

RGS-IBG Social and Cultural Geography Research Group

Annual Report 2006

The group membership currently stands at 480 members, and is currently £3757 in credit. In the Calendar Year 2006, the group supported a very successful freestanding workshop on Matter and Materiality (see Item 5, below), seven sessions at the RGS-IBG conference (see Item 6 below) and has put in place plans for a more active communications strategy (the website and newsletter having been in abeyance for some time). The Committee has seen a number of changes in the last year, most notably with the appointment of a new Chair and Secretary.

1. AGM

The AGM was held at the RGS-IBG conference, Kensington Gore, Friday 1st Sept. Chaired by the outgoing Secretary, Dr James Kneale (UCL), the main items on the agenda related to the replacement of the ten committee members who left this year: Mike Crang (Chair), James Kneale (Secretary), Ian Cook, Luke Desforges, Duncan Fuller, Julian Holloway, Stuart Oliver, Rachel Pain, David Crouch and Divya Tolia-Kelly. All were thanked for their valuable contributions over the last three years. Replacements were nominated and appointed as follows: Phil Hubbard (Chair), Gail Davies (Secretary), Peter Hopkins (Membership), Emma Roe, Kezia Barker, Russell Hitchings, and Ben Anderson. Molly Hurley-Depret was subsequently added as Communications and Website officer. It has also been agreed that Louise Holt will take on role of Treasurer after next AGM, and will trail Chris Wilbert in meantime.

The other business at the AGM related to a statement of financial standing (see item 5) and a call for themes for IBG-RGS Conference 2007 (see item 3). Paul Chatterton also spoke to an agenda item outlining a series of concerns which he has about the continuing involvement of RGS sponsors Shell in exploitative and socially-unjust activities in Nigeria, Ireland and elsewhere. The committee noted and shared his anxieties, and there was a general feeling that the Group would be happy to support any sessions, paper proposals or other actions that might stimulate debate on this ongoing issue.

2. Annual Conference Sessions 2006

Seven sessions were sponsored or co-sponsored at the 2006 RGS-IBG Conference, London. These included two sessions on **Cultural Geographies of native and non-native Nature**, three sessions on **Geographies of Age**, two on **Housing in Crisis**, one on **Asylum, Immigration and Social Justice**, one on **House Prices; Home Truths**, two on **Geographies of Excess? Beyond Sustainability** and a panel on **Public Geographies**. Convenors of all sessions were asked to provide a short report on their sessions but only two were ultimately forthcoming: the Geographies of Excess session was, it appears, poorly attended (a widely-noted issue at RGS-IBG 2006) but lively, and a special issue of *Environment and Planning A* is a mooted outcome of this session. Divya Tolia-Kelly, Julian Agyeman and Kezia Barker are developing a book proposal made up of the majority of papers from their session on non-native natures

provisionally entitled 'Biogeographies Beyond Boundaries.' Both of their sessions were well attended with 27 in the first session and 41 in the second (including notables such as William Cronon). The papers provoked lively discussion, which continued over a successful open-invitation dinner that evening.

3. Annual Conference Sessions 2007

Given the RGS had indicated that only 5 sponsored or co-sponsored sessions would be allowed per study group at the 2007 Annual conference, Gail Davies (Secretary) circulated proposals among committee members, who ranked the proposals to decide on the following supported sessions:

- Masculinity, intersectionality and place: dominant discourses and practices - sole SCGRG - 1 session
- Media spaces beyond representation - sole SCGRG - 1 session
- Emotions, politics and place - joint Political - 0.5 session
- Creativity and its Geographies - joint Economic - 0.5 session
- Contemporary Geographies of Palestine and Palestinians - joint political - 0.5 session
- Geographies of sleep/iness: sleepy geographies of culture, economy and politics - sole SCGRG - 1 session.
- Enchanting Geographies - joint historical - 0.5 session

Two sessions could unfortunately not be supported – though we note they appear as unsponsored sessions in the call for papers currently circulating through email lists.

4. Geography and Matter/materiality

A workshop held at Birmingham University, Dec 18th 2006, 10.00-17.00

This was the first of a series of three linked workshops on the theme of matter/materiality, sponsored by the Social and Cultural Geography Research Group of the RGS-IBG and made possible through a conference support grant from the RGS.

The first workshop was organised by Ian Cook (Birmingham), Ben Anderson (Durham) and Joanne Maddern (Dundee) to introduce the theme of the workshop series; specifically, the intention was to consider some of the diverse ways geographers have attended to the material, not least in the wake of a non-representational moment or 'turn' which has problematised so many distinctions of nature/culture, object/agent, text/texture as they have been invoked in human geography.

With an eye on the next two workshops, the day was organised to raise issues which might be developed or otherwise explored subsequently. To facilitate this, Jo, Ian and Ben circulated a co-written and pre-circulated position paper – written at a distance – designed to stimulate discussion among workshop participants. In the paper, each of the workshop organisers shared their particular ideas about the excessive, unpredictable but ultimately crucial geographies of materiality, drawing on their own researches as well as wider literatures on human, trans-human and non-human materialities.

In the morning sessions, a series of invited responses to this position paper were presented and discussed. Marcus Doel (Swansea), Phil Crang (Royal Holloway) and Gavin Bridge (Manchester) all delivered their responses; unfortunately, Gillian Rose (OU) was unable to attend and present because of transport problems. In his paper, Phil Crang presented a potted history of social and cultural geography in its institutionalised form, noting the ways in which the RGS-IBG Social and Cultural Research Group mobilised against particular notions of the material to emphasise the role of the imaginative and representative before seeking to re-incorporate the material through a renewed interest in the life of ‘things’. Exploring the way that other disciplines have engaged with materiality (especially in anthropology, where there is a longstanding interest in the biography of objects), Phil Crang posed three key questions: what is new about the way geographers are addressing materiality, what is political about this and what is of substantive interest in this literature? Alighting on key debates about materiality being played out in the humanities as much as the social sciences, Phil Crang identified the possibilities for geographers to contribute to debates on neglected objects, spaces of display, timespaces of materiality and elemental geographies.

Marcus Doel’s paper served as more of a warning than a prognosis for materiality in geography, suggesting that traditions of ‘mapping’ or ‘following’ the object are not open to the multiplicity and perpetuate dialectical or structuralist readings. Noting the indifference of objects, despite their many seductions, Marcus Doel insisted that we cannot know in advance what matter is good for, and hence argued for an indifference to critique, which he dismissed as a form of banal journalism. Elaborating, he argued that when we choose to map the lives or biographies of things, we are drawn towards objects that we think can work to tell particular stories (e.g. of exploitation) without considering why we are drawn to the object (perhaps because we have an idealistic faith in its emancipatory values?) The implication here – that too many studies simply ‘stalk’ objects – was contrasted to a geography that decides nothing in advance.

For Gavin Bridge, banal objects (plates, cutlery, a phone) provided the basis for an exegesis in which the proliferation of certain materials (iron, steel, plastic) in everyday life was described as the result of a circuit of production and consumption in which natural materiality is exploited – but where some materials retain a stubborn obduracy and refusal to be ‘co-opted’ or enrolled in certain systems of (capitalist) production. The stress here on the ambivalence of matter allowed Gavin Bridge to argue for a geography in which small stories could contribute to a wider (and political) understanding of how particular materials are regulated so as to maintain particular patterns of everyday abundance and utilisation (e.g. his own account of iron ore exploitation in Mexico and its effect on groundwater pollution).

These three papers, and ensuing discussion, provided launching pad for the eight afternoon breakout groups, each of which involved a mixed group of postgraduates and established researchers discussing the different ways in which materiality is invoked in their own work. This was prop-based, with the organisers having advised each of the 39 conference participants to bring along a prop or object whose material geographies were discussed and elaborated. In some instances, this allowed participants to think through the ways they were approaching a specific research issue or theme, while in others it allowed participants to discuss the particular ways that materiality was invoked in their past work. Mince pies, maps, CDs, recycled nappies, a golf ball, cutlery, a pen - and so on – all triggered vibrant discussions.

In the final feedback session, themes emerging from discussions were outlined to the workshop convenors. Whilst it was evident that there are some obvious divergences in the way that geographers approach the material (e.g. theories of affect, excess and non-representation vs. materialist readings of social production and consumption), common themes and anxieties emerged; an interest in aura and atmosphere; commodity forms and practices of circulation; objects of taboo; gifts and rituals; the materialities of the seemingly immaterial (e.g. music) etc.

The closing discussion hence alighted on the possible ways in which the second workshop (to be organised through Durham University) might encourage ‘new’ takes on the material, with general support for a ‘practise’-based workshop where the materialities of particular spaces might be explored and thought through. It was also suggested that the position paper and responses would feature in the new Blackwells online journal *Geography Compass*.

In sum, this was a well-attended day characterised by an inclusive approach to discussion and debate which was carefully-fostered by the convenors, not least through their open yet provocative position piece. The palpable enthusiasm for the remaining workshop amongst all present suggests that this will prove an enormously valuable initiative, with the number of early career researchers at this first workshop indicative of the enthusiasm and vibrancy in a UK social and cultural geography which is continuing to work at the boundaries of existing geographical enquiry.

5. Financial position

Research Group Accounts Reporting Form 2006

Name SCGRG

Period 2006

Receipt and payments account

INCOME

RGS-IBG subvention £520 notconfirmed as yet, but it is paid in November

RGS-IBG grant(s)

Other grants

Subscriptions

Conference income

£220

for Material Geographies seminar -
Birmingham

Meetings income

Royalties

Interest

Other income (please give details)

EXPENDITURE

Committee expenses	£62.86	Late payment for meeting in May 2005 held at RGS
Conference costs		
Meetings costs	£56.40	Catering costs for 'Popular Geographies' reception at RGS/IBG
Newsletter costs		
Grants and awards		
Other costs (please give details)	£20	Refund for non-attendee at Material Geographies seminar
Total payments	£139.26	
Net surplus/deficit	£600.44	Surplus
Opening balance(s) - 1st January (or alternative date)	£2885.83	
Closing balances - 31st December	£3576.57	

Closing balances comprised of:
 treasurer account
 deposit account

It would help if you gave the additional information for BACS payments

Address of branch where accounts are held Dundee University Branch, Balfour St. Dundee, DD1 4HB.

Account number(s) 156416

Sort code 83-1838

Name of treasurer CHRIS WILBERT

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Prof Phil Hubbard, January 2007.