Poverty and Inequality

The discourse surrounding the geoweb often entails terms such as "empowering", "enabling", "democratic", and "participatory". In contrast, I am interested in looking at the inequalities that may be (re)produced in the geoweb. To that end I engage with ideas from the poverty & inequality literatures. Like these, I start from the perspective that social interventions such as welfare policy, technological development, and "natural" disaster have highly unequal effects across populations. The inequalities of the geoweb, while always present, emerge quite strongly and clearly in the moment of crisis mapping. In these moments the geoweb may influence urban redevelopment practices following disasters. Crisis mapping involves four processes[1] that make it an inherently unequal endeavor: the enrollment of power relations, political economy, representations of knowledges, and urban redevelopment processes. In this section I first define inequality, and then situate the four processes in relation to my research.

Three intertwined approaches to poverty and inequality inform my research: discourse, political-economy, and lived experience. The first, poverty and inequality as discourse, is exemplified in O'Connor's (2002) argument that knowledge and claims about poverty are highly political and always contested. For example, discourses about "welfare state failure and moral decline" (2002, 5), while simplistic and challenged by poverty scholars, held strong political sway in the early 1990s and led to the Personal Work and Responsibility Act of 1996. The second approach to poverty and inequality is to focus on political economy. Harvey's (1982) adaptation of Marx's (1977) *Capital* and discussion of neoliberalization (2005; see also Peck and Tickell 2002) are particularly useful for this goal. Harvey introduces the concept of *accumulation by dispossession* (2003), where formerly public assets are made public and brought into capitalist relations. Neoliberalization, the current expression of capitalism,

[1] Crisis mapping is of course more complex than this; these are simply the four processes of interest to my research.

entails this devolution of state functions to the private sector, increased discourses of “personal responsibility”, and increased reliance on free markets through free trade agreements. The final approach to inequality and poverty is to explore the ways these influence one’s lived experiences, political horizons, and engagement. For Gurstein & Vilches (2010, 431–432) this relates to questions of a “just city”: equality needs to “enable a broad spectrum of engaged citizenship… The unjust city is one of impediments: lack of adequate welfare rates, lack of affordable and secure housing, lack of childcare, impoverished social networks and food insecurity…”. The distinctions I have made here are mostly for analytic purposes; the approaches are in practice closely intertwined. Goode & Maskovsky (2001, 4) pick up on my distinction by characterizing the "new poverty" as caused by "economic polarization, political demobilization, and market triumphalism". It is at the confluence of these three approaches that I find most productive for my own work.

Lawson, Jarosz & Bonds (2008) provide an empirical case at this confluence. Reporting on a research project in rural Washington, Idaho, and Montana, they note the tension between political economic causes of poverty and the contradictory representations and knowledges of it. They first document multiple scales of economic restructuring experienced by these communities. For instance, NAFTA resulted in decreased produce prices and thus slashed profits, national- and state-level welfare reform plummeted many poor people further into poverty, and a "large food-processing company closed its manufacturing operation, ... eliminat[ing] 1,000 jobs in a town of 10,000 and creat[ing] huge revenue and livelihood shifts in its wake" (2008, 741). Yet many leaders in these areas (e.g., commissioners, mayors, and job service coordinators) rely on discourses of choice, arguing that those in poverty have made a conscious decision to remain so. These 'undeserving poor' are implicitly - and often explicitly - "contrasted with the ‘upstanding citizen and enterprising individual’" (2008, 750).

Technology factors into this general discussion by functioning as a metaphor and by shifting relations of inequality. First, technology has become a cultural metaphor for understanding poverty and the impoverished. Watkins (1993) argues that technological development is now equated with socioeconomic "development", and that those who fail to keep up with it are "behind-the-times", or "technological throwaways". Social or state assistance can do nothing to remedy these social cripples, since poverty is a symptom of personal failures to stay "up to date". Second, technology can be conceptualized in complex relations with inequality, in some ways perpetuating existing inequalities, in other ways opening new sites for inequality to worsen, or even perhaps decreasing overall inequality (M. Gilbert 2010). This final conceptualization is arguably the most common in discourses of the geoweb.

The geoweb enrolls three processes that make it an inherently unequal phenomenon, and that influence processes of urban redevelopment: unequal power relations, political economy, representations of knowledges. First, unequal power relations allow people from the global North to map the global South. This phenomenon raises concerns regarding what is knowable by those working remotely, and the impact this limitation might have on redevelopment processes. The OpenStreetMap (OSM) interface captures this problematic: for OSM, "the map" consists of Cartesian and absolutely defined objects such as roads, buildings, fire hydrants, electric poles, and refugee camps. This is all important for disaster relief, but the North-South power relation that enables mappers to know these places (i.e., access to satellite imagery on which to trace, the expendable time with which to get involved, the ability to "feel good" by "helping", etc.) also derives its legitimacy from the very forces that produced the global North (Cartesian logic, scientific infrastructure to enable satellites, political superiority, and so on). Ushahidi sits in interesting relation to this discussion: not only was it developed in the global South, but it requires local knowledges – people on the ground reporting needs. In other words, it depends on a different power relation. However, not only is there a politics in needs claims, but also in need

interpretation (Fraser 1988). Ushahidi further enables political and social recognition (Fraser 1997), but on whose terms (this can mean the software level, the institutional level, or the social level)? In other words, what are the terms on which this recognition is achieved?

The full effects of the geoweb's political economy have yet to be theorized. Leszczynski (2011) has effectively 'situated' the geoweb in political economy, arguing (as I imply above) that the geoweb's emergence in many ways reflects our particular capitalist moment. Political economy is essentially a socioeconomic relation in that it involves a mode of production, economic (re)distribution, and flows of capital. One can observe the geoweb's political economy, for example, in the large amounts of venture capital invested in location-based services and geographic software/hardware such as iPhone apps, geographically-enabled search engines, and Google Maps APIs. Crisis mapping introduces interesting dynamics to political economy. First, OSM has been discursively contrasted with traditional GIS for its purported qualities such as 'efficiency', 'speed', and low use of resources. However, OSM works according to market logics by allowing Bing Maps use of its base map in exchange for OSM's use of Bing Maps aerial imagery (Leszczynski 2011). Another crisis mapping platform, Google's MapMaker, is proprietary and Google owns all data contributed to it. For places defined as 'crisis zones' where MapMaker is used - the Kibera slums of Nairobi, the people outside capital relations in the Amazon, etc. - mapping is undertaken in order to bring these spaces into market relations. Lastly, mapping platforms such as OSM and Ushahidi operate in the economic 'third sector' of non-profit. In a sense they represent the devolution of state government-led initiatives to individuals and to the non-profit sector, reflecting the discussion of neoliberalization.

The third way inequality is implicated in the geoweb is through representations of knowledges. For my research I am interested in the politics underwriting these representations in disaster relief contexts. Geographers have long discussed the politics of knowledge representation (S. L. McLafferty 2002; Kwan

2002a; J. Corbett and Rambaldi 2009; Jung and Elwood 2010), and I adapt these ideas for my context. What gets mapped in disaster contexts can be conceptualized as needs. I make this rhetorical turn both as a useful analytic lens, but also because it draws connections to Fraser's (1988) discussion of needs claims and interpretations. For Ushahidi, one can inquire into the terms on which needs are expressed, in other words, the discourses that are available for users to express needs, and the social groups that set these terms. What is an 'acceptable' need? On a software level this could mean questioning the pieces of data Ushahidi must receive in order to map the need. On a social level it could mean questioning the limitations set on *which* needs are able to be expressed, and *how* the needs must be expressed. More broadly, this is a question of which knowledges are considered legitimate for which purposes. OSM focuses on "permanent" Cartesian knowledges to the exclusion of relational and interpersonal ways of knowing (i.e., roads are mapped, but not memories) [2]. In contrast, Ushahidi maps relational knowledges (i.e., police abuses, medical needs, etc.), but still must make exclusions for practical reasons.

Fourth, inequality manifests in the geoweb's influence on urban redevelopment. Urban redevelopment involves the distribution of resources and restoration of services, both of which are increasingly influenced by the geoweb. Like inequality, technology, and the three factors mentioned above, urban redevelopment is an inherently uneven process. The processes involved in determining the distribution of aid are fraught with complexities that mean some urban spaces will be redeveloped differently than others. The geoweb influence these processes, but how, specifically, is the topic of my dissertation research. At this preliminary point, though, I expect to see that urban redevelopment processes have

[2]Interestingly, some Occupy Wall Street tents are being mapped in OSM, which raises a whole set of new questions related to this discussion. What are the politics behind mapping arguably "temporary" Euclidean spaces in OSM?

shifted due to the availability of geoweb modes of mapping and data production. The geoweb mobilizes various forms of inequality that necessarily manifest in redevelopment contexts.