

# Working through ‘working through’

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## Abstract

This commentary provides a summary of Shawn Bodden’s intervention, before raising three questions prompted by the article. What is the relationship between a more ordinary critical geography and interpretivism? How is ‘ordinariness’ being used by geographers as a category of geographical analysis? And what might a more ordinary critical geography resemble in practice?

## Keywords

Critical geography, critique, interpretivism, ontology, ordinary

This commentary on Shawn Bodden’s article (Bodden, 2023) begins by providing my own summary of the article, which is dense and substantial, making multiple readings possible. It proceeds by picking up three questions prompted by the article: on the relationship between a more ‘ordinary’ critical geography and interpretivism; the use of ‘ordinariness’ as a category of geographical analysis; and what critical geography ‘with an ordinary spirit’ might resemble in practice. Throughout, the commentary leaves certain issues to one side. For example, I am no expert on how ordinary language philosophy and Stanley Cavell have been (mis)used in non-relational geography. Others are better placed to comment on such things.

Following Clive Barnett, Bodden describes a ‘turn to ontology’ in critical geography, which has become characterised by ‘ontology talk’ (metaphysical assertions, e.g. space is relational) and ‘ontological critique’ (the correction of people’s conceptual misunderstandings by critical geographers, in order to direct their political action). One

example given by Bodden is Doreen Massey’s line that if space is relational, then efforts to promote local community are metaphysically mistaken. Another example that occurred to me is the line found in commodity chain research during the 2000s, when Barnett and I were studying ethical consumption (with colleagues Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass), that if only consumers had better geographical imaginations – if only they understood that consumers are connected to other actors via chains of production, circulation, consumption, and responsibility – they would make less harmful consumption decisions. Barnett’s response to this line was that geographical knowledge is rarely the primary factor explaining consumption practices, and responsibility in commodity chains – in any

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situation, really – is rarely given, straightforward, indisputable (see Barnett et al., 2011).

Like Barnett, Bodden is not comfortable with a critical geography that ‘points people to their proper place’ (a nice turn of phrase). Elsewhere, Barnett has provided additional reasons for discomfort with ontological critique. It encourages poor quality argumentation lacking a sense of proportion, with assertions often based on a narrow range of theory, or a reductive reading of science (that fails to recognise the contested character of most science), or insufficient evidence from everyday life (see Barnett, 2013, 2020).

Instead of pointing people to their proper place, Bodden prefers a critical geography focused on ‘how people place themselves’. To develop this preference, Bodden draws from ordinary language philosophy (especially Cavell) and Barnett’s action-theoretic approach (itself informed by Cavell). Such a critical geography would consider: how people respond to moments of difference, uncertainty, and politics; how they work through such moments by way of sayings and doings (questioning, reflecting, and judging); how they reach decisions or generate matters of worth by weighing reasons and justifications; and how they do critique in ordinary life, making heuristic use of ontology (including spatial concepts). Furthermore, such a critical geography would proceed by way of dialogic, intersubjective, democratic methodologies that ask people questions, or assign people to situations, before listening to their responses: their discussions of circumstances, commitments, claims, and counter-claims. Rather than being ‘put in their place’, research participants would be given a voice. Rather than pointing people to their place and directing their politics, critical geography would seek conversations with people to clarify the challenges they face, the justice they seek, and the politics made possible by context-specific encounters. This would be a more ‘modest’ critical geography; a critical geography with ‘an ordinary spirit’.

One question prompted by Bodden’s article: How does this vision for critical geography, based on ordinary language philosophy and Barnett’s action-theoretic approach, relate to existing approaches (besides critical geography as ontological

critique)? More specifically, how does it relate to interpretivism, especially as developed recently in political studies (see Rhodes, 2017)? On the one hand, interpretivism appears to prioritise situated agency – the embedding of action in beliefs, desires, and reasons, and the embedding of these items in traditions, discourses, and institutions – a little more than, say, Cavell or Barnett. On the other hand, interpretivism shares a similar focus on dilemmas: the way in which situations present actors with problems for which traditions, discourses, and institutions provide only imperfect guidance, meaning that dilemmas must be worked through in everyday life; and the way researchers can study such ‘working through’ using ethnographic methods.

A second question: What does ‘ordinary’ mean in ‘ordinary’ critical geography? Of course, ‘ordinary’ will have a specific meaning in ordinary language philosophy. But a more general use of ‘ordinary’ can be found in Bodden’s article – where ordinary appears 113 times to describe ‘language philosophy’, but also ‘lives’, ‘circumstances’, ‘challenges’, ‘actors’, ‘practices’, ‘concerns’, ‘interests’, ‘commitments’, and so on. The range of use would be greater still in recent human geography. To be clear, this point should not be pushed too far. For the most part, ‘ordinary’ for Bodden seems to mean ‘everyday’: those circumstances or practices that occur regularly in people’s lives, and so are not extraordinary for them. Nevertheless, at least sometimes, ‘ordinary’ seems to refer to lives or actors too, and so it might be helpful to approach ‘the ordinary’ – in Bodden, Barnett, and human geography – from the direction of Bodden’s article itself: as a metaphysical assertion (e.g. critique is ordinary), the heuristic use of which needs studying.

Claire Langhamer (2018) has recently done this, or at least something like this, from the discipline of history. She has analysed how the category of ‘ordinariness’ – a set of values, social characteristics, emotional styles, and behaviours – emerged and was used in British society from the Second World War onwards. It was used by filmmakers to garner support for the ‘People’s War’. Then it was used by journalists, politicians, and intellectuals in retrospective accounts of the war, in post-war reconstruction fantasies, and in entertainment and

advertising that sought to construct mass audiences and markets. Then, once valorised, it was used by 'ordinary people' themselves to claim legitimacy for their 'ordinary' opinions. Langhamer notes how such uses were often exclusionary, positioning certain people, values, or behaviours as extraordinary or deviant. A similar analysis from the discipline of geography would be welcome; a study of how 'ordinariness' has been used by geographers as a category of geographical analysis.

The third question: If a more 'ordinary' critical geography involves a shift from ontological critique to studying the heuristic uses of ontology in ordinary reasoning, then what would this critical geography 'with an ordinary spirit' resemble in practice? As Bodden recognises, Barnett heeded his own advice to study emergent forms of democracy and politics empirically, more than is often recognised. So one place we might look for models of ordinary critical geography in practice is Barnett's own research. For example, in the early 2000s, Barnett and I completed the project on ethical consumption referred to previously. A part of that project used focus groups to position 'consumers' in certain ways, imitating the process of problematisation found in fair-trade or no-sweat campaigns (see Barnett et al., 2011: Chapter 5). The analysis then focused on participant responses: how they reasoned about ethical consumption; how they engaged critically with demands placed on them as consumers; and how they argued about ethical problems and actions.

Another example is the project Barnett and I worked on during 2020 and 2021. We studied how people learned to live with risk and responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic using volunteer writing collected by the Mass Observation Archive (which has a long history of dialogic, democratic social inquiry – see Clarke and Barnett, 2023a). At various points during the pandemic, the archivists invited panellists to write about events – for example, government communications, guidance, and regulations – provoking them to work through in their writing the pressures they were facing, the claims being made on them, their circumstances and interests, and justifications for their actions. We analysed this writing for how people

encountered epidemiological terms, concepts, and subject positions (Clarke and Barnett, 2023b), and how people worked through the ethical dilemmas generated when government rules – communicated only in general terms – met particular situations (Clarke and Barnett, 2023c).

Other examples from geographers include Crispian Fuller's research on urban austerity (e.g. Fuller, 2017), in which the main influence is less ordinary language philosophy and more French pragmatism (another interest of Barnett's – see Barnett, 2014), but the focus remains on: processes of negotiation and agreement (among policy-makers); the justification or critique of positions within such processes using different conceptions of worth; and use of interviews with policymakers to elicit such justifications, critiques, positions, and conceptions. Latham and Layton (2019) also draw on French pragmatism, along with American pragmatism (another touchstone for Barnett), in their research on how dialogue, compromise, and cooperation emerged from a dispute over the redevelopment of London's South Bank. They used 'retrospective case study' methodology, involving interviews and analysis of media coverage and planning documents from the time, to study how notions of worth and justice were developed and contested, and how publics were assembled. Regan Koch (2020) also takes disputes as the starting point for investigating ordinary critique. His ethnographic study of underground restaurants in New York City – specifically, disputes over their regulation – focused on the values different stakeholders expressed, the criticisms they made of each other, the defences they mounted against each other, the way all these were transformed during the course of disputes, and the claims about public and private space that emerged from these disputes.

With more space, other examples from my own research could be provided: on how citizens reason about politics, making heuristic use of concepts from moral philosophy to do so (see Clarke et al., 2018); or how people might be mobilised by social researchers – including critical geographers – to observe their own 'working through' of problems, to observe the working through of others, and to constitute themselves as publics on the

basis of such observations (see Clarke, 2024). Bodden's article provides a clear sense of Barnett's action-theoretic approach, its influences, and its implications for critical human geography. Hopefully, this commentary has added a sense – however, brief and suggestive – of how Barnett's approach, developed by Bodden, and focused on the working through of problems in everyday situations, might be worked through by geographers in empirical research.


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