

# ***THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL (ECOLOGICAL):***

## ***REFLECTIONS ON FIVE DAYS TO, IN, AND FROM LAS VEGAS, MARCH, 2009***

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*It's true we all need to learn how to better draw conclusions from the experiences and feelings we talk about and how to draw all kinds of connections. Some of us haven't done a very good job of communicating them to others.*

Carol Hanisch, *The personal is political*, 1970: 5

*Profit maximization, in turn, generally comes at the expense of other public goods and values.*

James McCarthy, *Commons as counterhegemonic projects*, 2005: 22.

### **Bermuda grass and Astro turf: a metaphor**

I never thought I would identify with Bermuda grass. But there I was in Las Vegas, staring at a tiny grass patch near my feet and thinking about the similarity of our situations. I felt a strong connection, despite my opposition to the dominance of the lawn in the western U.S. and that of other people-environment geographers (Robbins 2007). The connection was this: if that grass had emotions, I think they would be similar to my own at that moment, marginalized and unwanted in this environment, but still struggling to thrive. I realize as a white male with a tenure-track position at a good university it seems very difficult to be marginalized and unwanted in the U.S., but I ask my readers to bear with me.

The grass was on the east side of Las Vegas Boulevard, just south of the Riviera, or "the Riv" as it is affectionately known according to Wikipedia. Participants of the 2009 annual AAG conference will recognize the Riv as the casino-hotel in which it was held in. This very small, linear patch of Bermuda grass existed in the gap where a section of Astro turf did not quite meet the curb of one of the ubiquitous parking lots that flank the conference location. By color, one could not distinguish between the Astro turf and the grass that it was supposed to prevent from existing. But by its form it clearly was grass and not Astro turf. Since Bermuda grass dominates my lawn at home in California, despite my disapproval, I think I identified it correctly as the grass in question here.

Paradoxically, my identification with the small patch of Bermuda grass gave me hope in what I saw as a bleak landscape: despite the intent of powerful institutions and individuals to replace it with a shoddy simulation of itself, it was there and living, and even looking quite healthy and very green. This was life after all, not just a simulation of it. For me, the grass represented both me and society in the context of the Vegas strip: it represented myself as someone committed to the idea of the public good and the commons, and it represented social relationships that are not based on profit, arguably the very stuff that binds social groups together. These normative commitments and relationships are marginalized on the Vegas strip, as the Bermuda grass was by the Astro turf.

The grass also reminded me of the insistence of political ecology as a field: the agency and persistence of non-human actors, the inseparability of “the human” from “the natural,” and the insistence that we need to look at these inner-relationships in places far from the origins of political ecology in rural areas in developing countries. Feminists have long argued and demonstrated that the personal is political (Hanisch 1970) — here I want to demonstrate, using my own situation and dilemmas as an object for critical reflection, what I think follows if we reject the nature/culture dichotomy: *the personal is political ecological*.

### The personal politics of public transportation

I arrived in Las Vegas on an Amtrak bus on Sunday evening, and then walked south for three miles to the ironically-titled Circus Circus,<sup>1</sup> chosen for its \$35 rooms and “proximity” to the Riv (although right across the street, the walk took 15 minutes from room to conference). This contrasted to how most of my colleagues had gotten there, which was by plane and then by taxi. Upon hearing a bit about my travel arrangements, one colleague remarked “You rode *the dog*?” referring, seemingly pejoratively, to the US bus system called Greyhound. I explained how I had been on an Amtrak train to Bakersfield, but then had to transfer to an Amtrak bus, of which there are many, because there is no longer rail service to Las Vegas.

I didn't have time to tell him that the trip by train and bus was really quite nice, relaxing, and allowed me to work. In fact, it allowed me to have a fairly polished presentation by Monday morning of the conference. It was also an unexpected adventure. There were extremely high winds that day, and a storm over the Tehachapi Mountains had closed Highway 58 through Tehachapi, meaning that we had to divert over the Grapevine on I-5. Upon finishing our descent over the pass, we got to see the Tehachapi Mountains covered in snow. We also experienced a dust storm and witnessed a large number of beautiful wildflowers, including California poppies, blooming in the desert (I noted that the poppies were doing especially well on recently plowed, fallow fields). I jumped a chain-link fence to get to Taco Bell on our brief lunch stop in pedestrian-unfriendly Barstow. Upon seeing the first Joshua tree in the Mojave Desert, I made the experience complete by listening to U2's album of

that name on my iPod.

The possibility of these experiences is not what got me on Amtrak. As I discussed during a panel session on the new carbon economy, I have been seriously rethinking my relationship to plane travel in light of global warming and the more general environmental crisis that I take as quite real. Along with most political ecologists, I am not usually a “personal solutions” kind of person (cf. Allen and Guthman 2006; Guthman 2008) nor do I think that attaching a great deal of guilt to our consumption choices is wise given the socioeconomic system in which we live (Heyman 2005). I try to recognize the contradiction that, although I disapprove, my sense of self — my very subjectivity — is partially a product of the discourse of neoliberalism that privileges individual freedoms and personal choices, especially through decisions about consumption, as the way that individuals should act. As Robbins (2007: 133) notes, to turn our concerns into progressive action “requires that we recognize ourselves as subjected.” My views, then, are usually much more in line with structural thinking, but as part of the panel session I was discussing how I had given up flying in 2008 as a personal and political ecological experiment. This decision was a difficult one to make, as I know that my own choices make little difference overall, but I, like my students and colleagues, still struggle with the ethical choices that spring from my material interactions with the world. I wanted to maintain some consistency between my talk, which presented the experience largely in a positive light, and my mode of transportation to the conference. As noted there, I learned in a very tacit and personal manner that the U.S. has a far-below-par mass transit system compared to both wealthier and poorer nations. I also learned during my first merit review that for tenure I would need to attend conferences to present my research.

Thus, I was in Las Vegas because of this quest for tenure, and the continued importance of embodiment and the social relationships it facilitates, even in our age of easy long-distance communication. I had spent 2008 not flying my body around, and using trains and buses instead, which meant I missed the 2008 AAG meeting in Boston due to the three-plus days required via our marginalized and antiquated passenger rail system. Vegas is close to Davis, and only a full workday (10 hours) away by Amtrak.

### Food geographies: conferences, commons, and convenience

En route to, and in, Las Vegas, I, and probably all other AAG attendees, experienced the complexities of and contradictions in our current agro-food system: I obtained energy through fast food, slow Ethiopian food, and gleaned food. The fast food was Taco Bell (good for vegetarians because of the non-animal proteins from beans), McDonald's (including its now-demonized high fructose corn syrup for my pancakes), and Subway (with the tomatoes that it is now paying one more cent per pound due to the successful campaign of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers). Through our food we literally embody the contradictions that result from when our normative commitments meet the outside world, and these contradictions were thrown into sharp relief in Las Vegas. At conferences, perhaps more than in our regular lives, we live the U.S. food system mantra of convenience for both breakfast and lunch, a situation exaggerated by fast food outlets' dominance of the strip.

But dinner was a different story. The Ethiopian restaurant to the south of the Riv became a personal favorite, and once word of the nearby Ethiopian restaurant spread through the conference goers, the place was packed for lunches and dinners. My first lunch there took two hours, in part because of pleasant conversation with a colleague, but also because of the restaurant's no-holds barred commitment to slow food, even if it is implicit or unintentional. I missed the first afternoon session, but was happy with the tradeoff.

My foray into freeganism — an important form of decommodification of consumption embraced by many food-conscious students at UC Davis (Hardwick 2009) — involved my wife and I on our bikes, gleaning a great deal of grapefruit from the impromptu commons of the alleyways in our neighborhood before my trip. Orange and grapefruit trees are common next to fences where we live, making their low-hanging fruit available to gleaners. Others who glean prefer oranges, leaving me as probably the premier grapefruit gleaner in the 'hood. I washed and packed five grapefruit, one for each day I would be gone. The plastic knife I obtained from McDonald's cut the grapefruit in half (with difficulty), and pried the wedges from the half-globes.

As political ecologists and food geographers are

increasingly aware, most of our daily food geographies are made up of these overlapping chains and networks — industrial, ethnic, slow, decommmodified, and/or alternative — even for those of us who claim many ideological congruencies with alternative agro-food networks. And we clearly bow to convenience despite our normative commitments, something that the undergraduates in my food systems class have clearly shown me as they come to terms with this contradiction of capitalism.

### Navigating and contesting (?) the ultimate neoliberal space

The outside spaces of the Vegas strip are intimidating and of a scale in which the human body (or at least mine) does not feel comfortable. The indoor spaces of the casinos are intentionally confusing. My first entry into the conference on Sunday night was through the "front door" of the Riv, where one is immediately confronted by the maze-like configuration of the casino floor. I eventually found my way through after asking a number of people and going to where the people with green AAG bags were coming from. I attempted to get online (having found out that Circus Circus charges an exorbitant \$12 for 24 hours of internet access) and was dismayed by the lack of wireless internet access (no internet commons here!). This I found surprising at first, but I soon connected it to the general lack of a commons that pervades Las Vegas. This lack of a commons was the thing that made me feel most marginalized in the space. As someone who likes to exist in spaces that challenge or at least do not prioritize profit making (such as co-ops, communal living arrangements, gleaning, copylefting syllabi, "public" universities, publicly-subsidized mass transit, etc.), I felt less than welcome on the strip.

Foremost in many of our minds was neoliberalism — our current and quite worthy villain — and I suspect many of us made the connections between neoliberalism and the landscape with which we were confronted. The Las Vegas strip seems to me the logical outcome of a place created by right wing ideology. Lack of public space/ privatization of everything? Check. Configuration of the urban social and biophysical environment to maximize profit? Check. Enormous inequalities acceptable, condoned, and exacerbated? Check. Women objectified and made into means of capital accumulation? Check. It is painfully obvious that the built landscape

of Las Vegas's strip has been configured at many scales to funnel people into casinos, from the small scale (e.g., a lack of coffee makers in rooms) to the large (e.g., by having no public space and by making the actual experience of the built environment unbearable for any length of time due to the lack of green space). In other words, there is a clear political economic reason why the strip has no public or green spaces.

After my first attempt finding my way through the Riv casino, I attempted to rebel against the landscape of the strip by refusing to enter another casino. I made my way around the main buildings through back alleys, and saw many others doing the same. I saw this use of the liminal spaces as a form of resistance to the socially and ecologically oppressive organization of space to maximize profit. But this reaction, while it felt personally gratifying not to be within the space of the casino, is not even a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1985) or a counterhegemonic project (McCarthy 2005) against the political ecological configuration of Las Vegas because it does nothing to actual change the power relationships that create and maintain the space. Instead, I felt like a rat in an unfamiliar sewer, without the possibility of transforming or contesting the shaping of its environment — only passing through as a visitor.

### **By way of conclusion ... reflections and provocations from leaving Las Vegas**

Leaving Las Vegas, the post-conference mental ferment lasted for the duration of my return bus/train trip and beyond. Talks and panels on neoliberalism, political ecology, food and agriculture, and organizing the "edu-factory" circled around my mind, mixed with the spaces of the Vegas strip, and came to rest largely on the inadequate mass transit system on which I found myself. I have never written a conclusion to speak directly to the reader. Let me start here, as this forum allows for this kind of radical departure from our perhaps ossified academic norms.

First, I want us as geographers to spark and continue conversations about the public good and its relationship to more just social and environmental configurations. I think we offer a great deal to the public, and more of us should become public scholars. As a project aimed at reclaiming the public good, countering neoliberalism has to be a fused socioenvironmental project that envisions

a positive future. Geographers are clearly already doing this kind of work (Gibson-Graham 2006), but I think political ecologists should be more heavily involved in creating positive alternatives to capitalism that do not exploit and destroy humans or environments. If we get things right socially, I do not think yet that ecological relationships will be necessarily improved, and vice-versa, but I think that both need to be "gotten right" for positive futures to emerge. The time is ripe: society discovered itself as it was being torn apart by the ravages of capitalism (Polanyi 1957). I, along with others (McCarthy 2005), feel that we are at a similar phase in history. Building a new, zero-growth economy — one that is fundamentally not based on expansion — I feel is an absolute necessity. We can teach some classes on this idea first so that we can really put together a coherent counter-proposal. Building on this, I think we need to create a mass movement of which political ecology is a key part. For this we need a good name, solid theory that links political economy and the environment, and consistent political engagement.

Second, while I agree that we have to take on the ideology that we call neoliberalism, I think we need a new vocabulary if we are to actually make an impact. The term is too confusing outside of the academy, since the meaning of "liberal" within it is at odds with dominant understandings of the term. "Market fundamentalism" can work as a very good starting point (Block 2007). The point of taking it on is to hold up a better ideal, which is that promoting "the public good" is and should be a central purpose of American society. Teaching is fundamental here, of course, and that's why many of us are professors who consider our teaching to be educational politics (Castree 2005; Jarosz 2004). And there is also room for work within the academy for taking on the increasingly capitalist orientation of our universities (Glenna et al. 2007). But I do not see serious change happening unless we engage in public debates and building/supporting alternatives outside of the academy.

Third, I want to ask you to ride mass transit if you can as a commitment to creating new norms that govern the transportation commons. Yes, it's generally less convenient. But it is generally less polluting and more pleasurable (plus it allows you to work while you ride). My political purpose in trying to incite you

to travel via public transit in this U.S. of ours is to build a stronger ridership that has a vested interest in improving the system, one with geographic thinking and skills and normative commitments to equality that can be instrumental in making the system work better for more people. Foresake the plane and car (start with a bit at first), and go Amtrak, Greyhound, or your local system. Then let's work together to reform our mass transit systems to make them work better and with less inequality (Wachs 1977), including their interfaces with one another and with pedestrian and bicycle systems. I feel this is a necessary requirement in a world warming as rapidly as ours, one that needs better relationships between people from a range of backgrounds, and one with a dire need for finding and upholding the public good founded on fair social and ecological relationships. Together we can move mass transit, and the public good, from the margins to the mainstream, and in the process create more just political ecological configurations.

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### Notes

1. The ironic layers are many, but primarily center on the idea that the name is meant to imply fun according to standard American understanding, but actually produced a miserable feeling in me as a guest.

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