

Interactive comment on ““Doing” cultural geography/“being” a cultural geographer – reflections by an “accidental geographer” on practising cultural geography in the Netherlands” by B. van Hoven

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I found this to be an interesting paper, partly because I am personally linked (in a peripheral way) to many of the networks described in the paper, and partly because I have a keen affinity for many Dutch geographers. At the same time, I am having difficulty in getting a sense of what kind of significant contribution this paper will make to the wider purpose of examining “geographies after and beyond the cultural turn”, the theme of the special issue of SG to which this paper forms a contribution.

As the author, Bettina van Hoven, aptly describes in her abstract, this paper

“...comprises reflections by the author on developments in cultural geography in the Netherlands... it briefly explores the historical context of geography in the Netherlands and considers reasons for what could be construed as a “lagging behind” in Dutch cultural geography (when compared to the UK). The paper then zooms in on the local and personal context of the author at the University of Groningen, thus illustrating “a” Dutch cultural geography, impacted by research traditions and teaching contexts.”

All is good up to that point, but then the author goes on to suggest that she will explore “[w]ays in which research here may materialise into interesting new developments in cultural geography in the Netherlands (and elsewhere)...”. It is precisely because the author ‘zooms in on the local and personal context’ that the paper is interesting; but it is also because she doesn’t adequately link this local and personal context to wider socio-spatial relations and structures that the paper fails to make a significant contribution to discussions to our understanding of “Geographies after and beyond the cultural turn”.

This is not to say that van Hoven does not acknowledge structural processes that affect the production of geographical practice in the Netherlands, but rather that I feel that she doesn’t place enough emphasis on their importance, nor does she follow through with an analysis that takes these structural processes into account in a thoroughgoing manner.

This raises important questions about, for example, the role of neoliberalization of the universities in the production of cultural geography. I can think of at least two important ways neoliberalization has affected (or may affect in the future) the production of cultural geography in Groningen specifically and the Netherlands more generally:

1) The choice to change the name of the Department of Regional Studies to the Department of Cultural Geography was impelled, in part at least, by the necessity of increasing enrollments – and it did so by offering a new ‘brand’ for the department, one that would, so the story goes, attract more students to choose Cultural Geography as

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opposed to Planning or Economic Geography, for example.

2) But this 'choice', impelled by one set of (neoliberal) disciplining logics, brings with it another set of 'disciplining' logics, the external review of research productivity. The last review of research in the department of Cultural Geography was undertaken by a group of external reviewers dominated by geographers from the UK, and this brings with it a very 'Anglo-centric' vision of what cultural geography is (and ought to be). For an interesting overview of such neoliberal processes and their implications for research (in a variety of jurisdictions, including the Netherlands), see, Castree, et al., 2006. Research Assessment and the production of geographical knowledge. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(6): 747-782.

This neoliberalization of Dutch Geography also has implications at wider scales than the University of Groningen, not least for example, in the national academic labour market, which has seen the hiring of a number of high profile geographers from the UK (although not necessarily 'British' nationals) as new professors of human geography in Dutch universities. This internationalization of the labour market is a hallmark of wider processes of academic globalization and neoliberalization.

So, how should the paper be revised? I suspect it is a matter of minor (in quantity) but quite significant (theoretically) revisions, ones that involve taking seriously the old dictum that people make their own historical geographies, but not under the historical-geographic conditions of their own making. Thus, I suggest that the author needs to go through the whole paper with an eye to ensure that any time that she writes about such things as 'choices' and 'decisions', no matter how serendipitous they may at first seem, she keeps in mind (and writes explicitly) about the ways that such things are always made in the context of socio-spatial structures and power relations.

It is also important to keep in mind the theme of the special issue, and thus I would like to see the paper more explicitly address the question of how cultural geography in the Netherlands operates within (or not) "Geographies after and beyond the cultural turn".

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I would also like the author to give serious consideration to revising the paper so as to avoid the hierarchical comparison between Dutch and UK geography that is made quite explicit in her abstract when she states that Dutch geography is “lagging behind” UK Geography. Can the comparison not be more nuanced and take into consideration some very important reasons for different national traditions. For example, it could just as easily be argued that because Geography has played such an important role in national (and colonial) policy-making in the Netherlands (something that cannot be said for geography in the UK), it is “ahead” of UK geography. Better, of course to avoid such hierarchical distinctions and instead focus on the reasons that the cultural turn in Anglo geography was not seen as so important in the Dutch tradition.

I also have some minor suggestions for revisions, which I outline below.

P 167, Lines 14-15: “In Groningen, and I would argue elsewhere in the Netherlands as well, feminist geography was not viewed as relevant or interesting” Although you complicate this comment with a footnote, I believe the situation is much more complex. Issues of gender were viewed as relevant and interesting by lots of people, but what I suspect is that geography departments did not employ a lot of feminist geographers at that time. In addition, there is kind of a hegemonic Dutch taken-for-granted understanding of widespread ‘gender equality’ in the Netherlands, which further complicates the issue. I think you need to be much more nuanced in how you describe the place of feminist geography.

P168, line10: “illustrate the lacking mechanisms that would have “spinned off” a cultural. . .” Awkward phrasing. I would say “illustrate the lack of mechanisms in place to produce a cultural turn in the Netherlands.

P 169, line 9: “less “abstract” and “critical” but more “applied” than geography in the UK”. Might be useful to provide in a footnote a definition of ‘critical geography’ (that is, a wide range of geographies that draw upon critical social and cultural theory for their inspiration).

Interactive
Comment

P 170, lines 15-16: “GeoJournal (incidentally the “most international” journal according to Short et al., 2001).” That was almost a decade ago, and there are now much more ‘international’ journals (if I might be so bold, journals such as ACME, which publishes in five different languages and has readers from over 100 countries, might be seen as very international these days).

P. 173, lines 4-7: “Master theses were encouraged around the themes of the books but depending on the supervisor, the subjects were dealt with in a more conservative way, or a more “post-structural way”. In so doing, UK cultural geography, as represented in the handbooks used, was often modified and “toned down”. I’m not sure that ‘toned down’ is appropriate here, as it implies a certain hierarchical relationship, one that is starting to develop as a primary ‘tone’ in this paper, one that suggests that Dutch Geography isn’t as good as British Geography (and this is a comparison the author makes explicit in her abstract as I discuss above).

I think that this paper has a great deal of promise, and I would like to see a revised version in print in future.

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