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Dialogues in Human Geography 2014 4: 331

DOI: 10.1177/2043820614544605

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Dialogues in Human Geography
2014, Vol. 4(3) 331–334
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DOI: 10.1177/2043820614544605
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Abstract

In this commentary on John Agnew's article, the overarching issue is identified as the relationship between us (humans), our words, and our world. The commentary considers the specific question 'what do we want our concepts to do?' Drawing from recent work in political economy and geography—much of it undertaken by feminist scholars—the effects of words and ideas on our world are stressed and the emphasis is placed on considering words' work in creating future worlds. The argument is made that we assess our keywords based on how they assist us in imagining what might become, rather than what really is.

Keywords

becoming, concepts, feminist, future, keywords, words

Introduction

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what *I* choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

(Carroll, 1872)

Alice was clearly frustrated and rather shocked by Humpty Dumpty's unorthodox approach to conversation. Humpty Dumpty explained that he was in a battle with words. He singled out verbs as especially troublesome adversaries, especially compared to adjectives which, he observed, 'you can do anything with'. Humpty Dumpty experienced words as alive, unruly, and difficult to manage.

John Agnew (2014) is also interested in the lives of words. Specifically, he is concerned with our discipline's keywords' relationships to our own 'practical lives' and with the words' efficacy in helping us 'understand real-world phenomena'. John expresses his disappointment with what he perceives to be an 'obsession' with 'tracing the intellectual genealogies of its concepts' in ways that have sidelined examinations both (a) of our concepts' uptake (by 'elites and populations') and their 'real-world' effects in history and (b) of our concepts' usefulness in describing the contemporary world.

Actually, this has not been my impression of trends in our discipline. It seems that even the most etymological of analyses have also been social

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histories, sensitive to the 'practical lives' of words, as their authors have undertaken varieties of a socially embedded philology. But, even if I grant that John's representation of recent work is fair and that some historical investigations into our concepts' pasts are more text centered and less materialist than John would like, I am not convinced that it is a major problem for our discipline. There is room enough for a range of approaches to the history and meaning of our key concepts, some more idealist than others. No one approach is likely to have a monopoly on unlocking the meanings and potential of our concepts. First, as Humpty Dumpty noted, words are too unruly. Second, if some are interested in drawing a line between opposed versions of idealism and realism or, to use another formulation John uses, between static and dynamic nominalism, I remain excited about a proliferation of different ways of approaching our key concepts. The point is not so much to close down examinations of and debates about our key concepts but to enliven them. Of course, any such 'broad church' approach will engender precisely the kind of conversations we are engaged in here. But, again, the point may be not so much to argue about right and wrong ways of doing the history of concepts, as it is to figure out what we can learn about particular words and their power.

The overarching issue is the relationship between us (humans), our words, and our world. I am particularly interested in the more specific question of *what do we want our concepts to do?* At points in his article, it seems that John wants our concepts to be accurate, to match up with reality. At other points, it seems that it is the relationship between us, our words, and our world that John finds intriguing. He writes, for example,

'Ideas work to influence the world in which we are primarily interested in contexts that allow for agency in invention and reworking those ideas in relation to social and political forces that exist independently of those ideas' (p. 314).

While it may be that John and I disagree on the degree to which we think it is important to hold 'ideas' and 'social and political forces' apart, I suspect we agree on the importance of understanding how ideas can be of use to diagnose and change social

and political arrangements. This is what is meant by the question *what do we want our concepts to do?*

Keywords

Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, with its incisive brief contextual histories of meaningful but often taken-for-granted words used in describing the social world, is one of my favorite books. In *Keywords*, the changing uses and meanings of English vocabulary are traced in ways that link them to the history of capitalism and modernity. And Williams, while he packs detail into the book's short entries, does not attempt to police the language by authoritatively offering singular pure definitions. Rather than attempting to fix once and for all the meaning of this or that term, Williams showed that meanings change, that multiple, conflicting meanings can coexist, and that his selected key words and their histories do not hover outside of capitalism but are deeply rooted in the changing nature of capitalist social relations. The historical tracings Williams offers show how the meanings of words slip and slide, as humans seek to understand and change their material conditions. Each entry thus offers deliberate lessons about the present and the future, not only the past. Simply, *Keywords'* entries affirm a radically open-ended conception of the future, allowing for the importance of continuity but affirming the certainty of change. As Raymond Williams himself explained:

This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as to continuity. (1973: 24)

In considering this issue of continuity and change in relation to the question of what it is that we want geography's key words to do, I turn next to three themes drawn from recent work in political economy and geography – much of it undertaken by feminist scholars.

What work do we want our key concepts to do?

One way in which geographers, among others, have begun to see the relationship between themselves, their words, and the world is in terms of performativity. Increasingly, geographers feel comfortable claiming that some words or concepts can effect change in the world. This is a claim based on an understanding of the social world that accords power to representations, be they formulated in terms of discourses or language or something else. To take a well-known example, Linda McDowell, in her important research on workplace identity in her study of the City of London, showed how success in many workplaces in London's financial center depended crucially upon complex performances of gender and sexuality (McDowell, 1997). McDowell's work explored how individuals' performances of gender and sexuality at work were structured by and contributed to locally understood norms of masculinity and heteronormativity. In this way, McDowell built upon Butler's conceptualization of performativity as '... that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (Butler, 1993: xii). Linda McDowell changed economic geography by showing how *ideas* about differences (not only organized around gender but also race, sexuality, class, and so on), individual and social *practices* (Agnew's "practical lives"), and hence *material* inequities are connected. So, an idea about gender becomes, in a sense, gender.

More recently, economic geography has been influenced by work in science studies and in the sociology of finance, in which an even stronger claim is made about ideas creating the objects they describe. In considering how particular ideas about the economy or parts of it have worked, some scholars have argued that these ideas do not just describe some material 'reality' but have, rather, at particular times and places, been a part of shaping the material reality in question. The discipline of economics is understood, then, as performative. For example, Donald MacKenzie and Yuval Millo have stated, 'Economics does not describe an existing external "economy," but brings that economy into being:

economics performs the economy, creating the phenomena it describes' (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003: 108). In his work on financial models, MacKenzie (2008) has investigated how certain models actually affected the way financial markets worked. He borrowed the phrase 'an engine not a camera' (from Milton Friedman apparently) to capture the performative role of ideas, of words, in this case, formulated as models. His main point is that performative ideas or statements don't reflect or capture reality (the camera); they intervene in it (the engine). Interestingly, Ian Hacking uses the same metaphor to explain how he conceptualizes the power of scientific approaches (for example, in sociology or medicine) to classifying people (for example, as obese or autistic), when he states they act as '*engines* for making up people' (Hacking, 2006: emphasis added). Hacking (2006: 23) discusses the 'looping effect' characterizing the recursive relationship between social inquiry and people's understandings of themselves.

This looping effect has been taken seriously in much geographical work on neoliberalism. Foucault (2008) suggested that American neoliberalism involved a series of shifts in how individuals understood themselves. American neoliberalism's hallmark, for Foucault, is its mode of subjectification—its remaking of homo-economicus and the generalization of the enterprise form. Thus, neoliberalism marks social and political life but also deeply marks people's understandings of themselves and their lives. Wendy Larner, in particular, has drawn attention to how ideas about proper political and economic subjects inform actual practices of persons. Larner asks 'new questions'... 'about the relationship between political-economic processes and subjectification' (Larner, 2012: 362)

However, we are interested not only in recognizing neoliberalism and describing as accurately as we can how neoliberal subjectification works. We also *want* ideas and concepts to be performative. Specifically, we want *our* ideas and *our* concepts to contribute to the change (rather than the continuity) Williams noted. This has been especially clear in the ways JK Gibson-Graham sought to co-create representations and understandings of the economy that would be liberating and that could be deployed

in resubjectification (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008). Being ‘conscious and critical’ (as Williams put it), Gibson-Graham deliberately set about the simultaneous production of language *and* politics. Imagining, inventing, crafting, and telling different narratives about economies, places, and people, Gibson-Graham and their collaborators opened up the horizon with and for a new lexicon. Concepts, never mind all their weighty historical baggage, are drafted into service and remade, twisted and reformed, and judged more in terms of their generative potentiality than in terms of their accuracy. To paraphrase Gibson-Graham, the most important task is to think about what the social economy *might become, rather than what it really is.*

The avowedly future orientation in the focus on becoming (rather than what is) and on the crucial significance of imagination (what *might* become) rather than on correspondence with a real is inspiring. Gibson-Graham provide a compelling and actionable answer to the question about what we want our concepts to do. The histories of any idea cannot be denied and they surely inform any formulation of, and struggle over, how they figure in *what might become.* But the political view is present focused and future facing. This is in alignment with John’s argument, although I think we come to such a position from different directions and along different routes. I am influenced especially by feminist currents in political economy.

Conclusion

Geography’s liveliness is in part attributable to work tracing the changing meanings and uses of the key words in our lexicon and of critically examining the new arrivals in that lexicon. The issue is not so much whether working to understanding more about how concepts have been defined/redefined/employed/deployed is distracting us from our job of understanding the contemporary world. Rather, it is that these tasks are complimentary; they both can help us imagine the *worlds that might become.* At times some of us may be more interested in tracing the birth of ideas, while others may be drawn to seeing how these ideas are used and/or whether they are analytically and politically useful. But as long as we are in dialog

across these ‘divisions of labor’ then the possibility for keeping geography’s lexicon lively seems good.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Rob Kitchin for inviting me to be a part of this *Dialogues* panel. Thanks to John Agnew for providing a provocative article for us to consider and respond to.

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