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How much does place matter?

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Anecdote is the singular of data

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"Everything is real estate. You're a product of your geography." [1]

Why put together yet another debate about the importance or irrelevance of place in society? The superficial reason for doing this here was that in Autumn 2000 I was asked to referee a paper by Andrew McCulloch (2001) which both impressed and concerned me. I was impressed by the amount of work and skill which had gone into this paper, as with much of the analysis of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) coming out of Essex University. I was also concerned with some of the underlying assumptions and implicit beliefs expressed through this and in similar recent papers using the BHPS. The six short articles which follow and McCulloch's reply reflect much of the admiration for his work and skill, a great deal of support but also much dissent. I summarise them next; however, they are all kept short enough to be summaries of a much wider debate in themselves. The authors were chosen as being leading researchers in social science, ranging from the study of deprivation and poverty, to employment, housing, voting, area effects, health, multilevel modeling, and other similar subjects and techniques. They were limited (as am I) to only a few words and half a dozen references.

Among a number of the critics, the paper raised the issue of whether area-based initiatives are a valid policy option for government today. George Smith, Michael Noble, and Gemma Wright suggest that McCulloch is on shaky ground in arguing against area-based policy initiatives; in contrast to his claims they suggest that we do need such policies and that we do not need further evidence that area effects exist to justify area-based initiatives. In further contrast, Roger Burrows and Johnathan Bradshaw argue that there is little evidence that area-based policies alleviate poverty. However, they too believe there is not enough 'evidence' in McCulloch's paper to support his general conclusions—with which they sympathise. Both of the above papers argue for longitudinal studies. Heather Joshi, a long-term advocate and

[1] Thanks to Nick Phelps for this. Source: Lenny Bruce, comedian character, in Don DeLillo's *Underworld,* (1998, page 544). 'Anecdote is the singular of data' came from an e-mail forwarded to me by Charles Pattie.

researcher of longitudinal data, is largely supportive of McCulloch's findings, but still believes there may be a place for policies towards places, as long as they operate within a context of policies towards people.

Charles Pattie argues that McCulloch has many good points to make, but that we should not underestimate the political symbolism of area-based policies. He also points out some subtle inconsistencies in the logic of McCulloch's modeling—in short that it ignores the possible past influence of contextual effects, using the past to 'control' out context. Burrows, Bradshaw, and Pattie all call for a longer historical perspective in general, as well as in the actual modeling (in Pattie's case). The following contribution, from Richard Mitchell, partly provides this, as well as a strong critique of the kinds of multilevel modeling approaches McCulloch uses, from someone who has also used them for his own research. Self critiques are often the strongest kind—as we tend to know many of our own weakness. Finally, Anne Green returns to some of the issues McCulloch's paper raises in relation to policy, noting the tendency of residents of poor neighbourhoods who get employment to 'move on up' and leave the area, hence helping to maintain the context. McCulloch replies to his critiques above by agreeing with many points they make but pointing out that: "The evidence presented in most analyses regarding local contextual effects is only circumstantial" (page 1365).

Having summarised the debate that follows, instead of providing you with a continuation of this polite academic discussion, I am going to use my remaining words to tell you of the substantive reason I thought it would be good to have this debate, and why whether you think place matters may depend mostly on which places you have been to, in your mind and on the ground. My argument here is very different from those which follow and begins with McCulloch's argument on the nature of circumstantial evidence. I believe that the extent to which you believe the findings of research of this kind depends as much on your own life experiences, as on what you have read as a student or academic, or on what you have found out if you are an active researcher. That is not to say that there is no right answer. Just that the right answer is contingent or 'circumstantial'. To start, how might it feel to be described as being part of a weak 'human resource base' [see current trends in 'third way' economic geography (Plummer and Taylor, 2001)] or more bluntly: as sediment?:

> "In turn, the uneven way in which processes of mobility and job creation operate leave behind an accumulating deposit of 'sediment' (of persistent unemployment and of other individuals in a relatively weak competitive position) on the margins of the labour market each time the tide goes in and out" (Green, page 1364).

McCulloch concludes similarly:

> "No policies now being considered by government hold any real promise of confronting these structural dimensions of disadvantage" (page 1368).

The importance of circumstance

From the ages of six to eighteen I got to school on foot or bike through a subway. The subway ran under a large roundabout connecting what was then one of the main roads from London to Wales and the Midlands, to the Oxford ring road.[2] It connected the four estates divided by these dual carriageways. It was entered by steep sloping ramps, was damp, long, and usually very dark as the lighting was smashed. The walls were graffiti covered. Among the names of children I knew, or thought I knew, were nastier slogans. The National Front were strong at the time

[2] Directions have also been anonymised somewhat.

and appended a swastika to their two joined-up initials. Swastikas are easy to spray paint. Most importantly, however, to me, the subway was curved. You couldn't see who was inside when you were going down into it. Once inside you could not see who was round the corner. Only when coming up again to the surface could you see light. And it mattered who you bumped into, depending on where you were entering and exiting from, how old you were, how small you were, whether you were a boy or a girl, black or white.

The roads divided a large council estate to the north, from the 1930s semidetached housing of my estate to the east, from the picturesque 'urban village' to the south, and the mixed development of the west. The subway connected these four corners and was where children in the 1970s and 1980s met between these different worlds. Adults often preferred to risk crossing the dual carriageways. Each morning and evening what appeared to be thousands of men cycled four abreast from the council estate round the roundabout to work in a large car factory half a mile south. Mums with prams would walk their smallest children to schools in each direction from each direction, over the surface, crossing the roads. Older children and teenagers (and a few pensioners—too slow for the roads) would go underground. There were half a dozen primary/junior schools and two middle schools. Which you went to said something about where your parents thought you were coming from and going to. Everyone I met in the subway ended up at the same secondary school at age thirteen.[3] But by then where they were going to next (how they would add to the sediment of society) was often largely decided.

No child I knew from the large northern estate left the city after school and only a couple from the estates east and west left Oxford. The boys were some of the last to be employed by the factory in large numbers; the girls could have children or take a secretarial course (but not both). Both sexes went into 'service' in the university, three miles into town—waiting on academics and keeping tourists out of colleges, cleaning the buildings and rooms. Painting, decorating, building, and labouring appeared the only other main alternatives. The small number of children who stayed on at school after fifteen/sixteen mostly came from the southern and eastern estates. They took and largely failed A-levels—it seemed to me later—so that other peoples' children could be told how well they had done when they passed. The most common grades were Us and Fs followed by a few Es and Ds. Only a few of my contemporaries got a higher grade than this without help from a parent (in almost all cases a parent who was a teacher). But these children who failed A-levels or did poorly at age seventeen/eighteen largely avoided manual, servile, or casual work and went into town to work in estate agents, other shops, banks, and building societies. These children were at least immune from unemployment for a while, as the car factory began to close, the university started to save money by sacking its servants and cleaners, and the housing market collapse ended painting, decorating, and casual building for a while. However, the current rationalisation of the financial and retail sectors is beginning to bite. Other jobs have come, new housing has been built, and a science park has been established over part of the factory site.

Why did I begin to learn that place mattered at age twelve? Because it was then that I began to notice who came into the subway from where and by which exit they left (in effect, where they lived and where they went to school). What happened to my neighbours six years later appeared, to me, to depend acutely on children's comings and goings in the subway earlier. You did not need to read for a geography degree to

[3] Children going to private school did not use the subway—I think they must have travelled by car.

learn that children's options in life are largely controlled and constrained by the places in which they grow up, the local expectations, resources, schools, job opportunities, child-care expectations, and housing opportunities. If you saw how the political posters coloured each quarter red, yellow, or blue with sometimes near uniformity in a street—you did not need to know there was a neighbourhood effect to voting and campaigning—neater even than the social geography. If you worked in education, the police, in health, or most obviously as an estate agent—you knew that place mattered. If you got a kicking at age twelve because you came in from the wrong entrance of a subway, you learnt quickly that place matters. There were exceptions to the monotonous predictability of children's lives from their subway journeys—but the very fact that these were pointed out illustrated their rarity: "didn't he do well", "she let them down", and so on.

Why, then, if it is all so obvious do we endlessly debate 'area effects'? Perhaps we were not all lucky enough to have such neatly laid out subways in our childhoods? More likely, I suspect, we have forgotten them, consciously or unconsciously. One thing academics have in common is that they tend to be good at passing exams. The temptation to put your success at exams down to personal ability or 'being clever' is high. For men like me it might, for instance, make up for not being so good at football or fighting as a boy. Increasingly concentrate your solution of 'higher achievers' as you move through academic careers, and the pages of a journal such as this becomes full of the self-supporting writing of the children who 'did well' in this one area of life. We give marks to children or young adults ourselves—supposedly to reward individual talent. We can begin to believe what we once knew was a myth—that achievement is due to individual effort, not largely a product of environment.

You are very likely to know the places where I grew up through having read at least one other person's very different description of them. Alongside cars from the factory and papers from the university, a third Oxford export has been its children's books. At least two of the most famous of children's authors lived long parts of their lives within a short distance of the roundabout which I later passed under twice a day for twelve years. To my mind all of these books are partly writing about how place mattered in one way or another. None of these writings was complimentary about particular parts of the city their authors lived in and particularly about the area I walked through and came from. I will list a few below, but before you read the list, think what messages about the importance of space were you told, did you read, or were read to you in childhood? Can you recognise them, from people writing about, or at least writing in, this one city and neighbourhood?

When Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (alias Lewis Caroll), of Christ Church, Oxford wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (in 1865) there was obviously no roundabout, there was only farmland and a quarry where the estates are now. The Oxford meadows and farmlands were portrayed in some ways as a safe place to play (although there were many other dangers to children in Alice's Victorian world). Less than half a century later the second most famous children's book to be inspired by a Thames boat trip was published. Kenneth Grahame, wrote *Wind in the Willows* in 1908. The map in the book is based closely on Oxford itself and shows the stoats and weasels living towards where the roundabout now lies. Forty years on John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* in 1948 while living in Oxford. He lived in one of the four quarters described above from 1953 to 1968. In this children's tale the 'world' map clearly reflects European wartime geography, but the description of the 'shire' becoming corrupted reflects one view of the postwar estate building in this area (it appears in the third of the trilogy published in 1955). Finally, Clive Staples Lewis,

another Oxford academic (although he commuted between weekends to Cambridge from 1955) wrote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in 1950. He lived in a house made famous through the film *Shadowlands* at the edge of another of the four quarters, a few hundred yards from the roundabout. His garden of small lakes, many trees, and the odd lamppost is now a nature reserve, although hidden from children growing up in the area. The children he described ruling over lesser species did not live in the houses his home overlooked. The parochial description I have given you above is of a place you have probably already been to in your imagination, it just looks a little different on the ground.

So where are we now? For me, given my past and my places, I am unlikely ever to be impressed by an A-level grade on its own (or even a string of As)—to believe it is much more than a signpost to your street, school, and socialisation. I am unlikely to think that if you do not have a job it is because of your personal failing rather than the choices of the employers in your area, and what in turn affects them and your luck and status when you enter that market. I am unlikely to be convinced that people in Britain do not know these things themselves—that when they choose and are forced where to live they are not expressing their intimate knowledge that place matters. I am unlikely to read a book by someone who has lived in Oxford (many famous geographers included) and not to have read something into where precisely they lived in that city. I made my mind up a long time ago about geography. However, proving that place matters to the satisfaction of others is much more difficult.

Finally, you might like to know what has happened to the subway. Around the time that the new M40 motorway was finished—through an area of outstanding natural beauty (but thankfully taking the London traffic to Birmingham away from many of the children of east Oxford)—the roundabout was reengineered. The subway was dug up and a new one built—in which from every entrance you can see through to an exit. A lot of the graffiti has now gone. Thankfully the National Front have too; although there are few new jobs in the car factory for the white men to 'defend' (but it is producing the new Mini car). To keep some pretence of olden days going, the university still hires a few younger, cheaper servants from the estates in preference to their more expensive parents (lower minimum wage regulations make under twenty-fives more attractive servants). Traffic lights and pedestrian crossings have been placed over the dual carriageways which so neatly divided the estates before. Some council houses have been bought, including even some of wartime pre-fabs (that I suspect Tolkien and C S Lewis despised). Despite many protests, a small council estate has been built in another of the quarters (very near to C S Lewis's old house). Many children are now taken to school by car. Almost no men cycle to work by the road any more. And so—all in all—the lines of demarcation are more blurred and the connection between where you are and where you are going is now less clear—to me at least. But perhaps not to a twelve-year-old child growing up there today? On one of the walls of the subway in May 2001 some child has written (geographically correctly):

← good puppies this way   lost puppies this way →

Perhaps I grew up in a strange place—but if that is true, place obviously matters in terms of what might inspire (or condition) you. Circumstances matter. I did not ask the authors who follow to include any biographical material. That is not something you ask in polite academic society. But what I still wonder is whether where you are born, brought up, and now live affects how you measure and interpret the effects of where people are born, brought up, and live? I hope you enjoy the articles and response that

follow and are a little persuaded by this that there is a human as well as quantitative answer to the extent to which geography matters.[4]

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[4] As I was revising this introduction I came across a paper (Montaner, 2001) critiquing Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) thesis. Putnam's thesis suggests that a large part of current social malaise is the result of a decline in 'social capital', in simplified quantitative terms that some 'area effects' have decreased in their positive effects. A few of the respondents mention social and human capital. Montaner questions both Putnam's thesis and also the author's own upbringing as having affected the way Putnam thinks. When discussing area effects and area policy, who we are and where we came from matter:

> "There is only a limited amount of cohesion (to which vast amounts of resources are devoted through the media, police, and the military) that working classes and subordinated racial/ethnic groups will tolerate before engaging in political confrontation with owners and the dominant race or ethnic group. Thus the efforts of today's social scientists to present social capital models that claim otherwise will prove ultimately futile, as were those of 19th Century Durkheimions [sic].
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> The back cover of 'Bowling Alone' shows a photograph that illustrates this idea. The photo presents a bowling team in the US circa 1950. The author is at the centre and with his glasses, higher stature and big, confident smile looks like the undisputed team leader. At his side appear two shorter white kids, without glasses, and barely smiling; at both edges of the group are two African American kids, shorter, staring at the camera, dead serious. Following the social conflict analysis presented here, and contrary to what Putnam would think, we might ask whether these African American kids would have preferred to be bowling by themselves" (Montaner, 2001, last page).