and direct challenges to dominant interests, in much the same way that other insurgent intellectual movements (e.g., the rise of the "new left" or of ethnic studies programs in universities) have. Like those movements – and similarly popular counter-cultural movements elsewhere in civil society – their languages and aesthetics are subject to appropriation and redeployment in service of very conservative interests. My concern, then, is that while the ontologies and epistemologies of Geography may be broadening, they are at the same time being reconfigured and reinterpreted by dominant interests in ways that preserve a patina of radicalism (especially aesthetically and linguistically) while completely dislodging them from their political and philosophic underpinnings. So "queer", for example, becomes just another lifestyle niche to be marketed to, while the idea of situated knowledge becomes an excuse for the already powerful to engage in strategic and well-informed discursive power games. In sum, while queer theory is already transforming epistemologies and ontologies in Geography in some ways, it is probably too early to say if these transformations are truly meaningful or sustainable.

JMS and PJV: Your career is striking by many intellectuals' partnerships among the most frequent has been Michael Brown. So it seems that there is a tendency to develop academic collaboration. What is the possibility of academia to develop such practices, expanding relationships with scholars from countries outside the Anglo-Saxon axis?

Larry Knopp: Obviously I think that international collaboration would be very good for Geography, geographers, academia, and the world beyond. There are many challenges to international collaboration, though. Most immediate are the resource challenges – especially time and money. But there are also cultural and other impediments related to the fact that human lives tend to be lived out in locales that are rich in unique cultural and political referents, rather than in spaces of cosmopolitanism. Then again, the advent of new techniques and technologies of real-time communication make overcoming some of these impediments, at relatively low cost, more feasible. Still, I am old-fashioned enough that I see distinct advantages to face-to-face, real-time, embodied collaboration. There is no doubt, for instance, that

Michael Brown's and my successful collaboration has had everything to do with our mutual connection to the Seattle area and our ability to work together both face-to-face and, when necessary, in "the field". In my opinion, then, international collaborations, are most likely to be successful when they feature either frequent real-time, face-to-face engagements among researchers (the traditional model, which assumes the privilege of cosmopolitanism) or when they assume cultural and spatial distance from the outset, and exploit this distance as a source of knowledge. The latter is an approach particularly exemplified by contemporary transnational social networks and political movements, in which users of the internet and mobile devices in far-flung locations forge creative collaborations with one another. This is the approach that I imagine being most practical and, in many ways, most exciting at this particular moment in history.

References

KNOPP, Lawrence. Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis. In: BELL, David; VALENTINE. Gill. (ed.). **Mapping Desire**. London and New York:Routledge, 1995, p. 149-161.

KNOPP, Lawrence. A Queer Journey to Queer Geography. In: MOSS, Pamela.(ed.). **Engaging Autobiography: Geographers Writing Lives. Syracuse,** NY: Syracuse University Press, p. 78-98, 2000.

BROWN, Michael; KNOPP, Larry; MORRIL, Richard. The 'Culture Wars' and Urban Electoral Politics: Sexuality, Race, and Class in Tacoma, Washington. **Political Geography**. Vol. 24, p. 267 - 291, 2005.

BROWN, Michael; KNOPP, Larry. Places or Polygons? Governmentality, Sexuality and Scale in The Gay and Lesbian Atlas. **Population, Space, and Place**. Vol. 12, p. 223 - 242, 2006.

KNOPP, Larry. On the Relationship Between Queer and Feminist Geographies. **Professional Geographer**. Vol. 59, p. 47 - 55, 2007.

MORRIL, Richard; KNOPP, Larry; BROWN, Michael. Anomolies in Red and Blue. **Political Geography**. Vol. 26, p. 525 - 553, 2007.

BROWN, Michael; KNOPP, Larry. Queering the Map: The Productive Tensions of Colliding Epistemologies. **Annals of the Association of American Geographers**. Vol. 98, p. 40 - 58, 2008.

KNOPP, Lawrence. Gentrification and Gay Neighborhood Formation in New Orleans: A Case Study. In: JACOBSON, Joyce. and ZELLER, Adam.(ed.). Queer Economics: A Reader. London and New York:Routledge, 2008, p. 353-373. (Reprinted from GLUCKMAN, Amy. and REED, Besty. (ed.). **Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community and Lesbian and Gay Life**, 1997).