23 Talking geography in the public realm

Danny Dorling

Danny Dorling (1968–)

Introduction

I was once a 'normal' academic researcher and teacher – I mostly published papers in academic journals and gave lectures to university students but not the public – and then, somewhat to my own surprise, my work took a 'public turn'. This became central to my *modus operandi*, and continues to be in many ways. The public domain is the space beyond the pay-walls that prevent most people, should they even want to, from accessing most academic publications. It is the 'place' where citizens are able to share information, ideas, and viewpoints of relevance to many of them – sitting between the domains of the

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private realm, of business, academia and the state. The public domain, if it works well, can be a vital support to those political systems called democracies. However, we can overplay its importance and underplay the extent to which there is also a great deal of public debate in those countries we think of as undemocratic. To enter the public domain, academics' contributions must be easily accessed, the language used be clear, and topics explored be of interest to a wider group. Although popular books still come at a price, that price is usually much cheaper than an academic book. And, of course, there are now plenty of other non-print ways to communicate.

Public scholarship is valuable because we don't live in a top-down world where experts have all the answers and a wider public only needs to occasionally be informed about what decisions are being taken from on high. The to-and-fro of ideas is needed across all sections of a society if a society is to function well. Putting your ideas into the public domain invites far more criticism than even the most scrupulous of academic journal referees can muster – and some of it is very telling. You can learn much, as an academic, when you share your ideas more widely.

It is geographical insights that I have communicated most often. Geography often has an image problem compared to more prestigious subjects like Economics. Yet many issues of major public relevance – such as concentrated poverty or uneven flows of international investment – are deeply geographical. Every topic I've discussed in public is geographical in nature. Some of the most useful insights into the effects of inequalities are geographical comparisons between countries. Geography is, of course, much wider than such simple factual observation, but there is a useful place for empiricism – emphasizing usually quantitative evidence. It could also be argued that much of the more complex theorizing that human geographers engage in will have a far shorter shelf-life and be deemed in future as having little relevance, other than in telling us what geographers did then.

Background

My becoming a 'public geographer' was unusual but not entirely unique. In the UK, for instance, the physical geographers Mike Hulme, Mark Maslin, and Nick Middleton enjoy some public visibility, as did the late Harm de Blij in the USA. Male academics appear much more often than female ones to be in the public eye and it is hard to know to what extent that is due to them being put forward more, or their views being taken more seriously by a sexist media (Jones, 2013). My route to public geography began through producing a large number of research papers, later republished in several edited collections (the last two of which were Dorling, 2018 and 2024). These detailed the rise in geographical inequalities in housing, health, education, well-being, and more across the UK, Europe, and worldwide. They offered suggestions as to why this was occurring. I came to believe that when spatial divisions were growing so wide, geographers should not simply write about the world for students and each other.

When asked to define their discipline, academics geographers often say 'geography is what geographers do'. I prefer 'geography is what geographers *are*' if I'm ever asked to define the subject. I then explain that my academic colleagues and I are highly influenced by the places that we have come from, where we grew up, what schools and universities we attended, and where we now live – our lived experience. For example, the academic subject of Geography internationally is very much about just the tiny number of countries worldwide in which the majority of academic geographers happen to live and work. We cannot enter a different space of academic discourse where personal positionality and experience does not influence our understanding greatly.

By 2023 I was writing that Britain was 'broken', that 'middle England' had become a patchwork of haves and have-nots, with many people now much more rarely mixing with others outside a certain milieu. I explained that before the pandemic of 2020, life expectancy dropped as a result of poverty and cut-backs. These were the first large falls seen against what might have been expected since the 1930s. I tried to explain why it was that 22 of the (now) 27 European Union countries in recent years have better mortality rates for new-borns (lower infant mortality). Fifty years ago the UK had been world leading in child health. I provided analysis that showed that no other European country has such miserly unemployment benefits; schools that do so poorly when ranked on their ability to encourage flourishing imagination; university fees so high; housing so unaffordable; or a government economically so far to the right – including to the right of the USA (Dorling, 2023a and Figure 23.1).

My public role goes beyond highlighting geographical issues of public relevance. I support campaigns, such as the one to introduce 20 mph vehicle speed limits in towns and villages. At one level, my geographical research on who's been most harmed by cars informs this, but it is also an issue of social justice. Below I discuss some of the challenges of 'going public', and why so few academics – never mind geographers – do this sort of thing. Public scholarship includes listening to, and working out how to communicate with, a very wide audience.

So why do it? There's value in using one's expertise to shape wider understanding, both analytically and politically. If you've learnt or discovered anything of value, then conveying that more widely will itself have value. Public scholarship also acts as a reality test: is anyone interested? Is there a major flaw in your argument that will be exposed if it's subject to enough scrutiny? Can you make a little bit more of a difference than you might otherwise have done? But, as I will explain towards the end of this chapter, in some countries the public domain has become very rancorous, uncivil and even at times vicious. This can take a toll on the would-be public geographer.

The Case for 'Public Scholarship'

In 2005 an article was published by leading American sociology professor Michael Burawoy. It made the argument that 'public sociologies should not be left out in the cold, but should be brought into the framework of our discipline'. In its very first paragraph it claimed: 'Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, although communism has dissolved and fascism is a haunting memory, the debris continues to grow skyward'. As Burawoy saw it, the 'debris' in question was the harm caused by neoliberal capitalism. A 'public sociology' would seek to actively shape public understandings of social issues, such as the increased use of illegal drugs among young people. It would do so by making sociological evidence and argument more widely known (Burawoy, 2005).

Within 15 years, it was being reported that China had become a more important trading partner for the majority of the world's nations than the USA. As recently as 2005 that had been unimaginable (*The Economist*, 2021). China is still very much a communist country, even if its communism has evolved to the point where its best-off 1% receive an almost identically large share of national income to the 'top 1%' in the UK, but still a little less than in the USA (Chancel et al., 2022). In 2017, Xi Jinping, the President of China, had written that the two greatest evils facing that country were now greed and indifference. These had replaced feudalism and colonialism, the two great evils that the first communist leader, Chairman Mao, had identified in 1942. Rather than communism having dissolved away, as Burawoy suggested, it had re-grouped and transformed

(Milanović, 2022; Mattick, 2013). Unlike Mao, Xi Jinping appeared more concerned about public debates within China. These public debates in China concerned recent and home-grownproblems.

Fascism is no longer a haunting memory either. There is a fear of fascism rising 'at home' in the USA today, and in how far to the political right most politicians in the UK have moved. In the USA the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 focussed attention. The rightwards political march of the Republican Party long predated that, resulting in the election of President Trump and, great fear when he won again in 2024. In 2023, I was worrying more about what political direction the country I lived in, England, was taking after Brexit (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019), the pandemic, growing social divisions over who could afford the most basic necessaries in life, and whether this might also result in a further lurch towards authoritarianism, dictatorial leadership, more centralized autocracy, more militarism, suppression of opposition and the right to strike, the further promotion of a belief in a natural social hierarchy, and more national rhetoric concerning the perceived innate good of the British (or English) as a nation.

In September 2022, three elections in Europe resulted in new leaders coming to power. An 'ex'-neo- Nazi movement in Sweden gained enough votes to be part of a wider coali-tion that would topple the government there, but not enough to choose the Prime Minister (Sands, 2022). In Italy the party most closely linked to past fascism, The Brothers of Italy, gained enough votes to see their leader elected as Prime Minister (Kirby, 2022). And in the UK the elevation of Liz Truss to Prime Minister (chosen by 21% of MPs and less than 0.16% of the adult population) resulted in the British Conservative Party becoming the most right- wing of all political parties in both the rich world and in what the *Financial Times* called 'emergent market countries' (Burn-Murdoch, 2022). Truss was in power for only 49 days. When Truss was replaced by Rishi Sunak and then Keir Starmer as Prime Minister there was very little shift back (see Figure 23.1 – it is very geographical – each circle is of a political party within a particular nation-state).

The *Financial Times* used the work of hundreds of political scientists to create Figure 23.1. It's a good example of unsung public social science – where the work of many is used to inform a wider population. Some would not put the US Democrats so far to the left, suggesting that others may have done so because American political scientists were a little mesmerized by Biden, after the shock of Trump. But it is interesting to think that worldwide, Geography as a discipline is still dominated by journals and publications produced by scholars living in the two states (the USA and UK) with some of the most far-right politics of the democratic world.

I began my geographical career 30 years ago by writing the computer algorithm that allows diagrams such as that shown in Figure 23.1 to be drawn. Although it's very likely that others did the same at the same time, it's possible that my code was utilized. I was at first best known in Geography for drawing cartograms that looked a little like Figure 23.1. Graphs are largely two-dimensional. I was interested in making maps out of circles, showing relationship as well as detail (Dorling, 1992, Figure 23.2). Solving the mathematical problem of ensuring that a series of circles don't overlap, with all just touching each other, and all being placed where they best illustrate how everything is connected, is an odd beginning to becoming a public geographer. But there's no obvious road to becoming one and, I discovered, it is quite a lonely road. Geography, in comparison to sociology, economics, or politics, is a small discipline worldwide. As a result, there are few 'public geographers' and we tend not to be that well known.

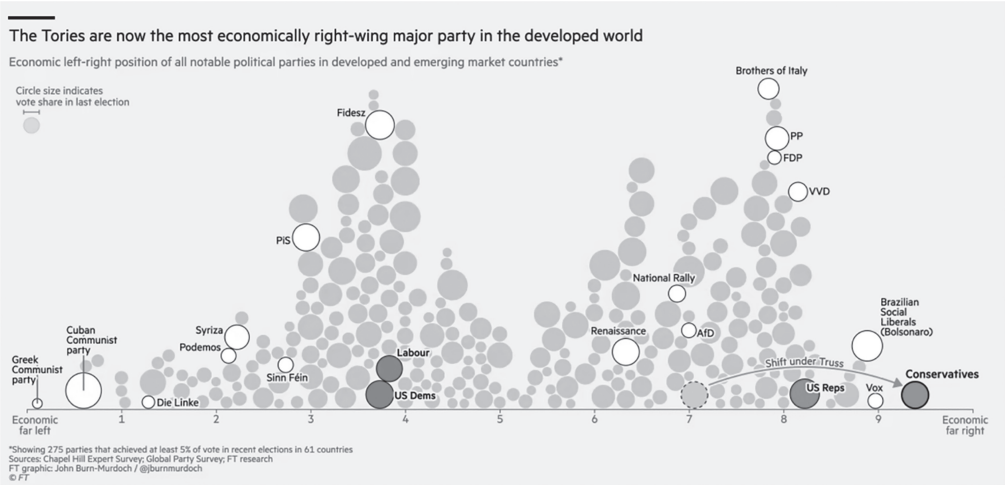


Figure 23.1 Economic position of all major political parties in rich and middle-income countries in 2022.

Source: *Financial Times* (Burn-Murdoch, 2022).

Figure 23.2 House-price change in England, Wales, and Scotland, 1980–1991.

Source: Dorling, D. (1995) *A New Social Atlas of Britain*, Chichester: John Wiley, p.127.

Figure 23.2 shows one simple example of using geographical data and visualization to better understand a geographical phenomenon. Each circle in each of the maps is a local authority district drawn with its area in proportion to its population. The largest is Birmingham. I drew each circle so it most often touches those other areas it shares the longest border with. The circles are coloured by the rate of change in house prices there in the last year. The housing boom that began in London in 1982 can be seen, and how it grew and spread northwards. Figure 23.2 also reveals how price rise slowed down in London as early as 1987, long before the famous market crash of September 1989. The circles reveal relationships whereby nearby areas affect each other the most, as well as detail such as a few areas of North-East England still experiencing house-price rises as late as 1991. In 1995, when I published this image in an academic book, I did not even imagine trying to explain what it showed to a wider public. On the one hand population cartograms were quite a novel idea then, on the other hand people who bought a home at the wrong time may have angrily asked why I did not see the crash coming and warn them (doing that itself could have exacerbated the crash, of course).

By 'public Sociology' Michael Burawoy meant sociologists who write books '…read beyond the academy, [books that] become the vehicle of a public discussion about the nature of American society – the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and its reality, its malaise, its tendencies'. The North America-centric focus in that sentence stands out today; and perhaps it helps illustrate how much progress there's been in such a short time by moving beyond seeing the countries that we live in as all-important. However, that sociological change was not primarily driven by academics. We mostly write books and papers that few people outside universities read. Very few people read my 1995 book. Almost all who did were other academics. Academia likes to think it leads public understanding and propels sea-changes in views. Looking back at the examples given in Burawoy's paper almost two decades on, it's clear that academics *don't* usually have the effects or insight they thought they had (he was wrong about both the future of communism and fascism) – but he was correct in suggesting that the public do notice the few academics who write in the opinion pages of national newspapers. I still work on housing today, and much more publicly than I did in the early 1990s; but I'm glad I had that experience of studying a housing crash outside the glare of publicity.

Talking Geography

For the last decade I've worked at the University of Oxford in the UK. As a result I get asked to talk publicly more than I did before. I have given over 1,200 public lectures and seminars in the last 30 years. I probably like the sound of my own voice too much; but if you are a university lecturer, then being given the opportunity to talk to people who've actually chosen to listen to you is an honour. You know when they're not interested, when you're becoming too boring or less relevant, when others stop asking you to come and talk. You also learn far more from the questions that school children or members of the public ask, than often you do from what your colleagues ask (because you become used to academic questions).

People invited me to come and talk because I had written books that were sometimes aimed at and purchased by the general public. I have published, with colleagues, over 50 books. In the last decade these included joint authored books on *Geography* (2016), two *Social Atlases of Europe* (2014, 2017), a *21st-century Atlas of the UK* (2016), a book on *Why Demography Matters* (2018), and *Finntopia* (2020), a book on Finland (Europe's

most equitable and happiest country). Alone, but as always actually with help, I wrote *The 32 Stops* (2013), an account of lives along London's Central Line, *Population 10 Billion* (2013) on the implications of world population heading toward ten billion, *All that is Solid* (2014) on the housing crisis in Britain, a book on *A Better Politics* (2016), one on *The Equality Effect* (2017), another on *Peak Inequality* (2018), one titled *Inequality and the 1%* (2014), and another on *Slowdown* (2020), concerning how most global trends appeared to be decelerating, one titled *Shattered Nation* (2023) – about the UK and what it had become, and most recently *Seven Children* (2024) – part fiction, mostly fact. The latest in this series is a more global book, *The Next Crisis* (2025).

I began writing about the UK in the late 1980s at the point when it was only just beginning to become clear it was heading to be ever more riven politically, economically, and socially. It was not at all obvious to me at the time I started work on the human geography of the UK that this state (made up of several countries) would later become such an outlier in Europe, or that inequality would become my main focus. But by 2014 the British Conservative party had left the 'Conservative bloc' of European political parties and joined a group which included the German far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland*. As Figure 23.1 shows, it had also moved its economic policies to the far right. It was these political changes that made what I was writing and talking about much more concerning. The rise in economic and social inequality within the UK became more interesting to a wider audience than any public lecture on how you could see the world differently if you first reprojected the base map to show the country as a series of circles slowly and slightly changing their positions over time as district grew and shrunk, coloured something like house-price changes (Figure 23.2).

In hindsight, the kernel of what I now concentrate most on was part of the work I began in the 1980s and 1990s. Initially I had been most interested in what very large datasets (such as those from UK census information or hundreds of thousands of mortgage records) could show us about how the UK was changing. In my PhD thesis, which I worked on between 1989 and 1991, I found new ways to see changes between the 1971 and 1981 UK censuses (by reprojecting the base map). Initially, I'd absolutely no idea that in 1971 the UK had been amongst the most equitable of all European countries. I was not alone, I vividly remember reading political essays about how unequal Britain was, written in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but devoid of facts. How wrong they were! But that was not my focus. Instead, I was looking for the variations between places, not the similarities. And I was interested in new Geographical Information System (GIS) techniques, not contemporary or past political or social theory. I constructed numerous segregation indices, and (with others) produced atlases of each census. Some forms of geographical segregation appeared to be falling over time, especially by ethnicity, between 1991 and 2001; other forms, such as the segregation of university students away from the rest of the population (and between social classes), were rising.

It can be the smallest things that catch the public imagination. You can't predict what might stick. In 2005 I wrote an article in a Sunday newspaper about a prominent commentator being wrong to say that ethnic minority ghettos were forming in the UK (Dorling, 2005). Just one observation caught peoples' imagination: 'Cut Britain up horizontally rather than by neighbourhood, and you do find minority-majority areas. For example, above the fifth floor of all housing in England and Wales a minority of children are white. Most children growing up in the tower blocks of London and Birmingham – the majority of children "living in the sky" in Britain – are black.' Imagery matters: a

single statistic from the national census report can have as much impact as the most complex of analyses. Complexity matters too and needs to be communicated publicly in an accessible way. However, the complex academic debate about 'ghettos' in the UK, USA, Australia, and New Zealand may have missed the key point. When the Grenfell fire occurred in 2017, that point became more obvious.

I'm not going to provide a long list of references to my own work – you can look up the books and articles in Google Scholar if you want and a few are listed above. One advantage of talking in the public realm is that you can more easily be Googled. I try to put a copy of all the papers I write on my website, and for every book I put all the data used, and all the graphics drawn from that data, on the web (see www.dannydorling.org). This site is aimed for public use.

Instead of talking more about my ideas, I'll instead now touch on the criticism an academic writing in public can expect. This illustrates one reason why (in the UK today) fewer academics now put their heads above the proverbial parapet – and why so many who do quickly put their heads down again when they are targeted by a small group of people who don't want the issues that I work on more widely discussed. Often they say that wider discussion would be unhelpful, for instance, that discussing publicly who it is that is most likely to study for a geography degree might put poorer students off applying to study geography. Or they suggest that an academic viewpoint has become too dominant, as the UK Prime Minster did in September 2022 when during her very brief tenure, she claimed: 'The economic debate for the past 20 years has been dominated by discussions about redistribution. And what has happened is, we have had relatively low growth … and that has been holding our country back.' (Harris, 2022).

For the last 30 years, as I've become more and more involved in the debate about inequality and redistribution, I knew that the very small number of academics involved in this publicly had not dominated economic debate – after nine years of the so-called New Labour government it felt as if no one was listening. We pointed out that the UK had become the most unequal country in Western Europe under New Labour. I was asked why I was criticizing Labour. Later, at first, only a few noticed the significance when the UK became the second most unequal country in all of Europe in 2019, after nine years of Conservative and Coalition governments. Today, that is much more widely known than it was when it was first recorded and I repeatedly reported the fact. It's common now to read that: 'The OECD ranks the UK 8th most unequal out of 40 major economies, more unequal than every EU country except Bulgaria' (Hildyard, 2022).

Talking Publicly

As the evidence that the UK was going in the wrong direction mounted, those people who believed that greater inequality was good, or at the very least that inequality wasn't a problem, began to become angrier about what some university academics were finding (e.g., Niemietz 2014, 2022; Snowdon 2015, 2017; Grant 2018; Butcher 2019). One wrote: 'It's no coincidence that the most vocal academics in the inequality debate – Richard Wilkinson, Thomas Piketty, Danny Dorling et al – are men of the left' (Snowdon, 2016). Most of the popular books and papers written by academics on inequality are only read by a few people, but collectively they can at times have great effect, as the criticism I received from right-wing pundits implied. In that list of references above you'll find three of my books referred to as 'the worst contribution' or 'worst book' written so far (they cannot all be the worst ever book, unless each was successively worse than the

last!). There was a suggestion that I portrayed neoliberals as a crossover between Ebenezer Scrooge and Hannibal Lecter. Another, that I didn't understand statistics on inequality. Another, that I (and the charity Oxfam) were advocating what one termed 'Karl Marx's wretched immiseration theory'. I'll leave you to read their criticisms and what I actually said, if you wish. However, after autumn 2022 I noticed that something may have changed and the criticism suddenly became far less frequent. This coincided with the disastrous 49 days of the Liz Truss premiership in which the ideas of my main critics were tried and seen, most spectacularly, to have failed (Dorling, 2023b).

The criticism that I was receiving as a public academic had come to a head four years earlier, in March 2019. It was then that the editor of *The Spectator* magazine wrote an article trying to encourage university students to take up internships at his workplace that summer (Nelson, 2019a). On the face of it the aim appeared laudable: to try to recruit outside of the usual circles which that magazine attracted. One of the questions it asked potential candidates to answer might be now seen as especially prescient – and misguided: 'List why 2019 will likely be the best year in human history'. However, it was the question asked directly beneath that one which caught my attention, for obvious reasons (see Figure 23.3).

I asked Fraser Nelson if he could let me know what the applicants found. He replied 'Happy to update you as entries come in. But we're disallowing the easiest hits: i.e. your publishing a book called "peak inequality" at a time when income inequality was at a 30yr low' (Nelson, 2019b). Nelson claimed that inequality was highest in '1986' – my critics tend to believe each other's 'facts'. He had picked this 'fact' up from another critic (Snowdon, 2017). What I learnt through this experience was how small and tight the

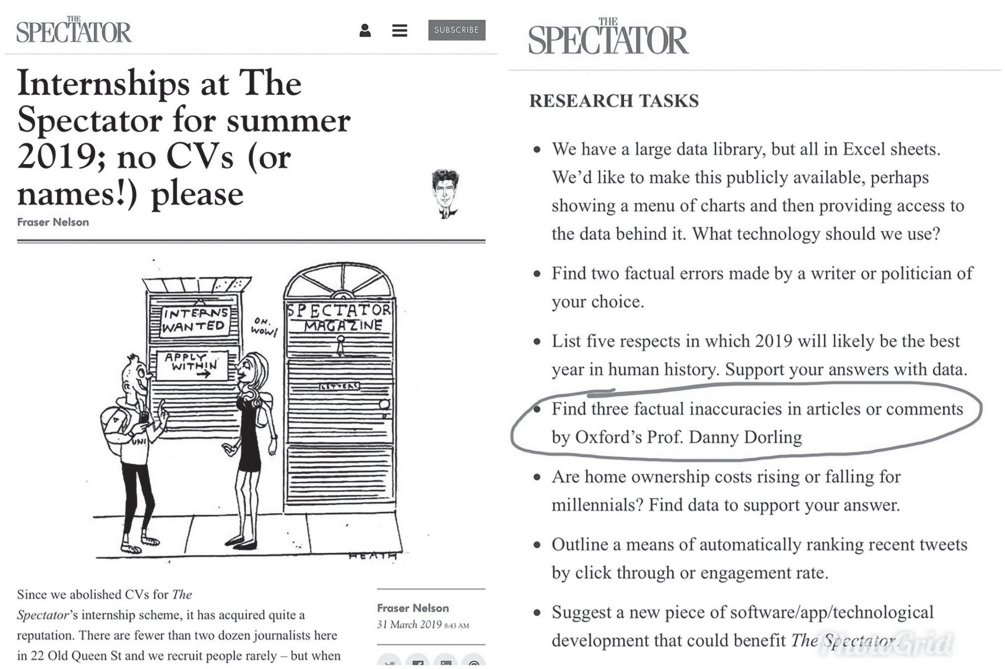


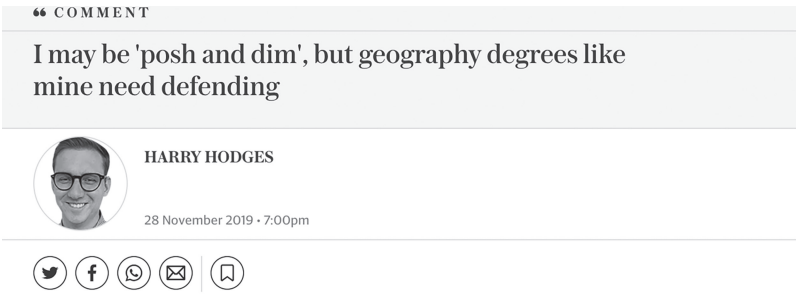
Figure 23.3 When you know you have touched a nerve – *The Spectator* advertisement.

Source: A tweet of part of the article: https://twitter.com/geoviews/status/1113940557116649472

circle was of people who consistently attack academics who speak in public. You can weather one-off attacks of course – most of the attacks that I received were from racists annoyed about what I had written elsewhere on immigration. But I was more surprised when a concerted and sustained criticism began to come more and more relentlessly from a small coterie of right-wing writers. These were people who read and often echoed each other's criticisms of what they saw as 'lefty academics'. Nelson never updated me, which was a pity as surely some of the applicants must have found some genuine mistakes I'd made. However, one should not assume those you're debating with are actually interested in how the world truly is – instead, they may have another agenda about how they think it should be.

It's hard to try to get into the minds of the people you make angry. It's not something most academics have to do much of if they're out of the public eye. Something about what I was writing, and especially the graphs, maps, and statistics I was producing, had touched a nerve with Fraser Nelson and his colleagues. Looking back, a few years after this episode, I think it illustrates just how wedded some people were to the idea that everything was getting better and those who suggested it was not, like me, were simply wrong; and any fact that counteracts their view must also be wrong. They really thought that '2019 will likely be the best year in human history'.

Once you're in the public eye people search out anything you write, even if printed in the most obscure of journals. Later, in 2019, a piece I'd written in an academic journal few people would read (Dorling, 2019) was picked up by *The Daily Mail* (a tabloid) and numerous other newspapers. Under a headline including the words 'posh and dim' (see Figure 23.4), a writer in *The Telegraph* newspaper summed it up: 'Writing in the journal *Emotion, Space and Society*, Dorling posits that Geography has become, as many have long suspected, "a soft option for those who come from upper middle class families"' (Hodges, 2019). I never used the phrase 'posh and dim'. There is no evidence that Geography undergraduates are especially non-intelligent. I published a follow-up academic paper showing that, of every single university degree subject, not only was UK Geography still taking the highest proportion of undergraduates from the most privileged geographic locations, but that during the last decade it also rose up to first place in terms of being the subject you were least likely to study at university if you'd ever qualified for a free school meal in the UK. Geography, across all its UK university departments, was taking the smallest proportion of young people who'd ever experienced poverty (Dorling, 2022). There is no Geography department in the UK that's especially diverse, equal, or


❝ COMMENT

I may be 'posh and dim', but geography degrees like mine need defending

HARRY HODGES

28 November 2019 • 7:00pm

Figure 23.4 How *The Telegraph* newspaper headlined and illustrated a story on Geography.

Source: Hodges 2019, with permission from *The Telegraph*

inclusive when it comes to those who are poorer. This rise in how exclusive the academic subject of Geography had become is extremely likely to be linked to the rise in economic inequality within the UK over recent decades.

To me what matters most is that academic geographers themselves, let alone their students, are so unaware of this. In that follow-up paper I quoted 89 geographers, a group that included 59 heads of department (the majority of all university departments in the UK), who wrote a letter published in the *Times Higher Education* magazine titled 'Geography degrees are preparing disadvantaged students for relevant careers'. I think these academics honestly believed that they were. But the letter would have been more accurately titled 'Around one, or less than one, disadvantaged student per year studies in each Geography department in the UK'. Since that debacle, several people have written to me who were Geography students in the recent past and from a poor background describing how strange their experience of studying Geography at university was, and how alienating it felt to them – how alone and unusual they were. They will also have studied when it was slightly more likely for them to have been admitted than it is now. For someone from a normal or poor background, studying Geography at a UK university may be even more alienating today because it is now more rare.

I'm not complaining about my colleagues. I too was completely unaware of just how unusual Geography had become as an academic subject in the UK until I stumbled upon those statistics from an analysis of all UK students going to all UK universities in 2019. However, Geography has a long history of being elitist and targeting young people, especially young men, from posher backgrounds.

Cecil Rhodes and Halford Mackinder

You may not know who either Cecil Rhodes or Halford Mackinder were, but it shouldn't take you very long to find out and it's very much worth your while doing so. The post I hold at the University of Oxford is named after Mackinder. In 2021 a university committee recommended that the statue of Cecil Rhodes be removed from the highest plinth on Oxford's High Street. Statues in public places raise questions about signification: what do they stand for and are attempts to keep them in place partly about putting others in their place and trying to maintain an old hierarchy? A part of the wider definition of fascism is a suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy, subordination of individual interests for the perceived good of the nation and race, and strong regimentation of society and the economy. Statues are often there to be looked up to, to put you in your place (below and beneath them), to present idealized images of the nation and race, and to give a sense of regimentation and order.

The recommendation to remove the statue was ignored by Oriel College's governing body (Rhodes attended Oriel), despite the governing body having asked for the establishment of that committee and appearing to be committed to following its recommendations. I, along with hundreds of other academics, objected to the recommendation being ignored. The petition calling for an academic boycott of that college was leaked very shortly after people had begun to sign it online. I was one of the signatories. I had not organized the petition, but being more in the public eye – and working in one of the UK academic disciplines that awards so many degrees to the children of better-off people – I was singled out. How could a geographer support this boycott – wasn't I being a hypocrite? After all, some might say, Rhodes was one of the 'great adventurers' of the 19th century. Who was I to object to the statue of Cecil being kept high up there towering above us all?

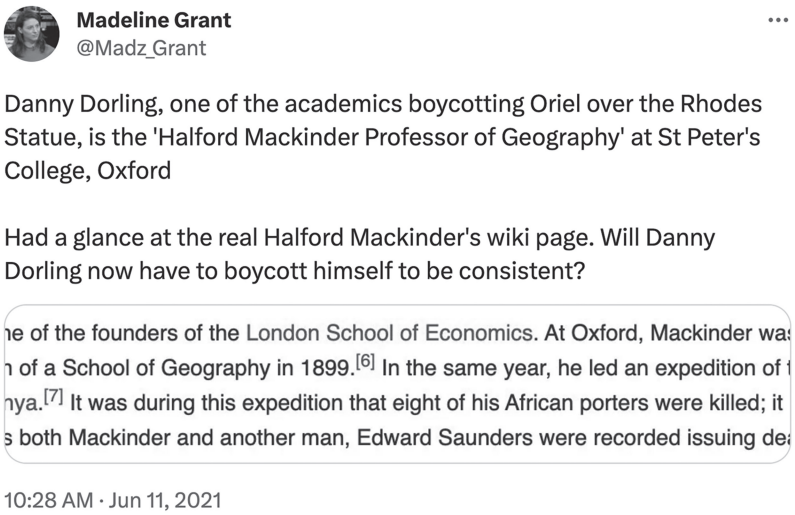


Figure 23.5 An extract from Halford Mackinder's Wikipedia page – tweeted by Madeline Grant.
Source: Grant, 2021, quoting in turn from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halford_Mackinder

Madeline Grant, the Institute of Economic Affairs contributor who describes herself on her Twitter page as '*Telegraph* columnist and Parliamentary sketch-writer', wrote this: 'Danny Dorling, one of the academics boycotting Oriel over the Rhodes statue, is the 'Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography' at St Peter's College, Oxford. Had a glance at the real Halford Mackinder's wiki page. Will Danny Dorling now have to boycott himself to be consistent?' (Grant, 2021). That tweet was posted with the accompanying image (Figure 23.5).

I would not object if there were a push to change the title of my job so that people hired to the post in future don't have deal with that legacy. However, for me it serves as a reminder of who I work for – a university that contains colleges which still implicitly endorse the British Empire. While Mackinder does not compare to Rhodes in the damage he inflicted on others, it helps to remember what Mackinder really did, including the death threats he made to his black porters in Africa, which were then acted on (Kearns, 2009; see Chapter 2, this volume). It makes me less complacent. When I was a child growing up in Oxford, one of the 'houses' of my school was named after Cecil Rhodes. After I left that school, in the late 1980s, the children refused to be part of that house and its name was changed to Martin Luther King House. I supported the Oriel boycott because the students of that college were trying to do the same as the children I attended school with – the Oxford University students were just unsuccessful, this time.

Grant's colleagues at *The Telegraph* newspaper, when discussing the Oriel boycott and why I'd signed the petition, wrote that 'Mackinder dedicated his life's work to the renewal of the British Empire, which he saw as viable in the aftermath of the Second World War' (Turner et al., 2021). A small group of people still harbour the idea of Britain rising up again in the world order. For some of them, the Rhodes statue is emblematic, a symbol of what could be again.

Early in 2021, the British government had proposed a new Policing Bill which recommended up to ten years' imprisonment for defacing a statue, but only five for rape. After

the bill was passed it was proposed to change the law again so that the ten years' sentence could be given even if the damage done to any statue was minimal, costing less than £5,000 to repair. The reason given was as follows: 'Concern has been voiced in Parliament and society that the law focuses too heavily on the monetary value of the damage with insufficient consideration given to the emotional or wider distress caused by this type of offending, and as a result, the punishments do not fit the crime. We intend, where there is damage to a memorial, to remove the consideration of monetary damage, which would otherwise, in some cases, determine venue and limit sentencing powers.' (Home Office, 2022).

So you could now go to prison for ten years simply for painting a single slogan on a statue, or even for just using chalk. A few people really care about keeping these statues – they do find the idea that they may be removed, defaced, or even just discussed and objected to distressing. To them, even showing you do not support the statue remaining where it is can be horrifying. And some of them do not understand that others might experience emotional or wider distress by knowing they have to live in a society where the statues of racists are specially protected.

The Spectator magazine listed the names of all the academics who supported the Rhodes statue boycott (Steerpike, 2021). The anonymous writer of that piece decided to pick my name out of the list of 150 and include it first. Male, white, middle-class, middle-aged academics (like me) can at least sometimes absorb some of the vitriol that's almost always more fiercely directed at others. Perhaps *The Spectator* writer picked on me first because they might otherwise be criticized for racism if they'd instead singled out one of my black colleagues; or bullying, if one of my female colleges had been chosen? The world is slowly changing and what is acceptable is changing – it is even changing how people working for *The Spectator* magazine behave.

Conclusion

Being in the public eye can result in pot-shots written in the most obscure of places. I was recently sent a published article which said: 'Danny Dorling's interesting analyses of inequality data were useful but lacked theoretical explanation and critique' (Sayer and Morgan, 2022). I was grateful to the person who sent it, as I wouldn't have found this out otherwise. I read the rest of the paper and learnt that another somewhat more capable academic than me, the hugely influential late Michel Foucault, was apparently also a disappointment because 'his theoretical reasoning is often confused'.

Being compared at times to far more famous academics such as Richard Wilkinson, Thomas Piketty, Ha-Joon Chang, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault is flattering, but it's also rather ridiculous. I became a public geographer largely by accident, at first by drawing weird maps (Figure 23.3), and then propelled along more recently by the ire of commentators who are mostly to the far right of British politics, and the extreme far right of European politics. I probably wouldn't have the job I have now at the University of Oxford if enough people hadn't so disliked the arguments I was making that, by criticizing me, they drew so much more attention to them! My first widely read book, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* (Dorling, 2010) was disliked by many people. It doesn't look as radical or unreasonable if you read it today as when it was published in 2010, but the reception to it is probably why I was appointed to the Mackinder Chair in 2013.

It's easier to speak out when you are older, and if you have a secure job. However, if you work, as I do, at one of Britain's elite universities you'll be constantly told that 'the

donors do not like what you are saying' – as if that mattered (although to the person telling me that, it really does). It will be easier to speak out in future if more geographers are vocal. I think I ended up being a public geographer at a point of extreme inequality in the UK precisely *because of* that inequality and the fact that I happened to study, analyze, and describe it. I hope that soon we'll be on the downward slope of that, at the start of an era where those forces trying to propel us to ever greater inequality are on the back foot. All kinds of public geography can be worthwhile. One day the UK discipline of Geography will not be quite what it has become, not as posh, not as elitist, and neither will the UK be in that same, sad, position.

Study Task

Variations on this question can be set on an unseen examination, an open-book examination, or as a term-paper assignment:

Geographers 'going public' with their research is a nice idea, but in practice too difficult to be worth the effort involved. Discuss, using the public engagements of Danny Dorling as a focus.

His personal website is here: https://www.dannydorling.org. It's a treasure trove of information and includes recordings of some of his presentations.

(Note that, in the USA, the efforts of the late Harm de Blij could also make for a good focus for this study task if instructors can curate his many public-facing activities for the benefit of students.)

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