



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

AHRC STRATEGIC RESEARCH PROGRAMME: LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENT

TRANSFORMATIONS: CYCLES OF DEGRADATION AND RECOVERY

REPORT ON AHRC SEMINAR, SHEFFIELD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND OUTCOMES

1. Language and Terminology

- **Landscape:** a useful unifying concept, the ambiguity in its definition is attractive.
- **Landscape and Environment** - stop using landscape AND environment and use instead a dash (-) "landscape – environment". The insertion of AND separates the concepts and infers no overlaps, whereas a dash would leave more potential for synergy (and/or).
- **Transformations:** "Transformations" was a useful generic term, with a temporal as well as spatial dimension, and with linking and connecting qualities. The concept of transformations is fundamental to the concepts of Landscape and Environment. It is also a useful 'umbrella term' within which a broad range of issues can be explored. Should the idea of "transformations" be politicised?
- **Cycles of Degradation and Recovery:** The secondary title of the topic was 'cycles of degradation and recovery'. There was a general consensus that this was considerably more problematic than transformations. "Cycles of degradation and recovery" was thought to impart an unnecessary value-judgement to the concept of change. "Cycles" implies an inevitable, cyclical process, whereas the process might be neither inevitable nor cyclical. 'Cycles' was also argued to be presumptive, and a reflection of contemporary political attitudes. Many of the notions implied by "degradation" and "recovery" have strong political implications. It raises the question of "recovery/degradation" for whom, by whom and for what? However, "recovery" could also be related to recovering identity and ideas of local distinctiveness. What is degradation? "Transformations", "degradation" and "recovery" could all be separate themes in their own right. For example, 'degradation' and 'recovery' were presented as perceived states or processes, and therefore their existence or otherwise could be research problems in themselves. Finally, "cycles of degradation and recovery" may also be a very Eurocentric perspective. More scope should be given to other perspectives,

perhaps via a more ambiguous title, which would open out potential for more diverse approaches. But could the existing title be used more as a polemic, not to define the subject but as a theme to respond to?

Outcomes:

Overall, it was felt that a more neutral and expansive sub-title was more appropriate. This could simply be 'transformations' as the term 'transformation' was generally approved, although it was suggested that 'change' was less linear and perhaps more appropriate in that it retains some sense of dynamism and the ongoing.

It is politically relevant (the power to transform), and it encompasses not only transformations of the physical world, but also of the subject – of the self. A study of transformations also needs to take into account stability and scales (temporal and geographical). Time is therefore one powerful unifying theme within this area.

Concepts of degeneration and recovery also had some promise, with major political dimensions to them (e.g. questions of recovery by whom, for whom). But did the explicit statement of 'Degradation and Recovery' constitute too narrow a field of definition to cover adequately the themes which were raised at the seminar. There was some concern that the existing title, if it was carried forward into the call for projects, would force a focus on binaries and that these should be avoided by using alternative parameters such as 'metamorphoses' and 'multiple cycles'.

2. Emerging Themes

- There was a general consensus that time should be incorporated as an important aspect of the landscape/environment debate. The fact that the call would enable researchers to come out of 'deep time' was welcomed, and it was suggested that the period between the 15th and 19th centuries has been thus far neglected in this regard, and might be flagged up for priority funding. Other time-related discussion raised questions such as linear and other time, generational time, folk history, real time, scientific and archaeological time, retrospection and notions of a 'golden past'. More attention to the idea that temporality to be addressed in terms that are not simply linear or circular, but more complex.
- The transformative effects of landscape, the materiality of landscape could be thought of as something that is dynamic; landscapes 'speak back' and transform (active). There was a response to this in that we, as a society, may be divorcing ourselves from the landscape through technologies such as the internet (constructed landscape). Both these points raise awareness of material versus imaginary landscapes; mind as a means of transcending land and materiality.
- It was suggested that there be not a strict focus on transformation in the fabric of the landscape, but its relation to human experience, which is both intrinsic to and external to these changes. Thus, transformations in human understandings and perceptions also need investigation, for example, self transformation through encounter (with materials and places, as things in the landscape "speak back" to humans), so that the landscape is neither human or physical but a nexus between human, cultural and physical. Finally, more is needed in exploring the link between landscape and identity, especially national identity, but also different

political, cultural and social orderings of the landscape, often wrought via state formation, etc.

- The human dimension to the theme also needs expansion, including political, moral and social dimensions to transformations, or to the definition of “empty lands”.
- More is also needed on cross-cultural experience and traditional knowledge and the representations and understandings of landscape transformations (these being imagined, anticipated, relived or on-going changes).
- Related ideas were the transformation of self- and personhood in the landscape, and transformations which landscape helped to express. The questions of travel and tourism were deemed to have important implications in matters of transformation. Participants suggested that not only are environments and landscapes transformed as a result of travel and tourism, but that the growth and development of travelling practices has impacted on perceptions of the landscape, ambitions (local becomes global) and representations.
- Landscapes have a *future* - we need not only think of past and history – landscapes also have futures that are anticipated and also realised in different ways. Therefore, in contrast to the obsession with recreating (backward looking) landscape histories, we need also to concern ourselves with “the future in the past”, “the past in the past” and the “past in the future”.
- Linked to this is the ability to dream, envisage and mentally create utopias and dystopias. More attention needs to be directed to the present and future dimensions of landscape transformations, not just to reconstructing histories of transformations.
- Creation and anticipation of futures should be equally emphasised. This requires highlighting the involvement of creative practitioners and other professionals in future research and collaboration.
- Overall, the consensus was that the call would/should enable and promote the articulation of competing and multiple interpretations and experiences of time and landscape/environment, in other words should promote a plurivocality among disciplines and users of landscapes and environments. Related issues emerging from this part of the discussion concerned outcomes, winners and losers, management of conflict/multiple interests in a democratic society.

3. Issues of Multidisciplinarity and Methods/Methodology

- Methodological innovation is an important, indeed, inevitable outcome.
- A big strength in the call is not defining strict methodologies - inter-disciplinary working would have innovative and unforeseen methodological implications. But methodological questions were sufficiently important that AHRC should put more explicit emphasis on them. There was a discussion of whether this should be an additional theme in its own right, or a cross-cutting theme.
- Some of the most fruitful areas for collaboration would be found in combining different methodologies, finding new and innovating ways of tackling questions, as well as representing those results. In contrast, strictly defining potential project study areas (times, regions, narrow themes) would be a less productive approach.

- This should lead to innovative ways of multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary working and representation. Chance for disciplines to come together, collaborate, bridge gaps and share (innovate) methodologies and approaches.
- Balance the idea of multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary working and to make explicit the different conceptual approaches, methodologies and ways of representing outcomes.
- Interdisciplinary studies would clearly be one outcome of the programme, but it was argued that small and focused projects within individual disciplines should also have a place, where appropriate. In short, interdisciplinarity would be a potential, not a requirement. Concern that there would be space allotted for well focussed projects, not just large synergic and interdisciplinary projects. Interdisciplinary approaches should be encouraged but should not be a criterion for selected projects.
- Reacting more directly to the challenge of developing interdisciplinary initiatives, it was suggested that the core strength of a distinctive arts and humanities approach to the question was that it lent itself to managing and representing this multivocality.
- The attractive breadth of inter-disciplinarity within the programme is promising, but “doing” inter-disciplinarity is very time-consuming. There is a danger that unless sufficient preparatory time is allowed for new collaborations to develop, people will just stick with safe existing collaborations. There was a request for support for conferences and symposia to allow working across disciplines, to allow for concepts to be broadened, and for explorations of methodological innovation. Members of the group wanted to highlight the importance of documenting the progress and outcomes of inter-disciplinary approaches themselves. The difference of methods has rich creative potential.
- Should there be boundaries to interdisciplinarity? Should the programme fund projects which include the physical and life-sciences? Isn't it the responsibility of the other research councils to fund these areas? It was suggested that the AHRC should negotiate some cross-over funding to allow interdisciplinarity which doesn't compromise the limited funding available to arts and humanities.

4. Additional Concerns

- The question of the relation between research and policy was raised. This ties in with the AHRC's focus on the 'wider resonance' of research. Matters discussed included attempts to stop landscape change; agency (as opposed to our understanding of landscape/environment transformation as a natural given) and agencies more generally; ownership and the powers of representation (which again brought us back to the question of plurivocality and conflict/competition).
- The pedagogical aspect of research and collaboration was raised as an important matter for discussion: how do we learn about landscape? How do we learn to appreciate landscape? How do physical, social and pragmatic realities intermesh with / differ from each other? This debate broadened into a discussion of community involvement in research, professional and non-professional relations, and the conflicting need both to develop, on the one hand, a language which will reach across disciplines and into the broader community but, on the other, to make use of a specialist language which facilitates the articulation of ideas.

- Work with non-academics: Another facet to this question concerned collaborative working with non-academics. All present felt that the programme needed to incorporate creative partnerships with practitioners, both artistic practitioners and other actors (e.g. public and private sector, community sectors, etc). However, this would only be possible if careful consideration was given to the funding structure. Firstly, one cannot expect practitioners to contribute their professional time to interdisciplinary projects for nothing. Secondly, even if they are already funded, their funding cycles may not coincide with the AHRC scheme. What can the AHRC do to address this, how can it incorporate flexibility into its programme without losing integrity? There was a request for clarification on the emphasis of research that is collaborative with non-academic bodies – the issue of knowledge transfer.

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