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‘I feel as if I’ve been able to reinvent myself’ – a biographical interview with Doreen Massey*

TIM FREYTAG and MICHAEL HOYLER

Your first encounter with academic geography was in the 1960s, when you were working for your BA in Oxford. Looking back today, how do you remember your studies and what were your major interests then?

Doreen Massey: It was a BA in Oxford, yes, and to the extent that one specialised there I specialised in economic geography – location theory, for example, people like Alfred Weber. Oxford wasn’t at the forefront, I suppose, but it was quite engaging. And there were also a lot of people around who were really interesting, across disciplines, so there were philosophers in my college that I spent most of my time talking to, or physicists, or anthropologists. The college system does enable an interdisciplinarity, at least in casual conversation, which can be quite provocative.

Did you experience the teaching of geography at Oxford as an intellectual challenge as well?

Doreen Massey: Oh yes. But the trouble with Oxford is – or perhaps the wonder of Oxford and the trouble with Oxford is – things like this: I remember reading out my first essay in a tutorial, and in the end my tutor said the classic thing for Oxford, which was that the answer was absolutely opposed to everything everybody said, i.e. I had come down on the wrong side, but that this mattered not one jot, because the way I had argued it was quite fine. What was most important to being at Oxford, I gathered over the years, was not what conclusion you came to, but whether you had the intellectual agility to argue it. The whole point was learning to play that intellectual game, not knowing some particular thing. At one level I despair of that philosophy because actually I do think one ought to learn things in some way, but at another level it’s an enormous privilege just to learn to use your brain. And actually I do think that one of the aims of a good education is to give people the confidence, and ability, to think for themselves. So I both hated it and loved it.

So you learned to use your brain and then left Oxford?

Doreen Massey: I left Oxford because I couldn’t be an academic. I do think there is a serious difference between being an intellectual and being an academic. And one of my greatest, almost physical, pleasures in life is using my brain. Having a really good

* Interview Thursday, 18th June 1998.

intellectual exchange is for me a real high, but I don't think that's the same as being in an academic institution necessarily; and the reason I left Oxford not wanting to be an academic was that I'd seen what I thought it meant to be an academic. And I didn't want to be that. So I went into industry – and hated it!

You then started to work in a research institute, the Centre for Environmental Studies.

Doreen Massey: Yes. It was established by the Labour government in 1968, by Harold Wilson, as a research centre for looking at problems of cities and regions. And it turned out to be very radical. It was an amazing bunch of people, an extremely productive intellectual and political environment. A lot of sociologists, physicists, economists, geographers – a huge range, and very intellectually alive.

In the seventies society was often seen through the lens of modelling and planning. Did that play a significant part in your work?

Doreen Massey: Somehow one of the things I thought about mathematical modelling at the time, or modelling in general, modelling cities in order to be able to plan them, was that at least one was making explicit the idea of the city that you had in your head and the choices that were available. So by making them explicit they became open to democratic engagement. I would now say that that was not a sufficient reasoning, it was an insignificant reasoning in relation to the way we ended up modelling the cities. We didn't justify it, but at the time I did think that there was something potentially positive about that way of thinking.

But you didn't see planning as a means of realising a utopia – planning new towns, for example?

Doreen Massey: No, it wasn't like that. This was kind of major zonal planning – transport planning, where to put your basic industries, where to put the housing, it was that kind of level. Though, of course, at that time Milton Keynes itself, where I ended up working, was being planned. The 1945 and 1960s Labour governments seem to have laid the basis for a lot of my life. I was born just after the war, a period which saw the beginning of the welfare state. I came out of university in the mid-sixties, when you had a social democratic ambience which set up the Centre for Environmental Studies where I worked, the Social Science Research Council, the Open University.

You experienced Labour's social and educational policies quite directly in your early life then.

Doreen Massey: I'm really a child of both of those generations of social democratic interventionism; I still believe in it in some ways now. I was born in a working class

family, in Manchester public sector housing, went to state schooling – there was the 1945 Education Act, which meant that people like us for the first time had a right to decent schooling. When I was born, I was very fragile – I have a lack of calcium in my bones. So had there not been a welfare state and the hospitals, I would probably not have survived so well. I really feel in a kind of physical, personal way the need for a welfare state, not as ‘a safety net’, but just for ordinary people simply to provide a decent life. I experienced that quite directly. My parents lived in that house and we still go back, and that public housing estate is now becoming more privatised and derelict. It always was very violent, even when I was there; that hasn’t changed. But it is the destruction of the security that was the state within that area which I feel quite deeply – if I was still in a working class position in the housing market I would be terrified. A lot of one’s politics comes from that kind of thing, it’s not invented, you grow with it.

It was Conservative policies, however, that ended your career at the Centre for Environmental Studies.

Doreen Massey: They abolished us – one of the first things that Thatcher did when she got into power, was to close a lot of places like that, and she abolished us in 1979. But I think the Labour Party itself was also finding it too left-wing. It had become a centre for left-wing thinking within urban and regional analysis. And although the Conservatives abolished the institute, many of the people that were there are still doing good subversive work somewhere or other. We went off down some mistaken paths, of course, but it was a really good formative experience.

How did you cope personally with the abolition of the CES?

Doreen Massey: When they made me redundant I was actually working on a research grant. So I had a little bit of time left although I no longer had an employer. I took the grant to the London School of Economics; I had to find a base. I managed to make the research grant last longer by doing some teaching in Berkeley. While I was in California the advertisement came up which offered a post at the Open University and that seemed to me to be a place where it might be possible to be an intellectual, a teacher, a researcher without being at a more formal university, and I applied for the job and I got it. There was a short time to go before I would have been unemployed. So it was either a chair or the dole.

Did you undertake any postgraduate studies between leaving Oxford and being appointed at the Open University?

Doreen Massey: I never did a PhD, but I did an MA during the time I was at the Centre for Environmental Studies. I went in 1971/72 to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia to do economics, mathematical economics. I did that because I was becoming increasingly critical of the mathematical models that we were doing, and the location theory which I had been taught previously, because of their basis in neo-classical economics. But on the other hand I had never done training in neo-classical economics, so I felt, ‘one has to know the enemy’, in a sense. I went to Pennsylvania, to the Wharton School, into the Regional Science Department. But while I was there I met a group of French Marxists, who were very much into Althusser. I got very involved in French philosophical discussions about French structuralism. Personally that was more important than the regional science. That started another train of intellectual thinking.

Why was French structuralism so inspiring at the time?

Doreen Massey: This was 1971, everybody had read Marx by this time, a lot of Marx. I had been involved in the early women’s movement – ‘69 onwards – which was a reaction to the macho nature of ‘68. I was committed to the women’s movement but I was very reticent about Marxism because of what I felt to be a kind of essentialism within it. What I had read was early Marx, and I felt that it had a commitment to a static concept of human nature. Marx and Engels go on about what makes human beings different from animals and I kept thinking a) is that question really important, b) I’m extremely sceptical about the answer, and c) the most important point is that conceptually I think that’s a trap. Once you start thinking what is human nature, the next minute you’re going to start thinking what is feminine nature, and you’re going to start making essentialist distinctions between men and women. I knew what was going to happen then, which was that once those distinctions were made I wouldn’t fit into the categories because, given the nineteenth century concepts of woman, there was no way I could apply for the job. And so I’d become a feminist socialist that was quite cautious about Marxism.

Reading Althusser completely changed that – this is where I totally agree with Derek Gregory. We both, I think probably for slightly different reasons, have never wanted to deny the debt we pay to that period of French structuralism and its developments. For me the most important thing about Althusser was the anti-essentialism, and the fact that he said ‘nothing is given, everything is produced’, and the crucial phrase is ‘there is no point of departure’, there is no beginning. Nobody can say that in the end, you’re a woman – because you’re not. You refuse to conform to some kind of eternal description, not because you want to be a nonconformist, not because you want to be a rebel without a cause, but just because that kind of categorisation is imprisoning as well as simply epistemologically and politically

incorrect. So what happened during the period of meeting those French Marxists at Philadelphia was, through reading Althusser, that I began to see a way of reading Marx which I found politically acceptable.

How did this encounter with Althusser change your research agenda?

Doreen Massey: The first thing I did when I came back from America was to write the paper 'Towards a critique of industrial location theory', that first appeared in 1973. What became evident in the debates I had in that period were the limitations of a closed kind of structuralism, and what is evident in *Spatial divisions of labour* is a commitment to a structuralism which talks in terms of the ever-constructedness of things without that entailing the closedness of early formalist French structuralism. My feeling is that there was a big gap between what Althusser was doing and what people like Lévi-Strauss were doing. Althusser was trying to mobilise the structures, he was trying to do something more dynamic. For Althusser, inspite of what everybody says, structural analysis was about dynamism, it did in fact entail a certain type of closure but at least it wasn't about stasis. For me that was very productive and I'm sure in various ways it shows up in *Spatial divisions of labour*. But before *Spatial divisions of labour* I had written a book called *Capital and land*, which is an analysis of capitalist landownership in the UK, and that was the much more straightforward Marxist analysis.

Feminism was always a political issue for you – why is it that in your research questions of gender figure relatively late?

Doreen Massey: What I found possible to do relatively early was to include Marxism in my academic work, but I didn't know how to include feminism. And I didn't do it. I mentioned women, I made rude remarks about men, I did all those classic things, but I didn't put a theorised feminism into my work. The intellectual debates I'd had within the women's movement didn't relate to the debates that were going on within feminist geography. They were much more around questions of epistemology, structure and change, identity and sexuality; the discussions that were going on in some parts of early feminist geography were more about the problems of being a woman, but also about being a particular kind of woman. And 'that kind of woman' (with husband and children etc) did not include me. I knew the category itself was problematical. Although I was willing to write about that, and you see lots of references here and there, I didn't know how to get a purchase on it intellectually. You could say things about women but somehow it wasn't overturning anything very dramatically. So I was incorporating the Marxism but not the feminism, and it would be a long time before I incorporated the feminism, even though I was politically active as a feminist from the late 1960s.

What altered it for me was when the debates about identity started. When we began to discuss the construction of gender and sexuality in a much more open way, then I began to see how conceptually one could put into geography not women, or women's studies so much, as the deconstruction of the whole notion of identity. And that mattered to me massively, both intellectually – well I think it's one of the intellectual breakthroughs that has been phenomenally important, but also mattered personally, because I then felt, finally one could figure in the discourse as a person. No longer was it closed to certain kinds of categories none of which you had previously felt you fitted. So it was both intellectually and personally incredibly liberating. And that's why I refuse to make easy jokes about postmodernism, because had postmodernism – whatever that means – not asked those awkward questions, had feminist and postcolonial studies not been as difficult and as challenging as they have been, we'd never had got to this point. I feel as if I've been able almost to reinvent myself intellectually and personally, because of those kind of changes.

Don't you think a postmodernist approach to the world makes it difficult to maintain one's political commitment?

Doreen Massey: Contrary to what most people say about postmodernism – and I'm not talking about the whole gamut of sometimes crazy postmodernism, I'm talking about political poststructuralism and deconstruction – I think it means that we have to be more political rather than less. We exist in a world within which we have to make up our own morality and our own rules – they are not on a shelf somewhere, where we can find them, and they are not guaranteed by rationality or God. You actually have to engage with the world as it is and take responsibility for how you're doing it. That does not mean that at certain points you can't say that there are general principles which are transportable between situations, as long as we remember that they are culturally specific and historically specific too. They are products of the moments in which they are said to be universal.

When and why did you begin to withdraw from economic geography?

Doreen Massey: Most of the economic geography I was doing was around regions and inner cities within the UK. I was also engaged in the policy debate about inner cities and regions, regional inequality and the North-South divide in Britain, and I think I'd got to a point where I felt that we had been saying what we were saying for so long through the seventies, and then through the eighties it became impossible because Thatcher was in power, but in a sense I wasn't sure why nobody was listening. We didn't need more research, we just needed political change. We knew enough at that point. I think now maybe the situation has changed, but partly the reason I withdrew was a feeling of having given up on having any effect on the kind of policy debates

that were going around cities and regions. I was on a Labour Party subcommittee for those issues from 1973 onwards, 20 years, and after a certain point you just get tired but you also feel that research is not the issue, it's political commitment on their part. I think that was a very important reason for backing off. Another impetus was the things we talked about in relation to feminist geography before, but as those debates turned outside of geography actually, as debates about identity and cultural politics and sexual politics changed, I got more involved with them. So two things happened at once: I got more and more fed up with what seemed like a blind alley politically of economic geography, and more and more engaged in philosophical and conceptual issues around identity and gender – philosophy in a most general sense, but within which gender and sexuality were important components. I don't read now as much economic geography as I used to.

Just monitoring economic change didn't really interest you.

Doreen Massey: That's right. I never knew quite what to do with some of the kind of excellent descriptions of what is going on in industry. But one time I really did get reinvolved in 'economic geography' was during the period 1982 to 1985 when I worked in the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone, when it was socialist. I was a member of the governing body of the Greater London Enterprise Board. I was very involved in that group: we had serious plans, we knew what we wanted to do. So I went onto that board, which was to evolve and implement the economic policy for London, and that very definitely involved thinking through some major issues – if there was postfordism or neofordism, what possibilities they offered for economic intervention at a local scale, etc – and that was very challenging because it involved two sets of debates: One was that for many years we had all been saying 'the problems aren't problems of the city, they are problems of capitalism and the city is just on the receiving end', and here we were sitting in the city trying to convince ourselves we could do something about it, which was quite contradictory. The way we justified that was by saying 'well it's changed, because we've got neofordism and a politics of the local that is now instrumentalizable in a way it hadn't been before'. I think there are huge questions one can ask reflectively about that, indeed which we were asking at the time, but the London Financial Plan, the London Industrial Strategy were drawn up. So there was that debate about the relationship between the structure of capitalism and the local area, and what was a possible relation and whether that had been significantly reorganised by changes within the capitalist system. The other point was that we were trying to intervene in a local economy not to help capital but to help labour. So we had this phrase 'Restructuring for labour' – I mean workers, not the Labour Party. In a sense what one was proposing there was that there were ways of running capitalism which were not socialism but which were

better for labour, and I think that was always a knife-edge to tread because I'm still not sure to what extent capitalism can become kinder, more civilised. But like any of the forms of political intervention and political activity that I got involved in over the years it was incredibly productive in terms of thinking and learning. It was a wonderful period, it really was, it was fantastic, the kind of exuberant radical politics that couldn't have been beaten.

In politics as well as in your work at the Open University engagement with the wider public has been very important for you. However, speaking and writing within everybody's grasp is not always seen as frightfully scholarly in academia.

Doreen Massey: I think posturing in a way of becoming incomprehensible is a) unnecessary and b) just a sign of your own vulnerability, and the whole point about knowledge is to spread it – well, it isn't actually, one of the points about it has been precisely to shore up the position of an elite that holds and legitimises the knowledge. But for me the point about knowledge is not to spread it in the sense of 'I tell you', but to make available debates and abilities to think. I have a real dislike of people who sit through lectures and say they are good because they can't understand them, it's something I really despise, and it happens such a lot, they say 'oh that was frightfully scholarly – (I haven't understood a single word but I know) it was an impressive performance'. The point of education is to give people the confidence and the awareness to think for themselves. That's partly what the OU is about – being able to write about relativity theory for twelve-year-olds (which is what one of our physics professors does) is the thing we should be aiming at!