

## An Interview with Don Mitchell

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by Stéphane Tonnelat, at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, 2 December 2009.

### Part 1: Radical geography and the right to the city

- ST: You are a distinguished professor of geography at the University of Syracuse, New York and you are also the director of the people's geography project at the same university. You are an important figure in the discipline of radical geography, especially dealing with public space, homelessness and labor landscape. You published several important books. I will only mention one book, whose title may already sound familiar to a French audience, which is *The Right to the city* with a subtitle, "social justice and the fight for public space in America." My first question, relating to this book is, what do you think is the role of radical geography as regard to public space?

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[*Interview with Don Mitchell – Part 1*]

- DM: Yeah, that's a good question. I think I can answer by saying a little bit about how I got interested in public space. There are two ways in. One was when I first got interested in geography, in the mid-1980s and I was in California. I was a university student and in California cities, as in most U.S. cities, visible homelessness had just exploded on the streets and with that the question of "who the sidewalks belong to, what they were for" became very important questions. And I just sort of paid attention to that. I didn't really think about it too much. When I got into graduate school, I was actually working on my PhD dissertation, which is on labor and landscape. I was back in California in Berkeley at the time that People's Park, which was a park built by community people, by activists and so forth in the late 1960s and there was a riot around this, the university tried to take it back. There were plans by the university of California to reclaim that park when I was there doing my research. Just after I left to go back to graduate school in the East Coast, there was another big riot as the university tried to take control of the park that had been in the community's hands for more than 20 years. And those kinds of issues along with some other experiences that I had like protests and so forth got me very interested in what public space was, who it was for, why it mattered. I began to dovetail this with my research on labor landscapes, which I was very much reading through a kind of Marxian lens. Because a lot of labor activists that I was looking at, the only place that they could organize was in public, on city streets, in parks. Migrant farm workers when they came to town, migrant farm workers would be organized by radical unions in the streets, and public space was crucial for that. So this began to dovetail to me. So my interest in what was going on in city streets in the contemporary period when homelessness, questions of protests and politics and what was going on in People's Park all kind of came together. And I tried to write a series of articles that got to questions of homelessness in public, and therefore at public space, looked at questions of protest and therefore at what public space could be and, of course, what became important then were questions of property as well. And so, developing my own radical politics became crucial for understanding this and at the same time my education in Marxism, and particularly the Marxism written in Capital volume 1, more so than a lot of commentaries about Marxism, became important, thinking how Capital circulate through cities and why, became very important for understanding how homeless people were regulated in public space and why, where shelters were located, why they were moved out of parks, why there were moved down the streets. So I started telling the story

of the relationship between capital circulation, capital accumulation and struggles over that, the making of urban landscapes and at the same time, the struggle for public space. And with that, of course I was reading all the classics of public sphere theory, Arendt, Habermas, all of that, as well as Richard Sennett's writing on cities and then trying to bring into that discourse a very very materialist understanding. And I think being positioned in geography really helped for that, because what we are most interested in is precisely the question of material space. Who has access to space, why, at what conditions and so forth. So it's that kind of trajectory that got me into I think what human geography or radical geography brings to questions of public space. Exactly how these spaces are produced, which is one the questions of Lefebvre, since we are referring to him, who they are produced by and under what kind of conditions, and for what purposes. What possibilities there are to transform the spaces into something more just, more worth it.

- ST: In the books by Lefebvre, *The right to the city*, but also *The production of space*, what do you think are the main concepts that you borrowed to work on your research?

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[Interview with Don Mitchell – Part 2]

- DM: Well, besides stealing the title, *The right to the city*, which was helpful, I did really want to ask this question, who has a right to be in the city and under what conditions. There are few things that became very important to me. Generally the arguments about the production of space anyd how the production of space is absolutely crucial to any social practices, to any social formation and to capitalism in particular. Capitalism produces spaces in particular ways, for instance framing struggles and so forth. Those arguments about the creation of space, the importance of abstract space, a term that kind of relates to the notion of abstract labor, have been very helpful for me. Then within *The Right to the city*, the way that he talks about the right to centrality, the right to participation, participation in the making of the city, the actual producing of that space and how right to habitat, to a place to live, right to the surroundings and control over it are in many ways foundational to other claims of ways of being. The very ability to be he talks about is crucial. He lays out a very nice framework for understanding some of these ideas, in his usual kind of dictating way. It's all rather abstract at times. And one of the things that I like to do is take some of these ideas and really bring them down to occur on the ground, make them more fruitful.

## Part 2: The people's geography project and the community geographer

- ST: What is the "People's geography project"?

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[Interview with Don Mitchell – Part 3]

- DM: The people's geography project is just a website at this point. I don't think it has been updated in a long time. In part because all the grand ideas that myself and a number of comrades had for it didn't pan out, for all kinds of structural reasons. The fact that we were all over a very large country and couldn't get together very often. I became administrator, department chair, which took up a lot of time. I had to deal with other sorts of things. And then there were some very immediate reasons, and I will come back to what the project is about. Immediate reasons like September 11, 2001. I took some money that I had and started to churn out teaching materials about US geopolitics, a kind of critical take on the US geopolitical role for schoolteachers. The original idea

for the People's geography project, another stolen title from Howard Zinn *People's history*, was to find ways to popularize radical geography or radicalize popular geography, we didn't care which one would happen. But it's important because geography has been an extremely interesting discipline for the last 30 years. It's gone through theoretical revolution after theoretical revolution, a kind of hotbed with very interesting theorizing of it with a lot of very good effects from that. The spatial turn in the social sciences more broadly was important to the reinforcement of the notion of space as central to thinking about how our worlds operate. And yet a lot of that knowledge, certainly in the US context, that has been developed is not well known outside the walls of the academy and academic journalists. So one of the ideas was to find ways to take a lot of that radical theorizing that has been going on and turn it into pamphlets, maybe eventually videos, and those sorts of things that we haven't done much of. I have a student who is putting together some aspects of that, popular books, which is the thing we really floundered on. We really want to write a people's geography in the United States, and we never could figure out what to leave out. That was the problem, right? History you can hang it on the scaffolding of time. And space, it became a lot harder because we never figured out how exactly to do this. So then the people's geography project ended up transforming. It transformed because, as I became department chair, I got involved in something called the "Community Geography Project" in Syracuse. And that came about because I got a phone call asking if we could map a changing geography of poverty in the city. I said, of course we'd be happy to help, having no idea what this guy was talking about, having no skills for this kind of stuff myself, and so I called up our GIS person. She said of course she could do it. She is a tropical ecologist, not into poverty studies or anything else. So we did. We put together this great project looking at hunger, and then more broadly now, looking at a whole range social, political, economic and environmental issues in the central New York State region, Syracuse city area, geographically and bringing together all kinds of community people. All of our projects are community driven. They start from the bottom up. They are not quite action research. It's a very hard model to describe. We are kind of making it up as we go along. We found money to hire someone that we called "community geographer." She's got all the resources at the university and it works for the community. People call her up and ask her to get involved in things. She gets students involved, she gets faculty involved and I use some of my people's geography project money that I had to get that going and I raised money otherwise. So the people's geography project has moved to very local on the ground kind of projects trying to understand the place that we live in. How poverty operates, how inequalities operates in it. How environmental justice or injustices operate in it. And then, one of my jobs in it, as kind of the house theorist, is, a lot of these things are incredibly pragmatic work, is to always get people to think about how things reflect larger social forces. It's a depressed, deindustrialized region, how that's an important factor. You know, when the city council decides to jump on the Richard Florida creative class bandwagon, we have big problems with that idea, and why we need to find ways to test it, so it became a very interesting project. And then somewhat related to that, the community geography project and myself and some other people involved in the project have also made links with the "right to the city coalitions" that are developing around the United States in a lot of cities. They are loosely linked to similar coalitions that are developing in Europe and Asia and so forth. And I used a little bit of money that I have left to get right to the city activists to our national geography meetings each year. We have done this for two years now and we are doing it again for its third year in Washington DC, where I paid for their registrations. It's some project money that I have and I pay for to rent a place for doing something else with the community and that sort of things that really tries to make some of these links between academics and activists in ways that in the United States they are rarely made. And so that comes back to the original idea of the people's geography project but it's now through the right to the city coalition, which I am very happy about. I mostly write checks.

- ST: You write checks and you infuse a little of the theory into it.
- DM: I try to, I try to.

## The community geographer

- ST: It sounds great. I really love this idea of a community geographer.

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*[Interview with Don Mitchell – Part 4]*

- DM: It's been one of the most interesting things that we have done. We are in the midst of trying to reconceptualize the whole project right now and find money so that our community geographer, Jonnell Allen, can be permanently in place. Right now she is on what we call "soft money," which is difficult you know. We get grants; we go beg to the university administration for another few months to pay for it. We need to make it permanent because there is huge dividend to the community. Community organizations, to non-profits, actually to the city itself, to development people. And they are actually beginning to recognize that, sometimes in ways that make me uncomfortable.

- ST: That's what I wanted to ask. In your work, you question a lot of the ways that spaces are made, buildings are built...

- DM: Well, it's not unanimous and that's obvious, and neither do I accept what they say. And what we've learnt to do, those who are on the steering committee, we bring a lot of peoples from the community. We have very big political disagreement from at a pretty high level, and we've decided that we will argue about this and we will try to make sure that we could be very clear about why we think that what we are saying is important to be heard. And that's been part of the ethos from the very beginning, and that's been very important to it. There is a guy on the board who works for one of the non-profits, for the Community Foundation, that hands out a lot of money. He is involved in all kinds of really good stuff but he is completely bought into the neoliberal model of NGOs, completely bought into it. He can't say a sentence without using the word "accountability." And so I am always giving him a hard time. But he gives it right back. And out of that then, we get a really good debate about how what the limits of his ways of thinking might be, about what the limits of my way of thinking might be and that's become very helpful, in some parts because we agreed we were going to argue about it, and we were going to do it in a comradely way. We are not going to call each other names. That part has worked. At times I am completely frustrated about it. Some of the things that Jonnell Allen, the community geographer, wants to get involved in, ought to get involved in, do not align with my politics very well. But I am one person among many and I also understand the importance of having some broad based project straight from the community. So I step back and let it go.

- ST: It's truly an encounter between a theoretical Marxian or Marxist approach of space and a more grounded, almost anthropological.

- DM: I try, I try. Maybe that's why I am in an anthropology meeting. It's crucial. And I learned this very early on. When I was a grad student, a good friend of mine now, she was a professor, she was reading a lot of my work because it kept getting sent to her and she finally took me aside and said: "you've got good theoretical ideas, but you are not a good theorist. Stick to the empirical stuff, you are really good at that. You ground what you are doing." And I took that to heart. If you really think

about how things are grounded in the places you are looking at, it makes a big theoretical difference.

- ST: I think we are done. Thank you. It was great!

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