

# INTRODUCTIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS

# PART I

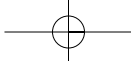
Social geography is a body of knowledge and a set of practices by which scholars look at, and seek to understand, the social world. It is a strikingly diverse sub-discipline of human geography that has many overlapping interests with other forms of geography rather than any fixed or strict boundaries. Its diversity occurs since the topics and approaches undertaken have varied over time and according to individual geographers' interests and politics. Consequently, *Introducing Social Geographies: From Difference to Action* presents a cameo of that diversity and Part I opens with two chapters that introduce and contextualize the sub-discipline.

Chapter 1 starts by sketching out the types of social relations and places that fascinate social geographers before explaining that (as with other academic knowledge) social geography is an explicitly constructed field of knowledge. This means scholars frequently concentrate on commonly agreed topics – especially the differences and relations between people and the places and spaces they use and shape in creating their lives. It also means social geographers cluster into groups of scholars who *practise* (pursue, design, construct, promote, and even fight for) certain ways of constructing their social geography. These preferences depend on the context and culture in which they are working (e.g. a British department enthusiastic about the methods and powers of ***spatial science***' perspectives in the 1970s, or a Canadian department focused on ***humanist*** approaches in the 1980s, or an Australian department energized by ***post-structural*** and ***postcolonial*** debates and challenges in the 1990s). These contexts and preferences result in individual scholars taking up positions and 'writing ... from somewhere' (section 1.2), from locations that are physical, cultural, political and ***epistemological***.

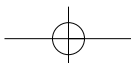
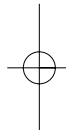
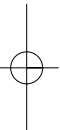
A more detailed account of these different approaches to social geography is presented in Chapter 2. This chapter commences with questions about how we can devise projects and knowledge about the social world. It explains how scientific approaches to knowledge have been incorporated in social geography before turning to an overview of the philosophical and theoretical perspectives that have been adopted by different groups of scholars over time. While readers

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1. As noted in the Preface, all terms appearing in **bold** and *italics* are included in the Glossary.



may be tempted to skip this chapter, it is a core foundation for the rest of the book and provides a basis for understanding why geographers have differed in their approaches to topics, e.g. ethnicity, gender, identity and so forth. The chapter also provides two detailed sketches of how individual geographers have tackled and worked their way through the theoretical trends and approaches that have swept across social geography at different times. The chapter closes with further emphasis on the **positionality** of our thinking and writing about social geography. This provides encouragement in making self-critical reflections and explicit decisions about how we view people, social experiences and the real-life (and academic tensions) that result.



## 1

# Contemporary Social Geographies: Perspectives on Difference, Identity, Power and Action

## **Box 1.1 Social conditions and implications of life in Australian coal-mining towns**

J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996a) *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Katherine Gibson is a geographer who has studied Australian coal-mining for many years. Together with Julie Graham, she investigated both the economic and social processes and changes that have shaped the lives of men, women and children in such industries. In recent years they have written collaboratively as J.K. Gibson-Graham. Excerpts of this work give a useful summary of the social conditions and challenges that these mining communities face. They also illustrate the types of issue social geography often concentrates on. They write:

Men and women in [Australian] mining towns see themselves as engaged in a joint project ... a good upbringing for their children, a house of their own on the coast, a comfortable retirement or a different life, ... after savings have been accumulated. Commitment to this joint project (and the feudal domestic class process<sup>1</sup> it promotes) is sustained by a discourse of love and companionship between partners. (1996a: 228)

In the late 1980s the coal industry entered a crisis. ... With employment levels declining the Combined Mining Unions were forced ... to accept the ruling of the Coal Industry Tribunal ... and new work practices were instituted in 1988. As part of the move towards greater 'flexibility' (for the companies), the new award involved widespread adoption of a new work roster called the seven-day roster. (1996a: 225)<sup>2</sup>

The effect of this decision on the community and ... upon women has been great. For many, the domestic work of women has risen, and the established companionship patterns of mothers, fathers and children have largely been destroyed. (1996a: 226)

The weekdays off between shifts and the long break between roster cycles allow men and their non-working wives to see each other – but at times that do not coincide with children's or other friends' time off. ... The seven-day roster has stripped away the activities and notions of the family. (1996a: 228)

**Box 1.1 (Continued)**

In Central Queensland miners' wives organized no public opposition to the seven-day roster. By contrast in the Hunter Valley, an older established coal-mining region in New South Wales, women successfully organized opposition to its institution on the grounds of its incompatibility with family and community life. (1996a: 230)

1 A 'feudal' domestic class refers to arrangements where one partner (usually a woman) contributes labour as a wife and mother that is appropriated by the other partner (usually a man) in return for provision of shelter and social position associated with their conditions as a miner (e.g. access to housing and services).

2 The seven-day roster involved eight-hour shifts on seven consecutive days, afternoons or nights. After seven shifts, workers had one-two days off and at the end of a block of three seven-day shifts they received four days off from work.

Social geography provokes thought and challenges us with the possibilities and opportunities it provides. It gives us the chance to ask questions, construct explanations – and discover yet more questions – about where and how social differences and interaction occur. Gibson-Graham's analysis of life in Australian mining towns illustrates some of these possibilities (see Box 1.1). Some social relations between men, women and children appear similar. However, comparisons within towns and states (Queensland, vs New South Wales) show that individual households and groups of women experience mining life – and its social costs – in very different ways. .

More generally, social geography inquiries may build from an awareness of contrasting social lives in different suburbs or rural towns; or it may develop from recognizing different behaviours and interaction occurring in a public square, workplace or pub. For me, social geography became relevant after I completed a fourth-year economic geography dissertation and was left with questions about how restructuring in a manufacturing industry affected workers and their families differently in various Australian cities. Gibson-Graham's (1996a) work, summarized in Box 1.1, raises parallel issues, showing how restructured work conditions affected personal, parental and community relations. This type of geography shows how individual, family and community life is closely linked. Gibson-Graham explores contrasting theories to account for the diverse ways men and women negotiate their economic and social environment, and in some cases, become politically active because of their situations. This initial example emphasizes the fact that social geography can be established wherever there is a variety of people relating in diverse ways and acting to organize their lives in both a material and socio-cultural sense. In these

settings, attention to social difference and interaction is usually highlighted as geographers acknowledge that these social differences occur unevenly over space and through the constructions of (and even struggles within) specific places (e.g. in homes, on streets, in workplaces and so forth) (Valentine, 2001).

Hamnett (1996: 3) defines social geography as 'the geography of social structures, social activities and social groups across a wide range of human societies'. Yet it is perhaps more complicated – and more exciting – than that, for social geographers are prepared to investigate the intimate connections and collections of interactions that occur between diverse people and the spaces and places in which this occurs. For instance, with Gibson-Graham, we can ask why some men and women in Australian coal-mining towns faced domestic struggles and divorce, while others worked out patterns of family and social life that absorbed (even accepted) the industry changes. We can also ask why NSW miners' wives became politically active against the work rosters, while Queensland miners' wives did not. Questions of this kind invite us to consider issues of gender, class, identity and political agency – some of the concepts that structure the remainder of this book.

Thus, social geography can be thought of as a focused curiosity and an explicit act of constructing (researching, mapping, writing) geographies that:

- recognize forms of social difference and interaction; and
- acknowledge that these differences occur unevenly over space and through the constructions of (and even struggles within) specific places.

This type of social geography involves us in choosing appropriate theories and research practices in order to investigate and write work that respects difference and highlights uneven patterns and struggles. These matters are discussed in Chapter 2 since contemporary *social* geographies have developed from a diverse heritage of theoretical and empiric histories. The chapter will show that debates and tensions arising from this diversity provide a complex but stimulating environment for current work. Coming to terms with these debates is an important step in recognizing that social geographers frequently wish to do more than record, organize and (re)present social differences and interactions. They dare to ask why they occur. For instance, Gibson-Graham (1996a) sought reasons for the enormous hardship being faced by mining families and communities. By working alongside some of these people, Katherine Gibson (1993) also recognized the need to acknowledge and account for the very different relations and choices she found in contrasting coal-mining regions.

In general, by asking why differences occur, social geographers must consider different research perspectives or forms of explanation in order to select and address their questions – and (re)present the answers they

construct. Explicitly or not, they position themselves, their practice and their writing in different ways, which in turn are both personal and political acts. These issues are explained further in Chapter 2 as it addresses some of the circumstances surrounding the construction of different geographic knowledges. Social geography is shown to be a creative inquiry that (implicitly or explicitly) negotiates both scientific and political issues associated with establishing academic geographic knowledge.

## 1.1 BOOK STRUCTURE

In writing this book I have not attempted to produce a comprehensive description of all forms of social geography. Other references and edited collections tackle this job in various ways (see for example Hamnett, 1996; Jackson and Smith, 1984; Pain et al., 2001; Valentine, 2001). Instead, *Introducing Social Geographies* presents a specific commentary on social geography as it appears primarily in Anglo-American and Antipodean contexts. The book confines itself to these contexts for two reasons. First, Anglo-American and Antipodean geographies have shared a common, dominating socio-economic system – capitalism. This has influenced the development of different types of geographic theory and the recognition of different research subjects common to the capitalist societies in these countries. Second, social geographies being written and beyond Anglo-American and Antipodean contexts are more often considered within studies of (economic) development and (postcolonial) political and cultural geographies. It is beyond the scope of this text to do justice to these literatures although their influence is acknowledged in several sections of this book.

Within these economic, cultural and continental parameters, social geography is presented as a critical but changing social science, and as a purposeful and powerful opportunity to construct a field of valuable social knowledges. Attention is given to how these knowledges are socially constructed; how they draw on different **epistemological** approaches and practices; and how they are presented from different positions and for different purposes. This diversity is shown through the theoretical tensions discussed in Chapter 2 as well as the specific foci on social differences presented in Chapters 3–6. These latter chapters consider the core axes of social difference shaping contemporary social geographies: class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. These differences support how we understand people's actions and multiple identities (across diverse categories of difference), and how places and spaces are involved in both shaping such differences and being marked by them.

But *Introducing Social Geographies* goes further than describing approaches to social difference. The third part of the book shows that beyond the specialist details that emerged in contemporary writings on difference there remain some thorny questions and opportunities. First,

the potential and power of social geography can be seen when attention is turned from difference to the ways diverse people and groups will unite around particular issues or shared experiences. Despite differences, there are times and issues that appear to stimulate people to unite for temporary or ongoing reasons. Identity appears as one important concept for understanding this process. For example, people connect and assemble meanings and values around certain social categories, relations or experiences. An illustration of this process is given in Box 1.2. In this case, despite a variety of differences in parenting, sexual attitudes, ethnicity and economic circumstances, groups of women united under a lesbian identity to establish a range of alternative livings spaces in the USA. Valentine's (1997) analysis of these activities shows how powerful a common (sexual) identity can be for achieving material and social alternatives for lesbians who are nevertheless a strikingly heterogeneous group of women.

Second, social geography can also advance by re-engaging with the opportunity to move beyond the specificity of difference, and recognize that geographies of power permeate the complexities of all social relations and difference. These issues are addressed in Chapters 7–9 which trace three ways in which social geographers move from the particularities of a specific social variable (e.g. class or gender) to *draw lines of relationship* between various categories of social difference. By focusing on identity, power and action respectively, these chapters illustrate that contemporary social geographies can acknowledge – but move beyond – social diversity to address the possibility of (re)presenting people's choices and actions as diversity is negotiated through engagements with identity and power. Thus the closing chapters of the book concentrate on the records of recent social action that geographers have made, as well as synthesizing ways in which social geography may continue to be a critically reflective means of seeing the uneven ways societies use and rework the environments and specific places in which they live.

## 1.2 WRITING FROM 'SOMEWHERE'

Before moving into the body of this book, it is important to emphasize that contemporary social geographies are particular accounts of what is often complicated and debatable content. They are projects that are placed at the intersection of diverse and sometimes contradictory concepts and experiences. At times these are expressed through dualisms that indicate the poles that might encompass the breadth of issues, for example, self and other, difference and unity, local and global. Nevertheless, an increasingly common quality within these geographies stems from the acknowledgement that all such knowledges are constructed from *somewhere*; that geographies are investigated and written by people who are working from specific personal and academic **positions**. This has been the case particularly for

**Box 1.2 Making lesbian space**

G. Valentine (1997) 'Lesbian separatist communities in the United States', in Cloke, P. and Little, J. (eds), *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*. London: Routledge. pp. 109–22.

Gill Valentine's work on geographies of sexuality has included an account of how some lesbians in the USA established rural female-only communities as an alternative society in the 1970s and 1980s. These communal spaces were to counter the perceived oppressive and **heteropatriarchal** conditions of the 'man-made' cities. Valentine notes that these actions were attempting to create a positive social space to counter lesbians' past experiences. However, she also records that social differences between the women meant that a united lesbian identity was always needing to be negotiated as differences between women surfaced.

US lesbian feminists ... [produced] their own very different sort of 'rural idyll' – non-heteropatriarchal space – through the spatial strategy of separatism. By constructing the rural as an escape from the 'man-made' city these women draw upon stereotypical representations of the rural as a healthy, simple, peaceful, safe place to live. ... [These] attempts to create idyllic 'communities' by privileging the women's shared identities or sense of sameness as lesbians, over their differences. (1997: 109, 110)

Separatists established land trusts to make land available to women for ever. This control of space, they believed, was essential because it would give women the freedom to articulate a lesbian feminist identity, to create new ways of living and to work out new ways of relating to the environment. (1997: 111)

A number of issues challenged the constructed unity lesbians tried to maintain. Valentine (1997: 114–17) documents these conflicts:

- Boy children: some lesbian lands banned all boy children and therefore excluded some lesbians because they were mothers of boys.
- Sexual and personal relations: different residents in lesbian lands experimented with celibacy, monogamy and non-monogamy but different personal choices affected women's ability to mobilize support for other decision-making processes in the communities.
- Class and financial resources: conflicts over ownership of land and ability to improve it (e.g. electricity and fences), and sources of income created cleavages between some women.
- Racism: while some lesbian lands drew on Black Power political ideology and strategies to succeed, the dominance of white women and claims of racism showed the fragility of these communities – and the limited access for African-American, Jewish and native-American women.
- Prejudice against disabled women: the lack of accessibility of some lands and the emphasis on physical labour reduced the way some women could participate in the lands.



**Box 1.2 (Continued)**

In conclusion:

Lesbian separatists are one example of a marginalized group who have ... attempted to live out very politicized visions of a rural lifestyle, by emphasizing their shared identities. ... [But t]hese desires for mutual identification or homogeneity simultaneously appear to have generated boundaries and exclusions ... the reality is that in many lands, identities were not equally valued, rather some were privileged over others. (1997: 119, 120)

western/Anglo social geographies since the 1980s as knowledge and research choices have increasingly been recognized as culturally and politically situated (see Box 1.3).

It is appropriate therefore that some note is made of my position and interests in writing this book. I draw on specific academic identities to describe myself as a social, feminist and rural geographer. These labels – together with an interest in poststructural theories – locate most of my interests in geography. These include investigating how social theories may apply to the material and cultural worlds of rural Australia and New Zealand: how concepts of identity, difference and social movements play out in specific places (Liepins, 1998a; Panelli, 2002a; Panelli et al., 2002); and how socio-economic processes and cultural relations affect the social arrangements of rural households, farms, communities and industries (Liepins, 2000a; Liepins and Bradshaw, 1999; Panelli, 2001; Panelli and Gallagher, 2003). Throughout these considerations I have maintained an interest in critiquing some of the power relations and discursive processes by which social differences are established or maintained to the disadvantage of some groups (e.g. women, farm families, young people). Additionally, as an 'Australian' working in New Zealand and publishing in international/western journals, I am conscious of both the influence and status of the theoretical 'metropolis' of the North (Berg and Kearns, 1998) and the opportunities for observing and constructing geographies from the margins (Monk and Liepins, 2000). Finally, having had the advantage of a postgraduate experience where a critical engagement with geography was supported within a wider departmental environment that encouraged and respected postgraduates' thought, dialogue and writing, I have sought to maintain the importance of listening across the spectrum of geographic voices. This is manifest in the book through my use of materials generated from a continuum of writers that stretch from the 'biggest' names of geographic and wider social theorists to the work of 'unknown' students who

**Box 1.3 Examples of geographers writing from somewhere: reflections on position**

R. Kearns (1997) 'Constructing (bi)cultural geographies: research on, and with, people of the Hokianga district', *New Zealand Geographer*, 53: 3–8.

*Robin Kearns* has maintained a long interest in the social and political issues surrounding health services. Working within a bicultural and multicultural situation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Kearns has reflected on the way he has conducted geographic research into the provision of health services in Hokianga. He writes:

[T]he emplacement of Hokianga within my personal biography cannot be divorced from my place within the narrative of Hokianga's health system. I have visited the area since childhood, and have a number of personal friends in the district. Furthermore, at the time of beginning research, I had recently returned from a period in Canada where I had spent time in First Nations communities. My empathy to indigenous welfare issues, as well as awareness of my own cultural hybridity, thus contributed to (re)visioning a relationship with Hokianga people. (1997: 5)

G. Valentine (1998) "'Sticks and stones may break my bones": a personal geography of harassment', *Antipode*, 30: 305–32.

*Gill Valentine* has experienced a widely accepted identity as a 'lesbian geographer'. However, in 1998 she wrote of the difficulties around maintaining multiple identities, especially in the face of harassment. In her account, she notes her different professional and personal positions as she reflects on the ways she was seen prior to her experience of victimization. She writes:

Although the choice of geographies of sexualities ... as a research topic at the beginning of my academic career was largely motivated by my own personal experiences ... I never set out to 'come out' within the discipline. ... [Nevertheless] the discipline [of geography] somewhat thrust the identity 'lesbian geographer' upon me. ... [This] has placed me in a rather paradoxical position, for while I have been held up as a 'lesbian geographer' who is assumed to be 'out' both publicly and privately, I have actually been performing a very different identity to my family, creating a very precarious 'public'/'private', 'work'/'home' splintered existence. (1998: 306, 307)

P. Routledge (1997b) 'The imagineering of resistance: Pollock Free State and the practice of postmodern politics', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22: 359–76.

*Paul Routledge* has investigated a range of geographies 'in action' where he has participated in political activities and written social, cultural and political geographies about these events. In one case, he writes of the social protests and geographies of resistance that surrounded the development of the M77 motorway in Glasgow, Scotland. He opens a paper on this issue by quoting from his personal journal, and then goes on to make his position(s) clear:

**Box 1.3 (Continued)**

This journal entry refers to one of my personal experiences within the recent campaign against the M77 motorway extension in Glasgow, Scotland, which represented the country's first anti-motorway ecopolitical conflict. I participated in the 'No M77' campaign as a member of Glasgow Earth First! (one of the groups opposing the road) and Pollock Free State – an 'ecological encampment' that was constructed in the path of the projected motorway and which acted as the focal point of the resistance. ... In this paper, I want to examine the direct action component of this resistance. ... My analysis draws from my participation in the campaign. (1997b: 360)

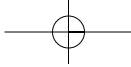
G. Pratt (1999b) 'Geographies of identity and difference: marking boundaries', in Massey, D., Allen, J. and Sarre, P. (eds), *Human Geography Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 151–67.

*Geraldine Pratt* has conducted many years of research into the connections between work and gender. Recently, her work with Filipina domestic workers has sought to redress the fact that in her earlier work she had omitted the acknowledgement of such workers. She reflects:

[In the past] as a white middle-class academic I simply did not see the geographies of Filipina identity at one point in time. ... [Now] I see our job as one of creating trouble ... by making visible boundary constructions and the production of difference, and by keeping alive the question of who, inevitably, is being excluded as identities are defined. My current research involves an effort to make visible the boundary that prevented me from seeing domestic workers living in Vancouver in 1992. (1999b: 152, 164)

have inspired me as they have tackled social geography at the University of Otago. Student reflections from class sessions or reading logs are included in a variety of forms throughout the book. These diverse positions and interests of mine result in a wish to see social geography as a sub-discipline that can be open to constructions from many positions while recognizing the difficulties and hierarchies that exist in generating knowledge within the academic arena (Johnston, 2000). The book forms both a celebration and a critical reflection of social geography and I trust that it will encourage readers to always question:

- What are the currently dominant forms of knowing?
- How can we highlight inequalities, challenges and alternatives?
- What do we think are the important questions for social geographic inquiry?



**PART 1**

**INTRODUCTIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS**

- When and how do we respect and acknowledge other voices and knowledges?
- How can questions and problems be best investigated, understood and represented?
- What are the consequences and opportunities arising from our choices?

