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David Slater: a leading geographical theorist

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Abstract

David Slater is an enigmatic figure in radical geography. He is much regarded for his theoretical contributions to geography although few geographers seem to know to what he contributed. David Slater appeared on the radical geography scene in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Dar es Salaam was described, in the early 1970s, as being a 'hotspot' for radical geographers. He focused his work on a critique of modernisation theory, publishing a two-piece article in *Antipode*. He rejected the western notions of the working class as the pivot for revolutionary change and, instead, sought to explore the power of peasant-worker movements drawing particularly on his Latin American experience. He moved to Amsterdam, The Netherlands, where his work was increasingly anti-imperialist and focused on theoretical discussions of territoriality. He began to take more open post-colonial positions although he was wary of the cultural turn in geography. This wariness came from his observation that most Anglo-American geographers do field work in developing countries without the relevant local language. This, plus his demand for close readings of classic texts, including Marx, was admired, but little followed, by geographers. He sought to define territoriality as a kind of Third Space but Soja had already done this. He moved again to Loughborough, United Kingdom, where his work became more stridently anti-American and where his exploration of territoriality took him away from political geography to international relations, away from economics and history towards politics and political action. Latin American exile groups that he championed very fondly remember him in the United Kingdom. To the end, he continued to explore theories of social change. His demand for knowledge of language, local culture and classic texts made him a somewhat foreboding supervisor. The body of literature, particularly the early critiques of development theory, stand the test of time.

Keywords

anti-imperialism, Latin America, modernisation theory, political change drivers, territoriality, theories of social change

David Slater: un destacado teórico geográfico

Resumen

David Slater es una figuraenigmática en la geografía radical. Es muy apreciado por sus contribucionesteóricas a la geografía, aunque pocos geógrafos parecen saber a qué contribuyó. David Slater apareció en laescena de la geografía radical en Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. Dar-es-Salaam fuedescrito, a principios de la década de 1970, como un "punto deacceso" para los geógrafos radicales. Centró su trabajo en una crítica dela teoría de la modernización, publicando un artículo de dos piezas enAntipode. Rechazó las nociones occidentales de la clase trabajadora como un ejepara el cambio revolucionario y, en cambio, buscó explorar el poder de losmovimientos de trabajadores campesinos aprovechando particularmente suexperiencia latinoamericana. Se mudó a Amsterdam, PaísesBajos, donde su trabajo fue cada vez más antiimperialista y se centró endiscusiones teóricas sobre territorialidad. Comenzó a tomar posiciones postcoloniales másabiertas, aunque desconfiaba del giro cultural en la geografía. Esta cautelaprovino de su observación de que la mayoría de los geógrafos angloamericanosrealizan trabajo de campo en países en desarrollo sin el idioma localrelevante. Esto, más su demanda de lecturas cercanas de textos clásicos,incluido Marx, fueron admirados, pero poco seguidos, por los geógrafos. Intentódefinir la territorialidad como una especie de Tercer Espacio, pero Soja ya lohabía

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hecho. Se mudó nuevamente a Loughborough, ReinoUnido, donde su trabajo se volvió más estrictamente antiamericano y donde suexploración de la territorialidad lo alejó de la geografía política a lasrelaciones internacionales, de la economía y la historia a la política y laacción política. Los grupos de exiliados latinoamericanos que defendió lorecuerdan con mucho cariño en el Reino Unido. Hasta el final, continuóexplorando teorías del cambio social. Su demanda de conocimiento del idioma, lacultura local y los textos clásicos lo convirtieron en un supervisor algoinquietante. El cuerpo de literatura, particularmente las primeras críticas dela teoría del desarrollo, resisten el paso del tiempo.

Palabras claves

Teoría de la modernización, antiimperialismo, impulsores del cambio político, América Latina, territorialidad, teorías del cambio social

For me, David Slater was one of the gifted group of radical geographers who graced the late 1960s as students, and then went on to produce a rich body of work. At the London School of Economics were David himself, John Adams and Joe Doherty. Joe was closely linked with Jim Anderson at the Architectural Association. And then, rather peripatetic to that scene, was Doreen Massey. They were all driven by interest in the Geographic Revolution with its dual emphasis on method (quantification) and subject matter; the latter turned out to be a search for theories of social change. Everyone radical asked, 'How could academics make things better?'

Hartshorne's (1939) regional idealist ideology was abandoned although no one could quite make sense of Bunge's (1962) *Theoretical Geography*. There was a rejection of ideographic inquiry, the search for the unique, and an embrace of the nomothetic, the laws and models that would explain human behaviour. Chorley and Haggett (1967) were the champions. If there was a subject focus, it was the developed world with urban geography and the developing world with land use.

I remember the lectures on the history of geography, steeped in Kantian, German understanding. Geography clearly started from beginnings in 19th century geology, through the development of physical geography. Human geography, as a university discipline, marked the beginnings of the 20th century as, before that, it was a handmaiden of imperialism where commercial (capitalist trade) geography dominated. My take on geography already assumed that human geography had split from physical geography. My undergraduate lectures were given by an exile scholar, MRG Conzen, for whom I delivered, in an essay, a table (Table 1) that captures the history of geography discussions.[1]

It was a dialectic but with no indication of where probabilism, that would later be critiqued as logical positivism, was going. The dominant explanations were the 'schools of geography' but, in turn, they were driven by dominant disciplinary traditions beyond geography. The intellectual exemplars are self-explanatory although it was later that Buttimer (1971) and Peet (1985) would provide critiques of determinism and that still ring true. Harvey (1969), of course, moved on from *Explanation in Geography*.

I only provide this context because it is necessary to understand where Slater was situated in late 1960s–early 1970s geography. Reminiscing with Peter Taylor about the broader culture of the time, the Labour Party Left and the Communist Party were no models of revolutionary fervour. The accepted highlights of the new television culture in Britain were 'Steptoe and Son' and 'Til Death Do Us Part' celebration of white, working-class culture but full of sexism and racism and anything else that would generate laughter through offense. Even if music, courtesy of American black blues and jazz, was providing a different background, there was little sense of a radical progressive culture.

Let's move to Slater's work and his contribution to the canon of radical geography. It emerges in and around his time in Dar es Salaam and his interaction with other European and American social scientists. It was, in part, stimulated by the Tanzanian leader's wish to go for a universal goal, socialism, through an African programme of Ujamma but not down a path of a vanguard labour aristocracy. The Chagga of the Kilimanjaro region were such a vanguard in Tanzania and Nyerere's part purpose was to loosen the Chagga hold on opportunity in independence programmes.

Table 1. Explanation of geography's development, 1971

	Dominant explanation	Dominant drivers	Key academic disciplines	Intellectual exemplars
Thesis	Determinism	Chemistry	Geology	Huntington
Antithesis	Possibilism	Humanities	Literature	De la Blache
Synthesis	Probabilism	Social Science	Psychology	Harvey

Source. O'Keefe (1971). Unpublished Ms.

Nyerere was not alone. In Tanzania, he hosted Frelimo and the beginnings of the African National Congress [ANC] cultural troupe. In West Africa, Nkrumah raised hope of a socialist transition to a Pan-Africanist independence movement. In former French Africa, there was the impact of the Algerian revolution and, beyond that, the cultural contributions of Fanon and Senghor. Tanzania was, however, an English-speaking revolution, largely free of colonialism as it was only a 'Trust' territory inherited from Germany after World War I. Commonwealth support was available to encourage young lectures to experience Africa, as the age of Imperialism gave way to the age of 'Area' studies. Slater was one of the first to take up the challenge.

Slater's critique of development was focused on the poverty of geographic inquiry into development, informed by voices outside geography. Certainly, his first critique of modernisation theory, focused on the work of Adler et al. (1971) and, separately but more importantly, on Soja's (1968) modernisation doctoral work in Kenya, were something of a bombshell. The essential target was Rostow (1960) and his 'Stages of Economic Growth', a statist response to the stages of development laid out in the Communist Manifesto. An early critique is available from Baran and Hobsbawn (1961). If, modernisation was not the game, what did development do?

Dar es Salaam threw up many references for Slater. The interview with Tamas Szentes gives a distinct flavour of the times. I myself have published a memoir of the impact on myself (O'Keefe, 2000).

http://roape.net/2018/11/08/to-be-bravely-critical-to-reality-an-interview-with-tamas-szentes/

In one sense, DaresSalaam was a missed opportunity to send the history of radical geography southwards. Although the numbers were small, the connections were large particularly of political scientists, sociologists, economists and historians. Much of the later work of this group would focus around the Review of African Political Economy but the geographical voice was muted.

An aside again is important. Academic dispute, rather like religious, doctrinal argument, is the strangest of fights. Peer review evaluation selects a person or people for permanent university position(s) who is (are) then, irrespective of teaching or research reputation, viciously attacked by someone in their own discipline or department. The closer the better. One need look no further than the Harvey-Berry or the Graham-Peet exchanges in geography: the more recent environment debates in Monthly Review, centring on Jason Moore, point out some recent spats around radical resource analysis. All suggest a dispute over paradigmatic theory, a paradigm shift that, in turn, implies an overthrow of theory. I am deliberately, here, avoiding all of the solipsism's of the cultural turn arguments. Only impenetrable, wrap-around theory guaranteed success. For someone like myself, delivering full time in the field, I needed enough theory to validate the job but not an oversupply that would throw the baby out with the bathwater.[2] And the appeal has to be broad, not narrow, which is why, in my experience, feminist, black and gay liberation entered the radical canon without much opposition but post-modernity was contested and often rejected.

Materiality, recognised in equality, was central to progressive struggle for all. Slater faced the same problems but from a different place. He wanted to lead at the highest 'scale' of theory, both in geography and beyond, and he wanted to be the person who defined space as the core-driving concept in establishing a new geography. By dent of his own personal problems and illness, coupled with the production of other like-minded radicals, he was somewhat pushed aside from this leadership although his contribution remains deep.

David Slater later wrote of his understanding of the problem.

> *Turbulence and tension are intrinsic to both the objects and subjects of knowledge and provide a key context in the quest for creative political geographies of the future. Recognition of the challenges involved, both analytical and ethical, will help to propel political geography forward, and I am convinced that both the subject and the journal will continue to thrive into the next century and beyond.* (Slater, 2000: 3)

His two-part Marxist critique of underdevelopment was published (Slater, 1973, 1977) becoming a classic of the genre, the first part dealing with a critique of modernisation in development geography, the second part moving to broader development issues. At the risk of simplification, the second part was immersion in the Labour Aristocracy debate, the debate where 'classical' Marxism (i.e. Soviet) assumed there could be no socialism unless it was led by the working class, a total rejection of Nyerere's position of African socialism. Debates that he touched on included class structure and development, spatial uneven underdevelopment and imperialism. He was to take on Warren (1973) and loudly reject economism and the sovereignty of economic explanation in radical thought.

Radical thought, for Slater, was not just a rejection of Soviet-style economism, not just rejection of an analytical tool. It carried a moral imperative suggesting how geographers should practice their craft which, all too often for Slater, had been complicit with imperialism. It would, eventually be called, post-colonial theory. Slater was an early exponent and, with his usual earnestness, would suggest it was the only way forward. It was, alas, a partial judgement, not least for those like Ben Wisner and myself who would continue to fight imperialism in the Portuguese colonies, particularly Mozambique, and in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa where to be post-colonial was too early without independence or democracy.

He challenged the Soviet hegemony, drawing his democratic theory and experience from other parts of the world, especially Latin America. And while largely avoiding

European debates on structuralism, his work increasingly led from a Gramscian position.

Dar es Salaam was as for Slater his unfinished symphony. He had the lead critical pieces on development geography but that was not enough to make him a leading geographer. Smith (1984) came up, in the outside lane, and demolished the need for Slater to speak for development or space. Uneven development as the key to human geography was released.

He then moved to the University of Amsterdam's Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA) where, initially quiet, there was a fresh wave of critical work on questions of space, politics and development that followed. These included a comparison of territory and politics under social revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua (Slater, 1987), an analysis of territory and state power in Peru (Slater, 1989), landmark papers advocating learning from other regions (Slater, 1992) and analysis of the geopolitics of development theories (Slater, 1993). It was critical work on questions of space, politics and development.

His Gramscian influences led him to major critiques of imperial power in global geopolitics, to explore the state and spatiality as a basis for class analysis, and to pick up strongly on Latin American social movements, initially with the Zapatistas and then beyond. He actively sought a post-structural mode of inquiry seeking to move beyond the 'imperial cage'. Although I never had the opportunity to debate Hobson (2007) with him, I think he would have appreciated the sentiments.

He asked, frequently from the floor of hostile meetings, 'How Do We Hear? Apartheid', Palestine, Cuba required that different hearing as well as the dispossessed in Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela. In short, his Gramscian geography substituted hearing, and therefore language, as the key geographic field technique – not sight. Soundscapes of revolt, not landscapes of dispossession, became his hallmark signature. The emphasis was on subjectivity and agency in change that allowed a range of social movements their own interpretations of democracy. Above all was a sense, born of the Latin American fieldwork, that the dispossessed had something to say.

Both in Amsterdam and later after a move Loughborough, Slater would delve into the theory of territoriality. His version of territoriality went beyond the usual idea of space holding a nation-state and beyond the interactive definitions of territoriality favoured by political geography. Rather like Soja's (1996) ideas of *Third Space*, Slater had a third territoriality that was made by political action, both real and imagined. Soja's *Third Space* resonated with the cultural turn: Slater's territoriality did not.

Table 2. Periodisation of Slater's output

Date	Place	Content
1970–1980s	Dar-es-Salaam	Critique of Geographic Theory
1980–1990s	Amsterdam	Latin American Geopolitics
1990–2010	Loughborough	Territoriality and Social Theory and American Imperialism

Following his move to Loughborough, in 1994, the power of the United States took on an ever-greater presence in David's thinking, and this led him deeper into political geography and the geopolitics of globalisation. He felt strongly that America used neoliberalism to achieve political goals, the goals of geo-political imperialism built upon unequal exchange. It seemed to many comrades and colleagues that he made allies with people who were, in the first instance, anti-American providing some strange political bedfellows. Much of his work, unwittingly, brought him into the minefield that is identity politics although he steered away from the 'turn' in cultural geography. It was his version of anti-imperialism, and in particular discussions over, and his pro-Palestinian support, that saw him finish his editorial association with the *Political Geography* journal in a somewhat acrimonious manner (Slater, 2000, 2004a).

Slater was profoundly concerned with where knowledge was made and who had the power to articulate it. His reference would be to 'the persistence of absence', where he would wonder how academics could talk of globalisation without mentioning the global South. He was dismissive of false universalities especially those that presumed the world was American: for him, America worlding was the problem.

His own writing and research led him beyond geography and beyond political geography where he briefly found a home in international relations. Many of his ideas, focused on exploration of dependency theory, retain a contemporary validity. With Taylor, he produced an edited volume (Slater and Taylor, 1999). David's milestone book-length study of *Geopolitics and the Post-Colonial: Rethinking North-South Relations* (Slater, 2004b) was published to a resounding silence in the Anglo-American radical journals, but was well-received by those who knew his earlier work and remains a clear-sighted statement of historical and conceptual issues that have lost none of their relevance. The last ten of his life years produced less.

As Slater searched for his highest level of abstraction, in his discipline of geography, he defined a core contribution to social change theory around ideas of territoriality, regionalism and space produced by local (i.e. sub-national) subjective political movements. Everything else was, in a very real sense, beneath him. Quite simply, his self-referencing frame was that he sat atop the mountain of inquiry. I recall a moment, in Toronto when, having already put me in a corner ('Vulnerability is a 101 contribution'), he went on, as part critique of *Antipode*'s contents, to say, 'I do not need David Harvey to interpret Marx for me'. I assured him I did, not least because I did not have the personal time for exegetical analysis of Marx. There were other contributions to make to a radical future. I should have said 'H'daway and Shite' for not everyone can be the lead theorist.

As he carved his way through a literature, largely European and Latin American, his way emphasised the political. On his way, it is possible to see him banishing economism, rejecting economics. On his way, embracing present political struggle, he abandoned more than a little history. It is difficult to imagine Harvey writing without reference to economics or history although his reference to politics might be thin: Slater was the exact opposite.

Against this, comrades handled him gently. His personal background and, together and separately, his ill health could well underlie some of his biting interventions. His commitment to theory was well known and later summarised as: 'A model of critical analysis, unashamed of its theoretical sophistication, to which we perhaps all aspire' (Poptheory, 2017).

Slater had three periods of substantial theoretical impact in Tanzania, Holland and the United Kingdom. Table 2 provides an overview. Each period saw a different, but effective, theoretical focus. Of course, these overlapped, but arguably each place and time gave David and his work a focus.

Words mattered to him, precious beyond counting, as did language construction. (Look at the placement of 'perhaps', in the last quote, and consider what happens when it is moved in the sentence.) As an editor, I was very conscious of his take on words, especially his own. He had few graduate students to, perhaps, leaven his pot of discourse. He had many supporters of his rejection of bite-size answers, of textbook learning and his permanent call for a return to the original texts. He was appalled, absolutely appalled, by geographers' linguistic inabilities that, he argued, necessarily denied all knowledge of the other, drawing insights from feminist literature. Massively before his time, he signalled the need for a 'Cultural Turn' but, to borrow a phrase from Gibson-Graham, 'Not as We Know It'. He was a global sophisticate of arts and manners, of meanings and methods, of wines and cocktails when many of his generation, including me, were not.[3] He knew, and lived, dialectics when few understood the term. He was a clever, most often alone, sometimes perhaps intellectually isolated, scholar where personal circumstances produced large gaps in his public and written performance. In between those gaps, he left a treasure trove of theoretical work much admired by scholars from the global South, especially Latin America, but which remains inspirational to many elsewhere. In short, he was human, but with theoretical cravings and a natty cravat, and his mother loved him.

For obituaries, see

1. American Association of Geographers (2016) David Slater. http://www.aag.org/cs/membership/tributes_memorials/sz/slater_david
2. Cairo H (2016) David Slater: un geógrafo politico comprometido. *Geopolitica(s): revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder* 7(2): 175–179.
3. Taylor PJ and Sidaway JD (2017) Obituary: David Slater. *Political Geography* 56: a-3,a-4.

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Notes

1. I was not a brilliant student but I did have a little bit of philosophy behind me courtesy of a religious education. I was also egged, by Peter Taylor, to send letters to Peter Haggett pointing out imprecise mathematical equations in his geography textbooks and to map physical moments for a regional geography dissertation that no one on staff, except Peter Taylor, could mark.
2. Talking theory is always difficult not least because, in argument, there are frequently assumed levels of power. To illustrate what I mean, I give an example of physics illustrated by Dan Weiner. With Dan, in Kenya, one of our African co-workers said that he found physics relatively easy except for electricity. I waded in immediately saying 'There are only four things to know about electricity. One, put a resistor into the circuit to generate heat. Two, put a resistor into a vacuum to generate light. Three, put the current through a magnet to generate mechanical motion. Four, switch it off/on to build communication systems. That is electricity'. Dan simply said, 'Fine theory but it does not fix the toaster'. The same is true of Marxian political economy; it does not fix the power station.
3. The question is what appropriate theory supports what appropriate action. The question is never theory in splendid isolation. It might be regarded as a question of scale. I had my Marx, at three scales namely
    1. Production in General, global and applied to all material reality.
    2. Modes of Production where the Capitalist Mode of Production was fairly well understood but not much before or after.
    3. Socio-Economic Formations or the specific production-reproduction histories of people articulated between different, and many, modes of production.

    For me, scale of theory was important and, obviously, very geographic. There were obviously problems with my scaling of my Marx. Firstly, as with any scale, there were implications of power from strong Production in General to weak Socio-Economic Formations. The historians were, therefore, necessarily weaker than the pure theorists. The field scientists, those who were producing with people, were weakest of all. I did not enjoy that conclusion and squirmed away from the question of scale or level of theory. Secondly, other radical traditions were reflected at different scales: feminism was definitely a problem that eventually would be solved by production in general: racism, especially around American Blacks, was specific to forms of imperialism, and thus of a Capitalist Mode of Production analysis.

A Northumbrian colleague of mine, the gifted Mike Jefferies, once sent me a comic strip he made as I was starting to lead out (1996) the Rehabilitation of Gorongoza, Mozambique, a five-year project in the biggest national park in Africa. The comic strip was his way of celebrating the project. We had been discussing the level of theory that were needed to support such a project, a development project with a different goal from the many environment and energy projects I ran. We agreed that moving 100 elephants from Zimbabwe to Mozambique was a very specific socio-economic formation problem. The last box of the comic strip has me saying 'I'm having a level of problem with the problem of level'. Even scaling Marx produces challenges not unlike looking up your own arse.

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