The role of geography in public debate

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Abstract: Many geographers work on matters of great relevance for the issues facing society, but geography is rarely invoked in public debates over matters of contemporary concern. As a result, geographical perspectives are often missing from public discourse, and outmoded conceptions of geography are reinforced. This forum considers the importance and challenge of addressing this state of affairs. Four distinguished geographers who have been involved in different ways with the effort to raise geography’s profile consider the possibilities and limitations of enhancing geography’s public profile. Consideration is given to the prospects for raising the discipline’s visibility in high-profile public venues, the role of geography in organized international research endeavors, the challenge of linking what geographers do to social activism, and the importance of questioning the unproblematized geographical ideas and discursive norms that already circulate in the public arena.

Key words: geographic understanding, geography’s public presence, institutional position, social relevance.

I Introduction
A great deal of geographic scholarship touches on the most visible, hotly debated issues of our time. Geographers have something to say about everything from homelessness to climate change. Their work has a direct bearing on understandings of geopolitical shifts in the wake of the war in Iraq, the impacts of globalization, and the social causes and consequences of racism. Yet, with few exceptions, geographers and geographical perspectives do not figure prominently in the public debate over these issues. This is particularly the case in North America but it holds true for much of the rest of the world as well.

The underrepresentation of Geography in the public arena becomes clear in comparison with such disciplines as Economics, Political science, Sociology, or Biology. Journalists, public policy-makers, pundits and others frequently look to these disciplines for insights, not because most practitioners undertake research and writing with the primary goal of informing public debate, but because they have come to be seen as repositories of insight on matters of contemporary importance. Not so Geography – or at least not very often. As a consequence, critical geographical perspectives and ideas are largely missing from the public discussion of issues and events, and little is presented that might challenge the widespread conception of geography as an exercise in place-name memorization.

The significance and urgency of this matter prompted me, in my capacity as 2003–2004 President of the Association of
American Geographers (AAG), to organize a plenary session on Geography’s role in public debate for the AAG’s centennial anniversary meeting, held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 14–19 March 2004. The plenary brought together four distinguished geographers who have each been involved in activities aimed at raising geography’s profile in public debate. They have done so, however, in different ways. Harm de Blij has become one of American Geography’s most visible public figures through his media commentaries and his participation on the lecture circuit. B. L. Turner II has been at the forefront of advancing Geography’s profile in governmental, quasi-governmental, and non-governmental organizations. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has emerged as a significant voice seeking to link geographical teaching and research with social activism. Derek Gregory is increasingly known as one of Geography’s foremost public intellectuals because of his insightful commentaries and his participation on the lecture circuit.

Since the addresses were part of an AAG meeting, they necessarily focus predominantly on the North American situation. Nonetheless, they raise issues of broader import that have received considerable attention in this and other journals (see, for example, Massey, 2001; Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Dicken, 2004). The editors of Progress in Human Geography thought it appropriate to publish the addresses in one of our recently launched forums both to spark reflection on the substantive issues addressed in the essays and to honor the AAG on the occasion of its 100th anniversary.

Lamenting Geography’s marginalization in public debate seems to be a recurring theme for the discipline. Why is this so? Are geographers simply making ineffective connections between their work and the issues of the day, or are there larger societal circumstances working against the recognition of geography’s potential contributions? How can or should Geography expand its influence? Attempts to address questions such as these usually focus on particular topics (e.g., public policy) or subject areas (e.g., human impacts on the environment). The contributors to this forum take a different approach – offering crosscutting perspectives on the topic based on their particular experiences and insights. The essays that follow range from examinations of more commonly recognized avenues for promoting Geography in public debate – raising the discipline’s visibility in high-profile public forums (de Blij) and influential organizations (Turner) – to less frequently discussed but no less important matters – linking what geographers do to social activism (Gilmore) and questioning the unproblematicised geographical ideas and discursive norms that already circulate in the public arena (Gregory).

Reading the essays not just as individual statements but as a collection provides telling insights into the challenge of raising geography’s profile in public debate. In the two essays that frame the forum there is an interesting synergy between an account that draws confidently on the potential of the discipline to inform public debate based on conceptions of the discipline commonly shared by geographers (de Blij) and a call for a politically and critically defensible geography that challenges prevailing spatial strategies and understandings (Gregory). Similarly, considering the juxtaposition of institutional participation (Turner) and social activism (Gilmore) provides insights into the possibilities and limitations of different strategies to linking the scholarly and the applied. Taken as a whole, the collection of essays raises challenges both for individual geographers and for geographical organizations such as the AAG. They do not provide a single avenue forward. Instead, they highlight some of the critical directions – and critical engagements – that geographers must confront if
they are to enhance Geography’s role in public debate in effective, constructive, and ethical ways.

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II Raising geography’s role in public debate

It has been more than 15 years since the appearance of former Executive Director Ronald F. Abler’s memorable Presidential Address in the December 1987 issue of the Annals of the AAG (Abler, 1987). His title, ‘What shall we say? To whom shall we speak?’ could have been the subtitle of this plenary session. Indeed, that particular issue of the Annals is worth revisiting in today’s context. Also included are a significant but largely unheeded exhortation by Robert W. Kates, ‘The human environment: the road not taken, the road still beckoning’ (Kates, 1987) and an interesting exchange between Wilbur Zelinsky and Geraldine Pratt over the appropriateness of Pratt’s article on housing in urban Canada in a geography journal (Zelinsky, 1987; Pratt, 1987). The ‘What does geography represent?’ issue roiled the profession in America at a time when public image was obviously of concern, especially among senior members of the academy.

I especially enjoyed rereading this issue because it appeared about nine months after former AAG President George Demko had invited me to deliver one of the four ‘President’s Sessions’ during the April 1987 AAG Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon (de Blij, 1987). Although the Editor of the Annals at the time, Susan Hanson, decided not to publish my comments (thus saving me, I am sure, many days of grief and the profession much embarrassment), it was pleasing to find several of my arguments endorsed and, indeed, elaborated by Abler, Kates, and Zelinsky. I argued that renewed investment in regional geography (that is, area studies including language competence) and human-environmental interactions would bear fruit in several arenas, not only the scholarly but also the popular. Under popular I included university administrators badly in need of enlightenment about the indispensability of geography in a ‘universal’ curriculum.

Imagine therefore my pleasant surprise when, upon reading Abler’s address, I found him ‘... impressed with the way traditional regional geographers with bad reputations among their junior colleagues can fill classrooms with enviable numbers of interested, enthusiastic students. Moreover, [these regional geographers’] insights are highly prized by government agencies and private firms ... if we do not move quickly to reclaim regional geography, that part of our intellectual birthright will be irretrievably lost. We have left a large vacuum, which is rapidly being filled by centers that are staffed from language departments and area studies programs’ (Abler, 1987). There are other implications. How many of us were first attracted to the discipline by what Fritz Nelson recently described as the ‘revelation’ of a regional course he took as an undergraduate student (Solis, 2004)?

Abler’s prophesy has been amply borne out as regional geography and area-specific courses barely survive in the country’s major geography departments. His concerns are also reflected in the contemporary literature; for example, in a recent book purporting to display, to a general audience, the geographic dimensions of terrorism, in which regional and cultural perspectives are almost totally lacking (Cutter et al., 2003). There was a time when what geographers had to say about global regions and foreign areas represented an almost proprietary ‘big issue’ context. That time has gone.

Gone, but not, as I will report later, forgotten by the general public. It is not surprising that the concerns raised by Abler would lead to an intradisciplinary debate (in the United States) on the question of what big-picture issues geographers can raise in public discourse. The Program Committee of the 2001 New York AAG Meeting invited a journalist
whose science writings appear in the *New York Times* to comment on this matter during the opening session (Wilford, 2001). He not only said that geographers have ‘done a poor job of speaking the popular language, of conveying in simple and direct terms what is important about their work’; he also argued that Geography, unlike the other sciences he covers, lacks any big-picture focus. Moreover, Wilford wondered whether geographers are actually ‘discouraged from thinking and speaking out in the popular language’.

Wilford’s comments evoked some pointed responses (Abler, 2001; de Blij, 2001). He cited the opening of Maya tombs and the landing of rovers on Mars as the kinds of big-picture items to which Geography has no equivalent, but he was obviously unaware of significant work done by geographers in fields ranging from environmental change to economic behavior. In this respect he is not alone, as revealed by his colleague the *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman (Berry, 2002). It is obviously difficult for some to perceive that Geography’s big pictures evolve incrementally, not sensationally.

Some published responses to Wilford’s arguments suggest a misunderstanding of his position (Cutter et al., 2002). The ‘Big Questions in Geography’ that will arouse public and policy-maker interest do not include such esoterica as ‘How do we delineate space?’ or ‘How do we measure the unmeasurable?’ In this time of climate change and global warming, it is interesting to note that not one of the authors’ 10 summarized ‘Big Questions’ refers to what must surely be one of our key issues, the relationships between natural environments and human societies, spatial and temporal. This is not the same as asking how the world has been transformed by human action, a rubric so broad and interdisciplinary that Geography can scarcely lay claim to it.

I venture to suggest that the general public and policy-makers do not want to hear about our intradisciplinary priorities. They want to know what geographers have to contribute to big issues already under discussion. Wilford may believe that opening Maya tombs and landing Mars rovers are proprietary disciplinary endeavors, but scientists know better. Whether the ‘big issue’ is planetary warming, global terrorism, Pacific-Rim competition, governing Iraq, or energy prospects, the scope is far greater than any academic discipline but the geographic perspective is indispensable.

This brings me back to Abler’s exhortation concerning regional geography. In fact, regional geography survives – if not in most of our major universities, then at least in the public eye. Believe it or not, the informed public still thinks that geographers have particular and unusual perspectives and insights on foreign areas as well as domestic issues, and that geographers can explain ‘the way the world works’ because they have a comprehensive view of it. I say this with some confidence based on nearly two decades of interaction with the general public via television, radio, and the public-lecture circuit involving, literally, thousands of personal exchanges. During my years as Geography Editor for ABC-TV’s ‘Good Morning America’ I reached an average of four million viewers per appearance, teaching me things both good and bad about the power of television (de Blij, 1990). During my subsequent role as Geography Analyst for NBC News I faced for the first time the voluminous challenge of electronic interaction.

All this taught me some things about the expectations of the public when it wants to hear from us. There appears to be a certain lag time, so that the public impression of Geography may, in the professional view of some of us, be dated by perhaps a couple of decades. That is probably why many in the general public still associate Geography with area studies, language competence, and field experience. The public is bombarded by opinions from political ‘scientists’, historians, retired military ‘analysts’ and other talking heads. The perspectives of Geography – environmental, spatial,
interconnective – tend to be fresh, insightful, thought-provoking, often surprising, and, in my experience, invariably welcome.

All this suggests that part of the answer to the second question in Abler’s 1987 title is ‘those who will afford us the opportunity to be heard’. Reaching the stage on which to participate in the public debate can be more difficult than demonstrating Geography’s relevance once there. The competition for space in national newspapers and time on television is fierce, and enlightened editors and producers are few and far between. But they can be found, sometimes in key positions, and they tend to share an often vague but cultivable unease over our society’s geographic illiteracy, especially when it is demonstrably related to our national security and competitiveness. Identifying such potentially helpful media people is as important as it is to convert doubtful university administrators to geography’s cause.

Raising Geography’s profile in the public debate, therefore, requires more than having something useful to say. It also compels us to create opportunities in extremely competitive media environments to break into the system, to gain a seat at the table. It is probably true that most of us are by nature disinclined to make this effort, but while the discomforts are real the rewards of success can be significant.

1 Arenas of public debate

In a recent issue of the AAG Newsletter, AAG President Alexander B. Murphy expressed concern over the paucity of books on issues in the public debate, written for the informed general public by geographers (Murphy, 2003). It is instructive to study the arenas where the public debate finds expression, and books for the informed lay public do indeed form an important venue. Quantitatively, geographers contribute modestly in this field (Gould, 1993; Monmonier, 1996; Lewis and Wigen, 1997; Michaels and Balling, 2000) but there is an additional problem: their books are rarely reviewed in the literature or on television seen by the informed public. Peter Gould’s book on AIDS was reviewed critically in the New York Times Book Review; Mark Monmonier received a more perceptive response in the Economist, and Lewis and Wigen got a dismissive note – but at least a mention – in Foreign Affairs (Fukuyama, 1998), but as far as I have been able to determine, not a single book by a geographer has ever been reviewed on C-Span or PBS television by Charlie Rose or Brian Lamb, where the opportunities for interactive critique are far greater.

The public debate also finds expression in the serious periodical literature (the Economist, Atlantic Monthly, Scientific American and a host of other journals) and in the popular press, including the editorial pages of major newspapers such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. As in the case of the lecture arena, occasional contributions by geographers are far outnumbered by those from other specialists.

It may be true that, as Ronald Abler argued in his Presidential Address, much of this writing never gets to its intended audience anyway, at least not in the capital of the sole superpower. ‘A great deal is written in Washington’ he states, ‘[but] very little is read there. Most people are too frantic to read. They rely heavily – often exclusively – on what they are told. It seems clear to me ... that we influence far more people in the public and private sectors ... by talking than by writing’ (Abler, 1987). Whether or not he is correct, it is obviously important to gain a larger foothold in this cacophony of commentary. Its productive arena ranges from nontrash television (such as PBS, which for years carried a geography series called ‘The Power of Place’ in which regional specialists appeared and a geographer summarized each segment) to the public-lecture circuit, university and college lecture series, and local-interest groups that can serve as stepping stones to wider audiences.
To anyone who becomes involved in the American public-lecture-circuit scene, a few surprises are in store. This is a veritable industry, extremely competitive, dominated by a cadre of speakers whose agents vie, sometimes bitterly, for big-budget assignments on behalf of their big-name clients ranging from television personalities to retired military figures. Many millions of dollars circulate annually through this system whose patrons include so-called town halls, foreign relations councils, business conventions, women’s clubs, and advocacy groups—among others. Two aspects of this industry are especially noteworthy. First, those comparatively few academics who have become established on the circuit usually owe their success to a bestselling book or series of books intended for the general public. In our temporal-obsessed society this tends to mean historians. In nearly 300 appearances over the past 15 years, I have been the first geographer ever to appear before every audience (ranging from several hundred to several thousand) except one. That exception was the Chautauqua Institution in New York, where since the inauguration of its summer-long lecture series more than 100 years ago I was the second geographer to appear, 35 years after the first.

Secondly, the lecture circuit is challenging but can yield major dividends. Town-hall and other audiences tend to be well informed, vigorously share our concern over national geographic illiteracy and its security and competitive implications, and have the resources to make a difference. Some listeners will go to their local school board, or to the administration of the college or university of which they are alumni, to discover the status of geography teaching and to demand improvement. A few have even been moved to make fairly substantial contributions to our professional organizations or to their Alma-Mater Geography Departments, convinced that geography’s message has merit.

Two other corners of the public-debate arena are right in our own backyards. Virtually every university or college has a student-activity-fee supported ‘entertainment’ series whose administrators tend to present a range of diversions that usually includes one or two serious presenters per semester or season. Student audiences are important, and this is a virtually untapped market for our insights. In addition, universities and colleges are always in search of nominees for honorary-degree consideration. A commencement address affords a superb opportunity to tell most students (and parents) in attendance what they have been missing.

2 The perils of profile-raising

As the foregoing suggests, numerous opportunities exist to raise Geography’s profile in the public debate. The associated perils are familiar to anyone who has attempted to present geographic viewpoints to the public in everyday language. One of these risks, as Murphy states, is the need to engage in the kind of generalization that has a way of arousing the ire of certain colleagues, especially if they disagree with what is being said. Another relates to representation. Involvement in public discourse requires explication as well as speculation (town-hall question-and-answer sessions often focus on anticipation and prediction), and what is said may not be the majority view in the discipline. Reactions among colleagues may not, in such instances, always be collegial.

Another risk relates to the misperception of Geography and geographers held even by some members of the informed public. A recent experience underscored this. In October 2003 I submitted a brief opinion piece to the New York Times proposing a temporary Dayton-model solution for the transitional administration of Iraq and suggesting that this model should recognize the country’s historic and cultural-geographic regionalism. I argued that such a process might facilitate reinvolvelement of the United Nations in the country’s reconstruction.
The text was condensed to letter-length and published (de Blij, 2003). It is the custom of the paper to print the institutional affiliation of writers whose views are accepted for publication, and I had asked to be identified as a Professor of Geography at Michigan State University. The editor, Susan Kirby, telephoned me to report that this would not happen, since ‘what [you] wrote here really has nothing to do with geography’. The story has a rather odd ending. Some weeks after my letter was published, there appeared on the op-ed page a lengthy, three-column article, accompanied by a space-wasting, impressionistic map, under the heading ‘The three-state solution’ (Gelb, 2003). The timing and content of Mr Gelb’s piece were, I am sure, a complete coincidence, but it was clear that the author had no notion of the complexity of Iraq’s regional geography. As a former director of the Council on Foreign Relations he did, however, have the right connections to get my salient point across, and, while geographically uninformed, his piece did make its mark in the public debate: it engendered half a dozen published responses, not one, unfortunately, from a geographer (New York Times, 2003).

Public-arena activities, whether book writing or media work, do not generally rank high among salary criteria in academic departments. Over the past decade I have visited numerous geography departments in this country, and in discussions on this topic with faculty, from formal meetings to office conversations, from the University of Connecticut to San Diego State University, it was made clear to me that public-arena efforts rank slightly below the teaching of required freshman courses as measures of faculty value. Not infrequently, faculty members believe that the university is responsible for the extant priorities, but administrators argue that it is the faculty, not the institution, that makes the rules. ‘The one-size-fits-all approach to faculty rewards’, wrote one such administrator, ‘needs to be forcefully challenged ... a profession that is mature and confident should be able to accommodate [a] diversity of contributions’ (K.E. Corey, personal communication, 2004).

Contributing to the enhancement of geography’s profile in public discourse, thus, entails some risk and frustration. Writing books in the competitive trade market is a great deal less rewarding, financially or academically, than writing scholarly works or texts. Writing op-ed pieces and letters to editors or television producers is unrequited labor. Speaking before lay audiences in service-organization settings is time-consuming and usually underappreciated. Securing placement on an agent’s roster requires investments of time and money that may discourage the persistence this requires. If a growing number of geographers would be willing to embark on such personal campaigns, however, the cumulative impact could be vital to the discipline.

3 The hazards of nonparticipation

Many, perhaps most, geographers may prefer to stay out of the public-debate fray, to concentrate on the security and satisfaction of intra-disciplinary and intra-academic exchange (see, e.g., Murphy, 2004). That, indeed, was the majority response to Wilford’s candid commentary in 2001 as gauged in an informal follow-up survey by the AAG Executive Director (Abler, 2001). While such a posture is understandable, it also has a price tag. Make no mistake: if we do not make efforts to involve ourselves more effectively in the public debate, we do not merely lose opportunity – we also incur scholarly as well as academic (especially institutional) costs.

Some of these costs are obvious enough, and President Murphy has alluded to them on many occasions in his AAG Newsletter columns (see, for example, Murphy, 2003). The paucity of geographers’ books aimed at general audiences has huge implications for the quality of students we hope to attract. Parents are not reading books that convince them of the value of what we do; impressionable
youngsters do not find such books on their early reading lists; university administrators do not see enough of them among those that affect their thinking about the importance of specializations in a time of shrinking budgets.

There is also a related risk. Much Geography today is being written (and taught) by nongeographers, sometimes to good effect but more often not. The damage done by certain historians, for example David Landes in his irresponsible Wealth and poverty of nations, a book that begins with a lengthy justification of Harvard University’s ignominious termination of its Geography Department, is incalculable (Landes, 1998). Wilford called physiologist Jared Diamond’s magisterial Guns, germs, and steel ‘the best book on geography in recent years’ and it is a tour de force indeed, but the weakest link in its multidisciplinary chain is the geographic (Diamond, 1997). Anyone here today who has read archaeologist Brian Fagan’s Little ice age must wish that someone versed in physical geography had co-authored or, in fact, written it (Fagan, 2000).

Not only are nongeographers writing Geography for the general public; they are teaching it at colleges and universities, in the process rediscovering geographic principles long superseded. A former Harvard University economics professor is quoted as follows: ‘Virtually all of the rich countries of the world are outside the tropics, and virtually all of the poor countries are in them ... climate, then, accounts for quite a significant proportion of the cross-national and cross-regional disparities of world income’ (Sachs, 2000). Indeed, some current Harvard University economics faculty have taken it upon themselves to teach such Geography in the absence of a Geography Department at that otherwise creditable institution. Harvard University is presently engaged in a reconsideration of its core curriculum; let us campaign for a reinstatement of modern spatial science as part of it.

Our low-voltage participation in the public debate has dollar costs as well. Whether we like it or not, this is the era of fundraising and ‘development’, and success in this competitive arena depends substantially on the perception of donors that what we do is of importance to the ship of state. We should reclaim the lost ground – not only in the national interest but as a matter of self-interest.

4 Enhancing geography’s profile
Raising geography’s profile in public discourse does not require the convening of another AAG committee. This is an arena in which individuals can make the key contributions, although the results may take years to materialize. Some of these efforts may seem mundane but their cumulative impact can be enormous. When Gilbert Grosvenor responded by letter to a Washington Post columnist who had described geography as a ‘frumpy’ science and implied that you would never see a geographer interviewed on television, the effect was a bump in the local ratings for ‘Good Morning America’ and a flood of mail to ABC-TV (Grosvenor, 1995). Op-ed pieces in the New York Times are seen by about half a million readers daily, and a well-argued statement can have far-reaching effect. But major regional newspapers from the Boston Globe to the Los Angeles Times also welcome opinion pieces, and their reach is by no means insignificant. Some suggestions for additional approaches follow.

• Secure invitations to address local and regional service organizations on topics of local, national, or international concern, demonstrating geography’s perspectives and approaches in serious as well as entertaining fashion.
• Prepare a videotape of one of your lectures on an issue of wide public interest as well as a publicity sheet and use these to enter the public-lecture-circuit ‘industry’, either directly or via an agent.
• Write to the major cruise-line companies (Crystal, Holland-America, etc.) if you have specialized knowledge of a world region on the lines’ itineraries and would
be willing to prepare visitors through ‘destination lectures’. Enclose a videotape and publicity sheet.

- Investigate the process through which assignments are made for your university- or college-wide, student-sponsored lecture series (sometimes mixed ‘entertainment’ series) and nominate geographers as potential speakers.

- Nominate distinguished colleagues from your own or other institutions for honorary degrees at your or other universities, and propose that they be asked to deliver the commencement address.

- Write to your local television station suggesting that you are willing to comment with new and different insight into matters of local, regional, national, and international concern. Include a videotape of a presentation.

- Write to the national television networks and to the major cable-news systems suggesting that a geographer be added to their news departments to bring fresh perspectives on issues of current concern and diversifying the staff.

- Get your students involved in expressing their viewpoints by helping them develop the ability to write brief, focused letters on matters that concern them as well as longer opinion pieces, using what they are learning in their geography classes, and encourage them to submit the best of these to newspaper editors.

If only a small percentage of geographers were willing to engage in the campaign called for by President Murphy, the benefits would nevertheless be substantial. Geography and geographers always do best not by describing but by demonstrating what the discipline is about in all its remarkable diversity, and how it can shed new light on the human and planetary condition. We may not immediately attract the best and the brightest among the students we so direly need, but we will cast our net wider and gain the attention of the parents of the better and the brighter. Let us resolve to make a stronger mark on the ongoing public discourse even for this reason alone.

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III International research agendas and practice

1 Research agenda setting and program practice as public debate

Geographic thinking pervades public debate on a wide range of issues. It is, perhaps, most commonly invoked in the vernacular or geography of the little ‘g’ when drawn upon by way of regional comparisons, place-to-place linkages, or human-environment relationships. Formal geographic thinking or Geography of the big ‘G’ is less prevalent in public debate as registered through the media, national or international governance, or intellectual circles, although its presence in each varies nationally. There is, however, another less visible but profoundly important form of public debate in which geographers and formal geographic thinking have engaged successfully – international research agendas and development practice. This engagement is made through governmental, quasi-governmental, and nongovernmental organizations with far-reaching consequences on research, in some cases informing policy. It is this kind of engagement that is most accessible to academic geographers, by far the largest community practicing Geography, and that has raised geography’s profile in public debate broadly construed.

The observation that research agendas are situated in societal, largely political, context is a clarion theme in contemporary Geography, especially as influenced by conceptualizations of power, information, and marginalization. Inasmuch as this observation is tied to the critical or polemical voice, it carries the implication that research interests, including those held by geographers, are shaped largely by forces beyond research communities, if only in determining which
vision of research will or will not be supported (e.g., Demeritt, 2001). Established thus, alternative research communities may enter only on the terms set by those entities and organizations empowered to represent the public or possessing the power to determine funding. Often missing or muted in this view is the powerful role that research communities have in initiating public awareness of a problem or concern, in working with international and national governmental and nongovernmental agencies and programs to establish research agendas relevant to it, and in using the information gained to inform policy decisions (Schneider, 2001).

To engage this form of public debate inserts geographical thinking directly into the problem and research formation. Geographers, in turn, do not just respond to an externally defined agenda, but help shape the agenda in the first place.

I offer two exemplars of this kind of engagement with public debate at the international level that are open to academic geographers, one through quasi-governmental structures, and the other through quasi-/nongovernmental organizations. They by no means cover the full range of concerns to which geographers have contributed; in fact, focusing on national and local levels would increase the number of potential examples exponentially. The critical message is that Geography has fared well in this avenue of public debate in a few international problem arenas. The influence of Geography, however, is constrained by the small number of its formal practitioners and their diverse orientations to practice, many of which are not directed to this kind of public engagement.

2 The global environment: influencing international research agendas

Global environmental change has emerged as one of the more significant century-transitioning themes of public concern and debate. Its emergence, marked by such international research efforts as the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), WCRP (World Climate Change Research Programme), IGBP (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme), IHDP (International Human Dimensions Programme), MEA (Millennial Ecosystems Assessment), and DIVERSITAS, among others, has been driven in large part by the concern of scientists worldwide for the health of the structure and function of the earth system in face of unprecedented rates and magnitudes of change by humankind (Crutzen and Stoemer, 2001; Ehlers and Krafft, 2001; Steffen et al., 2004). This concern, be it deforestation in Borneo or carbon emissions in the United States, has not necessarily complemented the views of some national and international power structures, such as the current administration in the United States (Liverman, 2004), and is viewed with suspicion by some public intellectuals and research experts otherwise operating in ‘mainstream’ science (e.g., Lomborg, 2001). Nevertheless, multidisciplinary science communities organized within their respective country’s academies and through the International Council of Science (ICSU) and its various arms (e.g., International Geographical Union) would not permit the problem to be dismissed, directing increasing attention to it through various quasi-coordinated research agendas (noted above but also those within the United Nation’s venue) vetted through local and national research organizations worldwide. Various questions have been raised about whose ‘voices’ are represented in these agendas, the usurping of research funds by environmental interests, and the consequences of policy predicated on the science (Mearns and Leach, 1996; Agarwal, 1998). These matters notwithstanding, the concern with global environmental change and the development of research agendas pertinent to this concern have been based in legitimate science-and-society questions, no matter the metric or measure employed (Turner, 1997).

Geographers have been highly visible and influential in these developments. They
were especially active in pushing for ‘human’ and ‘sustainability’ dimensions to the earth system question – a stance that was not immediately embraced by the science communities at large, given the insistence that questions about the base processes of the earth system should take precedence. As the first stage of global environmental change research took shape, however, several natural science communities recognized that their parts of the problem were so tightly linked to human action and so spatially variable that the natural, social, and remote sensing/GIS sciences needed to join forces, leading to the collaboration of the IGBP and the IHDP in creating the international and interdisciplinary project of Land-Use/Cover Change (LUCC). Geographers have been instrumental in the development of this effort. They joined an international array of researchers from many other disciplines and countries to generate science and implementation plans for land-change studies (IGBP-IHDP, 1995; 1999). Both Chairs of the LUCC Science Committee have been geographers, Dave Skole (Michigan State University) and Eric Lambin (Catholic University of Louvain), and the home base of the second in Belgium houses the LUCC IPO (International Project Office). The existence of LUCC, in turn, has spurred geographic-related research worldwide by directing national and international funds for research, including those for regions of the world in which local research and researchers are underfunded (e.g., START, IAI, and APN). LUCC’s success has led to the development of a new, even more ‘integrated’ science agenda for the next decade, the Global Land Project (IGBP-IHDP), which will join ecological and land-change researchers more concretely than previously.

As this history was unfolding, the human dimensions and sustainability themes of global environmental-change concerns began to take root. The IHDP expanded its range of projects to include human security, institutions, and industrial transformation, most of which involved numerous geographers in shaping the research design. Importantly, sustainability concerns finally reached formal agenda setting as the IPCC began to address the consequences of climate change and human responses (McCarthy et al., 2001), and various countries and their science academies turned to integrated environmental research communities to elaborate their own visions of sustainability research (NRC, 1999; PNAS, 2003). Geographers have been deeply involved in these efforts that have included the insertion of sustainability themes into the new science agenda of the Global Land Project (above), drawing on diverse viewpoints (Kasperson and Kasperson, 2001; Turner et al., 2003), many of which take critical stances to formal programmatic efforts (see below). Geographers have also led the way in engaging local research and practitioner communities in the identification and development of data, data delivery, and research programs that those communities deem critical to their concerns (NRC, 2003).

3 International development: influencing practice
Individual geographers and several subfields of geography have a long research tradition addressing international development. Obscured from much of academic geography, research is increasingly linked to real-world practice, especially through quasi- and non-governmental organizations (see Bebbington, 2003). Much of this outreach has been undertaken by geographers whose research orientations straddle ‘mainstream’ science and alternative understanding. I offer three examples to illustrate that, by directly engaging these organizations, it is possible to change their practices.

Substantial contributions have been made in risk-hazard practice, foremost in development of the pressure and release model of hazards that shifts attention to the factors giving rise to the vulnerability of the units exposed to a hazard (Blaikie et al., 1994).
Practitioners have used this refocusing to address local and indigenous empowerment in responding to hazards. As an example, geographers worked with the American Friends Service Committee to assist an alliance of citizen groups in El Salvador that triggered the Salvadorian National Assembly to enact new measures for disaster management (Wisner, 2001). These kinds of approaches and applications have made vulnerability central to efforts of the DFID (Department for International Development, UK), GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, Germany), DGIS (Directoraat-General Internationale Samenwerking, Netherlands), and the UNDP (Pelling, 2004). A more expansive vision of vulnerability, but one influenced by the outreach to practice, has also taken a central place in the IGBP-IHDP's Global Land Project (above).

Geographers have been instrumental in advancing gender initiatives among major NGOs and linked research organizations, especially those focused on sustainable agriculture, social forestry, agroforestry, and environmental policy (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Indeed, by working directly with such organizations as ICRAF (International Center for Research on Agroforestry) and CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research) (e.g., Rocheleau et al., 1988), gender-inclusion methods for participatory development have found their way into not only these organizations but also others, including the Peace Corps (US), World Wildlife Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International and the Ford Foundation, the last emphasizing women's role in the maintenance of biodiversity. Based on these kinds of contributions, CARE, USAID, and the FAO, among other units, now pay attention to gendered space, landscapes, and resources (Rocheleau and Edmunds, 1997).

Similarly, geographers working with other researchers have fostered a rethinking of development theory and practice among a range of international NGOs and related organizations. One significant outcome has been the crafting of initiatives by major development agencies and programs to include more directly the role of indigenous organizations, their networks, and their social capital (Bebbington, 2004). The Dutch CoFinancing Agencies, the IAF (Inter-American Foundation), and units of the World Bank now consider local empowerment and social capital seriously. The IAF inserted these themes in its Ecuador policy in the 1990s, and the World Bank added them to its World Development Report 2000/2001 as well as its poverty-governance program in Indonesia (Bebbington et al., 2004).

4 Sustaining engagement in this public debate

These few examples illustrate that geographers have been visible and effective in developing international and inter/multidisciplinary research agendas and in influencing the practice of quasi-governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This form of public debate is, perhaps, the kind most accessible to geographers housed in academic positions. It is entertained, however, through somewhat different modes of engagement. The research agenda mode typically involves community-level activity characterized by significant numbers of geographers joining even larger numbers of other researchers to stake out the problem, the methods to address them and the means of delivering the understanding gained to the relevant stakeholders. In contrast, the quasi/nongovernmental mode is often undertaken by individual geographers joining other experts and working directly with an organization to transfer the lessons of their research to organizational practice. Both modes, however, demand significant time to develop to fruition and require a mix of research, administrative, and cooperation skills on the part of the practitioner. The programmatic, intellectual, and real-world rewards, more often than not, require a long-term investment in which the researcher or scholar expends considerable energy in
the public process (e.g., committees, councils, panels, workshops). The payoffs, however, engage and affect broad research communities, local researchers, and local people.

The successes illustrated in the examples indicate a principal means through which Geography engages in a public debate that creates formal programs of research and practice. Many geographers understand and accept the ‘rules of engagement’ for entering this kind of public debate. A simple but surely incomplete count reveals, for example, the participation of 16 geographers from seven countries on the recent international committees of the IHDP (six serving as Chairs), and 13 geographers serving on current IHDP national committees of 10 countries (four serving as Chairs). Additionally, at least 19 geographers representing 14 countries have served on IGBP science committees (seven individuals from six countries currently serving). In another example, 63 geographers from 20 countries contributed to two of the four IPCC volumes (Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change). While these numbers are numerically small, they are proportionate to the number of professional geographers internationally and the large number of research communities and disciplines involved in IHDP, IGBP, and IPCC activities. For instance, geographers appear to have comprised about 10% of the total membership of IGBP international committees. I suspect that this percentage is substantially larger for the IHDP, but the database does not permit a rough calculation. Unfortunately, there are no counterpart organizations to which one can turn to derive even crude estimates of participation by geographers in the international development arena.

This level of participation notwithstanding, geographers are relatively few in number relative to the large array of public concerns to which Geography believes it has a bearing. This constraint is amplified owing to the few subsets of Geography that are attuned to the practice of ‘big science’ involved in international agenda setting and possess a substantial cadre of practitioners regularly engaging the major national and international organizations under whose auspicious research agendas are established. Such constraints suggest that Geography’s success in these kinds of engagements will be difficult to match throughout the range of public concerns engaged by geographical researchers.

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A.B. Murphy invited me to participate in a Plenary Session on Geography and Public Debate as part of the 2004 Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers. Those comments focused on issues peculiar to participation by geographers in affecting research at the federal level in the United States. Murphy asked me to redirect those comments to the international level for Progress in Human Geography. I thank him for his invitation and assistance, Susan Hanson for comments on a draft of this paper, and Arvind Suruda for his assistance.

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IV Scholar activists in the mix

I Scholar-activists and the production of Geography
When I set out in 1993 to earn the PhD, a bookseller acquaintance praised my choice of field, saying ‘Geography is the last materialist discipline’. Colleagues across the political spectrum generally bristle at this assertion, while I have cherished it as one of two mantras I use when the going gets tough. The second, dating from the same week in 1993, is an exchange I had with a former student who was completely perplexed by my decision. When she asked why an activist lecturer on race, culture, and power would go study ‘Where is Nebraska?’ I replied that actually I was going to study ‘Why is Nebraska?’. This explanation was such a hit among geographers that it turned up, without
Motivated to learn how to interpret the world in order to change it (cf. Marx, 1845), I found in Geography ways to contemplate and document the vibrant dialectics of objective and subjective conditions that, if properly paid attention to, help reveal both opportunities for and impediments to human liberation. Space always matters, and what we make of it in thought and practice determines, and is determined by, how we mix our creativity with the external world to change it and ourselves in the process (cf. Marx, 1867). In other words, one need not be a nationalist, nor imagine self-determination to be fixed in modern definitions of states and sovereignty, to conclude that, at the end of the day, freedom is a place.

How do we find the place of freedom? More precisely, how do we make such a place over and over again? What are its limits, and why do they matter? What, in short, is the mix? In this brief paper I wish to outline how the lively hyphen that articulates ‘scholar’ and ‘activist’ may be understood, and enacted, as a singular identity. These pages are not prescriptive but rather suggestive. If they serve to raise Geography’s profile in public debate, that will be great, because my interest is in proliferating, rather than concentrating, ways of thinking. The debates that most concern me center on how organizations and institutions craft policies that result in building social movement (through nonreformist reforms) rather than in areal redistribution of harms and benefits.

The projects from which I have derived these lessons all involve novel practices of place-making that revise understandings and produce new senses of purpose. For example, in the effort to dismantle the prison industrial complex, one trajectory frames prisons as new forms of environmental racism which are equally, if differently, destructive of the places prisoners come from and the places prisons are built (Gilmore and Gilmore, 2004). Such destruction shortens lives, and all people caught in prison’s gravitational field are vulnerable to its ambient material and cultural toxicities. Through forging links across enormous social and geometric distances, this activism extends the potential array of campaigns that abandoned rural and urban communities may design in their demand for both living and social wages. What rises to the surface is how people who are skeptical of ‘the government’ begin to engage in what I call ‘grassroots planning’ – a future orientation driven by the present certainty of shortened lives.

Moving to another example, which approaches the problem of ‘planning’ for those specifically excluded by state practices, organizations in urban and rural California are beginning to examine, through community design workshops, forums, and other means, the continuum (rather than the difference) between undocumented workers and documented felons. Both groups are equally unauthorized to make a living and participate fully in the institutions of everyday life (cf. Hugo, 1862). All these projects have the potential for fostering previously unimagined or provisionally forgotten alignments (cf. Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000), and they are connected by the likelihood that the folks who are becoming activists or reviving activism will die prematurely of preventable causes (cf. Greenberg and Schneider, 1994; Gilmore, 2002).

Engaged scholarship and accountable activism share the central goal of constituting audiences both within and as an effect of work based in observation, discovery, analysis, and presentation. Persuasion is crucial at every step. Neither engagement nor accountability has meaning, in the first instance, without potentially expanded acknowledgement that a project has the capacity to flourish in the mix. As a result, and to get results, scholar-activism always begins with the politics of recognition. Whether a project is compensatory, interventionist, or oppositional, the primary organizing necessary to take it from concept to accomplishment...
(and tool) is constrained by recognition. Recognition, in turn, is the practice of identification, fluidly laden with the differences and continuities of characteristics, interests, and purpose through which we contingently produce our individual and collective selves (Hall, 1994; Gilmore, 1999). Such cultural (or ideological) work connects with, reflects, and shapes the material (or political-economic) relations enlivening a locality as a place that necessarily links and represents other places at a variety of time-space resolutions (Massey, 1994).

Consistently, then, the scholar-activist works in the context of ineluctable dynamics that force her – deliberately yet inconsistently – at times to confirm and at times to confront barriers, boundaries, and scales (Gilmore, 1999; Katz, 2001a; 2001b). This is treacherous territory for all of us who wish to rewrite the world. There is plenty of bad research produced for all kinds of reasons (engaged or not), and lousy activism undertaken with the best intentions. In the following pages I will highlight what I have found to be key conceptual problems and perils, and end by suggesting some promising pathways that might be introduced into the mix.

2 Problems

Three kinds of problems dog the diligent scholar-activist in her desire to make the hyphen make a difference. Theoretical, ethical, and methodical challenges grip a project from its earliest moments of conception. Let us take them in turn.

a Theoretical: Theory is a guide to action; it explains how things work. What can and should be made of this? The way ‘good theory in theory’ (Negri, 1968: 47) stands up to the test of practice partly depends on how the researcher understands quantum physics’ key insight that the observer and the observed are in the same critical field (Barad, 1998). As may be said of all human activity that produces change, scholar-activism is caught in a social-spatial opening – sometimes a full-blown crisis, sometimes only a conjuncture or brief moment of instability – where historical becoming, or subjectivity (see Gramsci, 1971), meets up with historical constraint, or objectivity (Wallerstein, 1991). The external world is real, we are of it no matter what we decide to do, its mutability and our own are not without limit, and yet what we decide to do makes it, and us, different. Here, the theoretical does not collapse to an endless contemplation of the researcher and her feelings or insecurities or the compromises and complications inherent in her ‘location’. All of those things matter but, if the object of study is never a thing but rather relations, then the way theory moves to action always exceeds, while being linked to, the researcher’s individual mediation. Theory is, in this sense, a method.

b Ethical: As a result of heinous practices carried out at the expense of people’s lives and well-being, researchers rightly hesitate before connecting ‘human’ and ‘experiment’, and US universities have developed complicated apparatuses to safeguard human subjects from inhumane protocols. In addition to the scandal of harmful inquiry, there is another aspect of ethics for scholar-activists to think through in considering the normative dimensions of projects intended for the mix. What scholar-activism does is forthrightly bring the experimentation of academic research into relation with the experimentation of (any) political action. In both, whether predictions turn out to be strong or weak, effects and outcomes matter and provide the basis for a new plan (or theory) to move forward.

c Methodical: Theoretical and ethical considerations embed the third problem. If methodology is how research should proceed, the methodical, short of ‘ology’s’ comprehensive brief, more narrowly focuses on the plodding problem of questions. What kinds of questions should scholar-activists ask? Every question is an abstraction made of concentrated
curiosity. Curiosity itself is not free-floating, but rather shaped by the very processes through which we make places, things, and selves. Thus, no matter how concrete, a question’s necessary abstraction is also always a distortion – as cartographers, artists, and quantum physicists will readily attest. But all this means opportunity, rather than hopeless gloom, when questions have stretch, resonance, and resilience.

\textit{d Stretch:} Stretch enables a question to reach further than the immediate object, without bypassing its particularity – the difference, for example, between asking a community ‘Why do you want this development project?’ and asking ‘What do you want?’.

\textit{e Resonance:} This enables a question to support and model nonhierarchical collective action through producing a hum that, by inviting strong attention, elicits responses that do not necessarily adhere to already-existing architectures of sense-making. Ornette Coleman’s harmolodics exemplify how such a process makes participant and audience a single, but neither static nor closed, category (Rycenga, 1992).

\textit{f Resilience:} Resilience enables a question to be flexible rather than brittle, such that changing circumstances and surprising discoveries keep a project connected with its purpose rather than defeated by the unexpected. For example, the alleged relationship between contemporary prison expansion and slavery crumbles when the question poses slavery-as-uncompensated labor, because very few of the USA’s 2.2 million prisoners work for anybody while locked in cages. But the relationship remains provocatively stable when the question foregrounds slavery-as-social death, and asks how and to what end a category of dehumanized humans is made from peculiar combinations of dishonor, alienation, and violent domination (Patterson, 1982; Gilmore, 2005).

Clearly, all three problems are related, and the mode I have presented them in here is an attempt to make what is strange familiar, and what is familiar strange. We will return to that issue, in a brief discussion of categories, further on. First, let us pause and consider the substantial perils invoked by the discussion so far.

\textit{3 Perils}
The perils inherent in searching for the liveliness in the scholar-activist’s hyphen fall into two general tendencies: technocracy and disabling modesty.

\textit{a Technocracy:} Mixing social science expert-ise into experimentation in the nonacademic world can reinforce the bad idea – promoted and affirmed in an innumerate culture where statistics are magic (with the hit-or-miss properties of all magical forces) – that better information from better data is what is needed to make the world better (Lake, 1992). This way of thinking leads to the supremacy of intrastructural policy tweaking and perpetual displacement machines, and reduces the possibilities of complexly thoughtful action to, for example, expand reliance on narrowly focused nongovernmental organizations (Wolch, 1989; Smith, 2002) that are locked into endless rehearsals of injury and remedy (Gilmore, 1993; 1999; Brown, 1994).

\textit{b Disabling modesty:} If, on the one hand, nonacademic activists expect too little from the social scientist’s toolkit, on the other hand, the reluctance of engaged scholars to raise challenges in the mix can make the hyphen inactive insofar as the scholar becomes irrelevant. Here of course is where the question of \textit{questions} comes most vividly into view. In the constant rounds of discussion and reflection through which engaged work proceeds, the strictly attentive practice of making the familiar strange is as important in extramural circles where projects come into being as it is in the halls of academia where scholar-activists struggle to legitimate our trade.
Careful focus on the interworkings of the theoretical, ethical, and methodical as outlined above at least partially averts these tendencies. The next section touches on of what such focus might consist.

4 Promising pathways
One of the key tensions in any kind of experiment (research, activism) centers on the collision between creativity on the one hand and already-existing frameworks and categories on the other. Categories are not only useful, but also seem fundamentally to organize human thinking (Lakoff, 1996). There is a difference, however, between the general fact (if we wish to accept its accuracy) that human thought is categorical and the practice that plagues much research and activism whereby particular social and spatial categories get reified by studying or acting on them as ahistorical durables. So too with frameworks: the challenge is not to be more logical, or more reasonable, but rather more persuasively based in the real material of the everyday, which means performing with the kind of attention Coleman’s harmolodics requires to produce beautifully unexpected sound.

Two of the pathways are rather self-explanatory, and I will only name and briefly describe them, saving my scarce remaining space for the third.

a Research design and analysis: By now it goes without saying that purpose leads, and the way a project’s design and analysis proceed depends a lot on what work the outcome is supposed to do. If it is supposed to bring a different solution to a crisis than the remedies current power-blocs propose, then what will it take to mobilize communities to demand certain kinds of decisions? Where might they go wrong? Who will know, and how?

b Scale and rhetoric: Persuasion requires barriers to fall, at least momentarily. Scale suggests the actual and imaginative boundaries in which political geographies are made and undone (N. Smith, 1993). A scholar-activist’s project both defines and produces an opening on the ground, through which creative possibility can move (see, for example, Pulido, 2000).

c Credibility and afetishism: In order for the scholar-activist to maintain the vitality of the hyphen, she has to toe a line that keeps moving. Her credibility is a function of many relationships – with other academics, with sources, with organizations. Every graduate student learns, at about the time of oral exams, to say, at long last, ‘I don’t know’. The important demystification of scholarship makes its work, in my view, stronger. This strength derives from constantly reflecting on the theoretical, the ethical, and the methodical while always acting. Yet, also, the way through the twinned jaws of technocracy and disabling modesty is as well marked, provisionally, by care around three troubling categories that can trip us along the route: object, truth, and authenticity. Objectivity cannot ever be passive (Barad, 1998), truth cannot ever be comprehensive (which means pessimism of the intellect has to be balanced by optimism of the will) (Gramsci, 1971), and authenticity is a projection of shadow and light that shifts in time and place. Indeed, object, truth, and authenticity return us to an original argument of these remarks, which is how recognition permeates what we do, and how, and why. Recognition and redistribution are, then, two sides of the same coin.

5 Conclusion
Geography is an interdisciplinary discipline, and its relative irrelevance and ‘pariah’ (Wallerstein, 1991) status in the twentieth century ironically enhances its current promise because it is so wide open for good use. Certainly, the key words of the contemporary moment – globalization, racism, migration, war, new imperialism, environmental degradation, fundamentalism, human rights – bespeak and connect (what, in sum, ‘articulation’ is) all kinds of complexities.
In my view, interdisciplinarity and coalition-building are, like recognition and redistribution, two sides of a singular capacity. What the outcome could be, with scholar-activists in the mix, is the harmolodics of novel scales — which we might call a renovated ‘third world’ or Bandung-consciousness — and subsequent differential alignments for the twenty-first century.

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V Geographies, publics and politics
Thirty years ago, in a symposium on the relations between geographical inquiry and public policy, David Harvey (1974) asked: ‘What kind of geography for what kind of public policy?’ He wondered why so many geographers had been drawn to the arena of public policy. Was it prompted by a belief in the neutrality and objectivity of geographical inquiry — a belief that geographical knowledges are purely technical devices and those who produce them are the privileged agents of expert systems — or was it spurred by the conviction that geographical inquiry is an irredeemably critical project driven by the imperative not only to understand the world but to change it? These were characteristically pointed questions, and they have lost none of their edge. But, in moving them beyond the domain of public policy into the wider sphere of public debate, which I very much welcome, the answers are not foreclosed. Public debate is a condition of any critical politics, but it is no guarantee of it.

The fact of the matter is that geographical knowledges already course through multiple publics. For all those histories of Geography that pretended otherwise, most of us now recognize that geographical knowledges are not (and never were) confined to an academic discipline, to Geography with a capital G. Instead, they include myriad discourses about the world — about its peoples and landscapes, its environments and ecologies, its configurations and connections — that are activated by (and in turn animate) supranational institutions like the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank, and by states and their administrative, military and intelligence apparatuses. Not for nothing did Yves Lacoste remind us that la géographie, ça sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre; and it is no coincidence that if you enter ‘Iraq’ or ‘Iran’ into a search engine the CIA World Factbook almost invariably appears on the first page and often as the very first entry. As this example implies, many of the most politically charged geographies are produced for public consumption as part of the rhetorical armature of public policy. Geographical knowledges are also produced, used and distributed by transnational corporations like Enron, Haliburton and Shell as a necessary part of their operations, and by nongovernmental organizations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, and the International Crisis Group. In all these cases, too, a rhetorical address to the public through communications strategies and IPOs, or through directly political campaigns, is an essential moment in their work. Simply to list these sources is to indicate the considerable spectrum across which geographical knowledges are implicated in grids of power — from right to left, reactionary to progressive — and the same is true of the multiple geographical knowledges, at once formal and informal, that
are embedded in and reworked through the conduct of everyday life: almost everything we do depends on them (Harvey, 2004).

These geographical knowledges do not exist in isolation from one another, and in recognizing the multiple sites where they are produced and the multiple networks through which they are circulated we can begin to chart the connections between geographies of the public sphere and geographies in the public sphere. The maps of meaning that they convey are not independent from the means through which they are constructed nor the media through which they circulate. This matters, I think, for at least two reasons.

1 Closing debate
First, while geographical knowledges circulate through different publics, they often function not to provoke or inform public debate but to close it off. We need to remind ourselves of the importance of public debate for democratic politics because nobody else is likely to do so: our world is one in which ‘policy’ is consistently (and increasingly) used to override and even suppress debate. This happens most obviously through appeals to ‘expert knowledges’ or, in the case of the Bush and Blair administrations, ‘intelligence’, whose very designations are designed to remove them from public scrutiny (not always successfully, to be sure). Jürgen Habermas (1971) drew attention to this process of depoliticization more than 40 years ago, as the realization of a narrowly scientific or technical interest, and more recently Donna Haraway (1991: 183–201) warned against ‘the God-trick’, the claim that there is some unassailable position from which we can survey the world whole and render its spaces fully transparent. Those who think that our own field can secure a public hearing by insisting on its disinterested, scientific credentials are not only working with an untenable – I think, frankly, dishonest – model of how science is conducted; in the United States they are also ignoring the selective deafness of the Bush administration when confronted with scientific research that jibes (as it so often does) against its own predilections.

Other knowledges achieve the same depoliticizing effect (which is, of course, a profoundly political one) by appeals to ‘common sense’. Although Mark Twain once cautioned his fellow Americans about how uncommon that is, the present administration – more than most of its predecessors – has consistently attempted to establish its own, highly partisan view of the world as one that every right-thinking member of the community shares, as the only sensible and therefore the only legitimate one. Indeed, endorsing that view of the world is made a condition for membership. President Bush’s insistence that ‘either you are with us or you are against us’ in the ‘war on terror’ – and, so it seems, in everything else too – is a means of drawing boundaries not only beyond the United States but also within its borders, a way of partitioning ‘us’ (the normal, the human) from ‘them’ (the pathological, the monstrous). One of our most urgent tasks is to interrupt this moral cartography, an ordnance survey in something uncomfortably close to its original sense, and ask about the supposedly unexceptionable terms on which some people are included while others are excluded from its identifications and affordances. By asking these awkward questions, and insisting on the multiplicity of geographical knowledges, on the plurality of positions, perspectives, and interests that are articulated through them, it becomes possible to prise open those closures. If all knowledge is situated, as Haraway suggests, and for this reason irredeemably partial, the solution is not mute compliance with the administration of the day but, as she argues, conversations and alliances with those many others whose positions and dispositions differ one from our own. Choices will still have to be made, but these solidarities cannot be founded on the arrogation of authority, truth, and legitimacy to a single, unassailable position.

The terms of public debate are skewed by more than the conjunction of politics and
political economy, the powers of the state, and the mainstream media. These are, of course, immensely important, but so too is an understanding of the cultural performances that work to normalize some statements and rule others out of court (see, for example, Barnett, 2003). Let me give just two examples. The first concerns what may be said: for, as Judith Butler (2004a) observes, ‘the public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown’. She notes that, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, it became extremely difficult for American commentators to adduce any reasons for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that lay outside the pathologies of terrorism itself. Those who attempted to do so, by identifying the conditions that make political violence possible, were vilified as apologists (or worse), on the wrong side in the Manichean ‘war on terror’. Or, again, any criticism of the ways in which the state of Israel has waged its own war of dispossession against the Palestinian people, particularly in the heightened forms that have been authorized by the Sharon regime since 9/11, is routinely stigmatized as anti-Semitic – even when, as is so often the case, it is voiced by Jews themselves – so that it, too, becomes unsayable (Butler, 2004b). My second example concerns how things may be said. I have cited Butler’s wonderfully lucid arguments deliberately to discomfort those who ridicule her writings for their difficulty and opacity. Critics like these usually insist on normalizing a particular mode of address and analysis and, by extension, seek to exclude anybody who does not conform to their own canons. They do so not by engagement, however, and one can only marvel at ‘how securely the power of the enemies of theory [which almost invariably means the enemies of other people’s theory] is anchored not in their command of knowledge, their superior understanding of the texts they impugn, but precisely in their ignorance, their claim not to understand’ (Culler and Lamb, 2003: 3). To speak as plainly as these critics demand, their objections to Butler are grounded in her politics not her poetics: it is hard to imagine how anyone who privileges the passive voice and the Harvard reference system could have much grasp of the beauty of language, but they evidently recognize its power. When they complain about ‘bad writing’, as Michael Warner shrewdly notes, they are not longing for the passion of Marx, the soul of Nietzsche, or the poetry of Foucault: ‘They want a language that will bring a certain public into being’ (Warner, 2003: 109).

2 Producing publics

This is a powerful insight, and it supplies my second reason for emphasizing the multiplicity of sites and circuits through which geographical knowledges proliferate: publics do not pre-exist discourse but are formed through it (Warner, 2002; 2003). I make this point partly to underscore the work involved in forming and transforming publics, work for which traditional print media are increasingly ill suited. This is why the emergence of public-access e-journals like ACME or borderlands is of such importance, to say nothing of the host of websites like Common Dreams, Information Clearing House, Open Democracy, War in Context, and Z-Net. But I particularly draw your attention to the reaction of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the United States to 9/11. Within a week or so, scholars from around the world and from many different points of view had been invited to compose short, critical and provocative commentaries which were posted on the SSRC’s website. At a moment of grave difficulty and danger, when reflective voices were stilled, abused, and even threatened, the collective courage of the SSRC and, in particular, its Director (sociologist Craig Calhoun) deserve the highest praise. At a moment when so many people – not only in the United States – felt unmoored, without coordinates in this (to them) newly turbulent world, the SSRC provided an astonishingly rich, complex and (yes) profoundly geographical imagination.
These essays outlined different genealogies of political violence (including the modalities by which the foreign-policy adventures of the United States had wreaked untold damage on peoples in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America); set out comparative geographies of genocide and terror in other places; and criticized the imaginative geographies of Islam (‘Good Muslim, Bad Muslim’) that were being brought into play to justify a roving military response. What, then, of the Association of American Geographers? Its website recorded the deaths of several geographers in those terrorist attacks. But that was all. No analysis, no reflection: just another posting about the progress with the mortgage. Is it necessary to repeat that what counts in the public sphere is not only what is said and shown, but what is not said and not shown? It is not hard to imagine the public that is likely to be produced through such an unworldly response.

I emphasize the ways in which publics are formed and transformed through discourse for another, closely connected reason. We need to examine the informal, subterranean ways in which geographical knowledges spiral through everyday life. To take the example with which I am presently most familiar: ‘Orientalism’ was never just a professional apparatus for politicians, generals and public servants to exert and legitimize the collective power of Europe and North America over ‘the Orient’; it was also an immensely powerful repertoire through which ordinary men and women found the terms for cultures and landscapes for which they otherwise had no terms. It was a ‘corporate institution’, as Said’s critique (1978) showed, bound up with the grand strategies (or deceits) of Great Power geopolitics and the intimacies of colonial governmentality, but it also modulated public culture in complex and differential ways. Orientalism is still abroad, aggressive and aggrandized, and the connections between the two realms – one more or less ‘official’, the other vernacular – are acutely visible in the response to 9/11 orchestrated by the Bush administration. The caricatures of Stanley Kurtz, Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, and others serve to map the violent contours of American Empire set out by the Project for a New American Century, to legitimize the ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan and its violent extensions in Palestine and Iraq, and they also spread through (and in my view deform) the public sphere within which those actions should be scrutinized and called to account. Here, too, to recognize the multiplicity of sites through which these geographical knowledges are set in motion is not to fall back before the sheer, knitted-together strength of Orientalism; it is, on the contrary, to recognize its porosity – its vulnerability – and by this means to insist on the possibility of quite other ways of knowing these places and the people that live in them.

It is not enough to advance such counter-geographies in the pages of our journals and in our classrooms and lecture halls. They are not merely academic propositions, so much ‘theory-talk’, and they ought to make a difference to our very being in the world: to what we are and how we are. This is difficult enough, but the ‘imaginative geographies’ that we need to challenge are called that not only because that is what they are (they are quite literally fabrications, ‘something made’) but also because that is where they reside, concealed in the collective unconscious, phantasms that fan the flames of indifference, contempt and hatred. Soon after 9/11, Newsweek sought to explain the locus of terrorism by characterizing the Middle East as the land of suicide bombers, flag burners and fiery mullahs. In one astonishing sentence the various, vibrant cultures of the region were fixed and frozen into a diabolical landscape, a repository of monstrous unreason. One might just as easily (and accurately) describe America as the land of serial killers, neo-Nazi militias and philandering TV evangelists. In both cases, places are turned into phantasms that, as Said shrewdly remarked in one of his final lectures, feed on (and in turn feed) emotional
experiences (Gregory, 2004: 60; Said, 2004: 82). If we are to contest them, therefore, we need more than careful, clinical analysis – the sharp dissections made possible by our techniques and our theories – because imaginative geographies rely not only on reason (in its multiple guises) but also on desire and affect: which explains how I have finally understood what Michael Keith meant by ‘angry writing’.12 If we do not care about the world – if we treat it as merely a screen on which to display our command of high Technique or as a catalogue that serves to furnish selected examples of our high Theory – then we abandon any prospect of a genuinely human geography. I do not want to be misunderstood: of course techniques are important; of course ideas are important. But it is simply wrong to encounter the world and to render it – the _mot juste_ – in such exorbitantly and exclusively instrumental ways.

3 Counter geographies

So, to return to the original question: what kind of geography for what kind of public debate? In _The colonial present_ (Gregory, 2004a) I identified three imaginative geographies that continue to be central to the ‘war on terror’. War is not the only possible response to terrorism, and neither is it the most effective, and many geopolitical and geoeconomic calculations enter into the decision to resort to spectacular and sustained military violence. But war also requires a cultural mobilization – the inculcation of a sense of common purpose and public conviction – that identifies an Enemy and legitimizes the loss of life (on both sides). Imaginative geographies are powerful rhetorical weapons precisely because they fold difference into distance. Yet they do not only produce a series of performative spacings between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘white’ on ‘black’: their topologies also produce a vast grey zone in which indifference is folded into indistinction. I want to sketch the imaginative geographies that were mobilized to convert the ‘war on terror’ into a _mission civilisatrice_, in each case describing them in active terms as spatial strategies, in order to identify in minimalist form three countergeographies that might produce counterpublics informed by other, less destructive maps of meaning (Gregory, 2004a; 2004b).

First, ‘locating’ mobilized a technical or technocultural register in which opponents were routinely reduced to mute objects in a purely visual field – letters on a map, coordinates on a grid – that produced an abstraction of other people as ‘the Other’. By this means, American bombs and missiles rained down on K-A-B-U-L not on the eviscerated city of Kabul; Israeli troops turned their guns on Palestinian ‘targets’ not on Palestinian men, women and children; American firepower destroyed Baghdad buildings and degraded the Iraqi military machine but somehow never killed Iraqi people who were effaced from the scene.

Against these reductions that hollow out places, both figuratively and physically, I urge the continued development of _contextual geographies_ that affirm the materiality and corporeality of places and attend to the voices (and the silences) of those who inhabit them. Before the US invasion of Iraq, Baghdad was presented to an American audience as a city of targets: those blank circles that pockmarked satellite photographs in newscasts, newspapers, and websites. It was only when Saddam’s statue was toppled that it was allowed to appear as a city of neighborhoods, inhabited not by tyrants, torturers, and terrorists, as you might have expected, but by doctors, engineers, shopkeepers: people very much like you and me (Gregory, 2004a: 213–15). I am not surprised by the reversal, but think what could have happened had that countergeography been affirmed before the invasion. How might the public have viewed the war then? For this very reason, the production of such a contextual geography faces obstacles that are more than intellectual. Within the United States, criticism of the ‘war on terror’ and the racisms that underwrite so much of its violence has spawned a series of willfully ignorant attacks on area...
studies, and in particular Middle Eastern Studies (see Prashad, 2003; Lockman, 2004; Heydemann, 2004; Turse, 2004). The silence of our own associations has been shocking, but I hope that geographers everywhere will come to the aid of those scholars—al of them geographers— who have invested so much of their lives in studying the languages and landscapes, cultures and histories of other people and other places. For their offence should be our offence too: to refuse the brutal reduction of other places and other people to counters in a calculus of self-interest and opportunism, and instead to affirm the importance of a careful geography of engagement and understanding. Again, this is not to blunt criticism, merely to establish the ground for a critique that is open, dialogical and informed.

The second spatial strategy was ‘opposing’ or ‘inverting’, which mobilized a largely cultural register in which antagonism was reduced to a conflict between a unitary and universal Civilization (epitomized by the United States) and multiple, swarming barbarisms that were its negation and nemesis. America, with its proxies and allies, was thus called to take up arms against the gathering forces of darkness, of Evil incarnate. Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein became Doppelgänger, inversions of the face of Goodness reflected in the White House mirror, with fateful consequences for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, while fundamentalists on both the Christian and the Zionist Right saw the redemption of the biblical Land of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinians as fulfilling God’s ultimate purpose. All were barbarians to be summarily dispatched.

Against this dismal logic of exclusion and estrangement, I urge the construction of contrapuntal geographies—the term is derived from Said (1993: 67)—that explore the webs of connection and affiliation, the myriad ways in which we are all involved in the lives (and deaths) of millions of unknown others. The reason I am still a geographer is that I want my students to know about— to care about—the lives of distant strangers, people whom they do not know but without whom their own lives would be impossible (cf. Ignatieff, 1984; Corbridge, 1993). The complex topologies of the commodity chain show that contrapuntal geographies are unlikely to be simple or transparent—as Harvey once remarked, you cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation on the grapes in the supermarket—and their shape-shifting duplicity is conveyed by a series of imaginative geographies, in part constructed through advertising campaigns and in part assimilated as part of a taken-for-granted vernacular (Castree, 2001). In a haunting novel written before 9/11, Giles Foden captured the contrapuntal geographies that are written in the political register when he described ‘the endless etcetera of events which led from dead Russians in Afghanistan, via this, that and the other, through dead Africans and Americans in Nairobi and Dar, to the bombardment of a country with the highest levels of malnutrition ever recorded’ (Foden, 2002: 335–36). There will always be those with reasons to erase connections like these, of course, and there were attempts to snap the webs that tied successive US administrations, via the CIA, the activities of multinational corporations, and the business ties of the Bush family, through the foreign and domestic policies of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the arming and financing of the mujaheddin, and the rise of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These were remarkably successful; the public reaction to 9/11 showed how easily the capacity for distraction is aggravated by grief and anger. It soon became clear that any acceptable answer to the repeated question ‘Why do they hate us?’—which was itself a rhetorical device of considerable power—was to be found uniquely among ‘them’, the sort of people ‘they’ are, and not among ‘us’. This is an effective way of producing identity and identification, but its excision of the contrapuntal geographies in play provides neither
a rigorous analysis of political violence nor an effective response to it.

The third spatial strategy, ‘excepting’, mobilized a political-juridical register, in which not only armed opponents – al-Qaeda terrorists, Taliban troops, Palestinian fighters, Iraqi soldiers – but also civilians and refugees were reduced to the status of what Giorgio Agamben identifies as *hominis sacri*. Their lives did not matter. The sovereign powers of the American, British and Israeli states disavowed or suspended international law so that men, women, and children were made outcasts, placed beyond the pale and beyond the protections and affordances of the Modern. The deaths of American, British, and Israeli citizens mattered (unless of course they were killed opposing or witnessing the bloody wars in Afghanistan, Palestine, or Iraq: think of Rachel Corrie, Tom Hundall, and the journalists who were targeted during the Iraq war). In this grisly colonial calculus the deaths of Afghans, Palestinians, and Iraqis were rendered not only uncountable – the US-led coalitions constantly proclaimed they did not do body counts, and the murders of Palestinians in the occupied territories rarely provoke a tremor of concern in the mainstream media – but also unaccountable. They were trapped in a zone of indistinction, where those who observed them were utterly indifferent to their fate.

Against this, I urge the elaboration of *cosmopolitan geographies*. Cosmopolitanism is a vexed term, and I cannot do justice to its complexities here (cf. Harvey, 2000), but one starting point is Susan Sontag’s call for an understanding ‘that human beings everywhere do terrible things to one another’ (Sontag, 2003). In other words, without dissolving the specific injuries and horrors of 9/11, or suicide bombings or military violence elsewhere in the world, we need to struggle against seeing them as *special*. Sontag argues that the pain of others is not somehow less than our own, and that it is only through this regard – rather than the detached gaze or glance – that it is possible to retain our own humanity. That is another awkward term, of course, and Agamben is properly critical of the modern anthropological machine that produces our seemingly commonsensical idea of ‘the human’, but this should direct our attention to its silent production of all those excluded ‘others’ – the barbarians, the savages, the monsters – who are to have no claim on our sympathies, what Paul Gilroy (2003) calls ‘all the other shadowy “third things” lodged between animal and human [that] can only be held accountable under special emergency rules and fierce martial laws’ (see also Agamben, 2004; Gregory, 2004c). Against this colonial economy of meaning, as part of what we might think of as a ‘geographical compact’, we must hold ourselves to the same laws and standards as we do others, and extend to them the same rights and affordances that we extend to ourselves. How else can we turn the logics of effacement and estrangement into an ability to face the strange that inheres within – and makes possible – ‘our’ selves and ‘our’ spaces? It is this unsettling, haunting, demanding hospitality that provides the very horizon of the political (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000; cf. Amin, 2003).

Finally, all three of these countergeographies require, in addition and as an essential moment in their production, _collaborative_ geographies: critical work done not merely for the people we write about but _with_ them. It is only by this means that we will ever be fully engaged in both public debate and a genuinely democratic politics, and it is only by this means that ‘progress in human geography’ can yield to a truly progressive human geography.

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to convert my scrawled notes into more connected prose. Even so, I have tried to retain the informal character of my original presentation and to reflect the American audience to which it was addressed.

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Notes

1. Various reviews of the rise of the contemporary concern with climate and global environment change are available (Weart, 2003). The antecedents reside in a constellation of factors raised by Rachael Carson in *Silent spring* and by Love Canal, among others, that led to Earth Day in 1970. The critical marker, however, may rest in the monitoring of atmospheric carbon dioxide from Mona Loa (Keeling, 1998) followed by the recording of the ‘ozone hole’ (Makshtas and Gunney, 1995) both of which demonstrated that humankind had entered a new phase of environmental change, one in which it matched or exceeded nature in terms of the critical biogeochemical flows that sustain the function and structure of the biosphere (Turner et al., 1990). These concerns, anticipated early on by White (1985) and Kates (1987), among geographers, expanded to all changes in the biosphere that were global in scope or magnitude (Kasperson et al., 1990).

2. Careful review and critique of research agendas and policies linked to their findings is essential and welcomed by the science community if presented judiciously and considered within the range of uncertainties at the moment. Critique may fall into polemical traps and straw-arguments, however, reducing the attention of science communities. These problems occur when critique simplifies complex processes and phenomena and known uncertainties in their understanding to support counterclaims, or conflates the claims of a few researchers or policy legitimated by recall to them with that of the prevailing view among diverse science communities. The former case represents that of *The skeptical environmentalist* (Lomborg, 2001) and much of the response of global change science to it (Fisher, 2002). The latter is illustrated by various inferences that Sahelian desertification policy followed from a consensus among environmental science communities about the causes and process of land degradation in this region (e.g., Mearns and Leach, 1996), not recognizing the long-standing debates among scientists and their ultimate demonstration of the climatic versus societal proportions of the problem (Reynolds and Stafford Smith, 2002).

3. START (Global Change System for Analysis, Research and Training) helps to galvanize global change research in African and Asia and is headed by a geographer, Roland Fuchs. IAI (Inter-American Institute) and the APN (Asian-Pacific Network for Global Change Research) serve a similar function for Latin America and Asia, respectively. Both organizations are predicated on strong input from local scientists regarding the structure of the research programs supported.

4. It would be inappropriate to fail to recognize the impacts of the totality of the risk-hazards communities in shaping the contemporary agendas on and assessments of vulnerability. Nevertheless, the role of risk-hazards thinking with a social and critical theory orientation has been powerful, and geographers championing this orientation have transcended research and pedagogy to inform real-world practice, especially among NGOs (Blakie et al., 1994).

5. These figures should be considered first approximations only. Neither organization keeps records on the home or doctoral disciplines of the members of its committees, and the two organizations differ in the availability of membership records. These estimates, which do not reflect the total participation in one way or another of the geography community, are offered to provide some measure for the reader other than my observations that participation has been strong or weak. I thank the IGBP and IHDP home offices for their assistance in deriving the estimates.

6. These figures were derived from the ‘Synthesis’ and ‘Vulnerability’ volumes of the IPCC only as could be readily detected by name and program association. The ‘Science’ and ‘Mitigation’ volumes proved more difficult to determine the role of geographers and thus are not included here.

7. The superb example of a book that successfully negotiates pitfalls while embracing complexity is Leela Fernandes (1997).

9. The privilege (and with it, moral virtue) accorded to ‘clarity’ is historically and constitutively bound to an imperial geopolitics that ruthlessly normalizes particular audiences and modes of address and legitimizes their resistance to the unfamiliar, ‘the foreign’ and the subaltern (see Ferguson, 2003).

10. Any consideration of why more people do not read writings by professional geographers would do well to look less at the difficulty (or otherwise) of the ideas or the language and more at the sterile apparatus through which they are conveyed. This works to immunize our geographical knowledges from the very ‘worldliness’ (Said’s term) (Said, 2002) that gives them life and substance in the first place.

11. These were subsequently published in print form (see Hershberg and Moore, 2002; Calhoun et al., 2002).


13. Butler (2004b: xii) says much the same. Writing specifically about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, she says: ‘To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession and fear, and in what ways....’ [T]he dislocation from First World privilege, however temporary, offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community. To accept her challenge is to connect what I am calling contrapuntal geographies to cosmopolitan geographies through the sort of comparative work that – astonishingly – is only too rare in our field; I suspect, too, that it will require us to rethink the ways in which we understand what I take to be the topological as well as topographical mediations between power, space and violence.

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