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'Exploring the bunker' - a response by Luke Bennett to 'Shallow Excavation'

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Published version

BENNETT, Luke (2011). 'Exploring the bunker' - a response by Luke Bennett to 'Shallow Excavation'. *Environment and planning. D , Society and space*.

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Exploring the bunker - a response by Luke Bennett to 'Shallow Excavation' (Garrett, 2011)

Garrett offers an alternative reading of 'urban exploration'. He contrasts my "virtual" study with the extended period of participant observation entailed in his three year study of urban exploration, and its "diverse and multifaceted community". Garrett implies that only such long term immersion can reveal the full colour and polyphony of this community.

I agree that my article (Bennett 2011a) and the study described in it cannot be taken as the 'last word' on interpreting urban exploration. But surely a variety of investigations and methods are warranted here.

For my contribution I chose to study a distinct sub-fraction of the on-line, publically available corpus of knowledge generated by, or in the name of, the urban exploration community (or – to appease Garrett – *communities*). This is voluminous, circulates in the name of urban exploration practice and, I contend, is worthy of study in its own right.

The study of participants' own accounts is a valid interpretivist method. Atkinson (1983: 128) notes that the study of participant's own accounts has a rich pedigree within that tradition. He points out that the early Chicago School of urban sociology drew heavily upon first-hand accounts presented by those being investigated. My study is consistent with this, follows Orbuch's (1997) advocacy of a 'sociology of accounts' and emergent methodological approaches in researching internet communities.

My study was primarily interested in how a distributed community of enthusiasts could construct and sustain a body of knowledge regarding remote places scattered the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and why a peer-produced survey of abandoned underground chambers was being invested with such energy and commitment.

A copy of the dissertation from which my paper was derived is available for scrutiny on-line (Bennett 2010a), it provides discussion of matters of research design, ontology and epistemology which my paper did not have space to go into

Garrett alleges that I have cynically constructed the 'bunkerology' concept and populated it with a diverse membership of groups other than (real) 'urban explorers' and that I have done this in order to discredit urban exploration. But if I have defined the field too widely to suit my own ends, then isn't Garrett guilty of something very similar – delimiting the field so that only the transgressive, emancipator and cerebral urban explorers remain in view?

I do not deny the existence of politically or psychogeographically motivated urban explorers. I simply contend that prevailing academic focus upon that constituency fails to account for the non-political and taxonomic “community of practice” (Wenger 1997) that my enquiry found as dominant within this case study – at least in terms of its on-line published outputs.

Garrett appears to imply that the “display [of] a public image of apolitical benignity” which may be observed in contemporary urban exploration is a “smoke screen” and that my interpretation is “shallow” because I have failed to see past it and discover the ‘real’ agenda of urban exploration. Discovery of a motivational outlook that sits secretly behind (and in contradiction to) the ‘public shop window’ of this community of practice is a bold claim that I will leave Garrett to substantiate through his own work.

My paper sought to examine the current practice as found within the ROC Post accounts sample and I found that practice to be distinctly apolitical in its declared motivation. However (and my paper would have been clearer if I had stated this) I chose to examine this area of urban exploration precisely *because* it appeared to have clear origins in oppositional political reconnaissance. The following paragraph is a crude summary of what I mean by this, and I intend to write elsewhere in more detail on the role of various genres in the ‘re-discovery’ (i.e. the signification) of abandoned bunkers.

The ROC Posts were built during the 1950s. During the 1960s peace activists like ‘*Spies for Peace*’, sought to investigate and expose the existence and role of Cold War nuclear war planning infrastructure (see Carroll 2010). In the 1970s Peter Laurie's book, *Beneath the City Streets*, was the first appearance of hobby (as opposed to expressly political) bunkerology. This was a book, in his words: "written to satisfy my own curiosity" (1979: 271). The book was subtitled "a private inquiry", to emphasise this non-aligned perspective. However, like ‘*Spies for Peace*’ Laurie still read physical structures as signifiers of intangible governing practices, for:

“in the concrete of bunkers, in the radio towers, the food stores, the dispersed centres of government, [one] can read the paranoia of power. This evidence is written on the face of England.” (1979: 9).

In the 1980s Duncan Campbell's *War Plan UK: the truth about civil defence in Britain* (1983) followed in Laurie's footsteps, and his research included penetration of the central London Government communication tunnels system at Kingsway. The ROC Post network was abandoned in 1991, and during that decade this Cold War infrastructure increasingly became framed as ‘archaeology’, with *Subterranea Britannica* members co-opted into the surveying of twentieth century relics of ‘the defence of Britain’ (Council of British

Archaeology 2010). The form and content of ROC Post accounts found on *28dayslater* are the latest iteration of this drift away from the original manifestly political reconnaissance mission of bunkerology.

I do not seek by my paper to deny that bunkerology has ever had a political purpose, or that some (like Paglen 2010 and the “eyeballers” now scrutinising satellite mapping (Dodge 2004)) are not still engaged in something that is oppositional to power. But I do contend, that in the case of ROC Posts, the amateur exploration and study is now driven by something different.

My article argues that this process of collaborative survey cannot be satisfactorily accounted for if the dominant (and rather romantic) theoretical interpretations of urban exploration are left without empirical investigation. My investigation pointed me in the direction of applying Augé (1995) in order to highlight a role for the “erotics of knowledge” (de Certeau et al, 1998: 92) within the motivations at play. Garrett appears to reject altogether any role for these factors. Are they worthy of no room at all? My study found a clear practice of serial factual survey within one of the most popular urban exploration forum sites. That needs to be accounted for somehow. I have given my interpretation, perhaps future studies by others will adjudicate between us.

Garrett appears to believe that by invoking ‘nostalgia’ I am necessarily seeking to marginalise and belittle urban exploration. I am not. The yearning for the ‘lost’ past that I observed appeared to animate those who held that view. It did not bear them down or render them inactive. That yearning can be an important component of identity, and informs a sense of place. Indeed it is not without a role in (political) psychogeography (Bonnett, 2009).

My article was not about undertaking exploration, it was about how urban explorers explain their activities in ROC Post accounts. These accounts themselves tend to marginalise the embodied content of this area of urban exploration (Bennett 2010a & 2011b).

Garrett seeks to position me as someone who wishes to trivialise urban exploration. That is not my aim. I have high regard for the effort and dedication shown by the participants whose collaborative survey work I observed during my study. Garrett describes me as author of a “funky caricature sketched out with a clear agenda in mind”, yet he declines to state what that agenda is.

In my recent research work I have conducted investigations into the influence of communities of practice upon access management. This requires studies of both owners and access takers. To avoid ethical complications my enquiry into the practices and ways of

doing of urban explorers focussed upon a single (but widespread) form of abandoned place, one unconnected to the areas where I had previously researched the landowner's perspective. I intentionally restricted my access to only publically available information in order to minimise the risk of any future conflict of interest.

I welcome Garrett's comments as a call for further studies to map the diversity and multifaceted nature of what is practiced in the name of 'urban exploration'. But I would hope that such studies will themselves remain true to that aim, and feel able - whenever they may come across them - to acknowledge (and celebrate for their own sake) the collaborative survey aspects, alongside extolling the transgressive, the emancipatory and the athletic.

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10 June 2011

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NB: Due to pressure of space my own papers are not referenced in the following. The reader is referred to the following to trace my papers:

<http://shu.academia.edu/LukeBennett>

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