



Spaces of play, spaces of responsibility: Creating dichotomous geographies of outdoor citizenship



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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the co-constitution of citizens and environments, and how the association of outdoor spaces produced as particular 'natures' with particular performative norms produces distinct spatialities of inclusion and exclusion. These issues are explored in relation to the moral geographies of outdoor access, whereby the realisation of citizen entitlements to perform outdoor activity depend on the spatial production of norms, practices and identities in relation to various 'natures'. Using mountain biking as an example, the paper explores how particular subjectivities become placed in the 'nature domesticated' of purpose-built trail centres and displaced from the 'nature wild' of mountains. Trail centres are positioned as places of play, ignorance and recklessness in which mountain bikers can belong, whilst mountains are constituted as places of responsibility, quiet contemplation and seriousness, in which mountain bikers are out of place. Such spatialisation, setting practices of play and responsibility in opposition to each other, is flagged as problematic in relation to the actualisation of citizenship entitlements, and in turn meeting a range of societal goals for health, wellbeing and ecological knowledges. Despite arguments that play is generative (rather than the 'other') of responsibility, there is evidence to suggest that such a dichotomy could become more materially realised, with implications for the ability of citizens to access and share space, and to translate their knowledge and experience from one 'nature' to another.

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Growing outdoor participation, but in which outdoors?

Generating greater participation in outdoor activity is an increasingly pressing concern in the UK. It is seen as crucial to meeting policy imperatives regarding health, mobility, and economic development, as well as social and environmental citizenship (SNH, 2007; Defra, 2008). Mountain biking is seen as an important vehicle for achieving outdoor participation objectives, particularly for encouraging and sustaining activity among young people (SMBDC, 2009; King, 2010). In practice, however, mountain biking has met with significant resistance to its acceptance as a legitimate mode of outdoor citizenship, even where legally endorsed. Conflicts have been identified between mountain bikers and more established outdoor recreational users, with particular objections to mountain biking including: noise; speed and style of movement; wearing of bright or intimidating clothing; moving in big groups; inconsiderate, irresponsible and dangerous behaviour; the presence of a 'machine' or 'urban' artefact in nature; and, causing environmental damage or being disrespectful to nature (Ruff and Mellors, 1993; Ravenscroft, 2004; Carothers

et al., 2001; Heer et al., 2003; Milner, 2006; Hoy, 2006; Brown, submitted for publication).

With this prevailing image of mountain biking as feckless and reckless, it could be argued that the mountain biker is constituted as deviant and the outdoor 'anti-citizen' (after Matless, 1998), whereby their pursuit of sensory pleasure and its associated bodily effects are considered vulgar, polluting or disruptive in relation to established ideals of environmental engagement. A legitimate citizen of the outdoors must demonstrate the requisite conduct and aesthetic ability demanded by dominant moral orderings, which according to Matless (1998) are always spatially constituted. Judgements made about the (in)appropriateness of behaviour cannot be separated from judgements made about the characteristics, value and purpose of the environments in question (see also Cresswell, 2006; Edensor, 2006). However, little consideration has been given to the spatial contingency of citizenship, acceptance and belonging in relation to outdoor activity, despite the drive for growing participation. This paper explores with respect to mountain biking how and why deviant subjectivities are not considered inappropriate everywhere, and attends to hitherto overlooked underlying mechanisms of such spatial differentiation.

The paper draws upon a study of outdoor access in Scotland which illustrates the emergence of distinct moral geographies of

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recreation participation. The (un)acceptability of mountain biking as 'in' or 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996) is shown to be highly contingent on precisely which 'natures' subjects are attempting to access, and how these subjectivities are mobilised in relation to these natures. A vivid illustration is how mountain biking is allowed to belong (or is even positively encouraged and prioritised) in the overtly commodified spaces of purpose-built trail centres, but are deemed unacceptable in spaces seen as 'wilder' and more 'natural' such as mountains.

We need to examine further some of the core geographical imaginaries with which particular outdoor activities – and moral judgements made about their associated conduct and identities – have developed. It is commonly suggested that mountain biking is resisted in part because it is adversarial to, or not as much a part of, 'nature'. However, spatialities of acceptable environmental conduct raise questions of precisely which 'natures' are being invoked (implicitly or explicitly) in such debate (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998), and thus who is allowed to engage with them (Whatmore, 2002).

How we co-constitute legitimate citizens and 'natures' also evokes questions of the capacity to perform appropriate conduct in particular spaces, and in which spaces particular subjects are encouraged or expected to access. Such questions underpin the governance of outdoor recreation, not least due to the heavy regulatory reliance on informal customary practices. Everyday norms and subjectivities play a fundamental role in delineating how outdoor access is enabled and governed – along with legislation and codes of conduct defining rights and responsibilities¹ of outdoor citizenship (Parker, 2006, 2007) – and are therefore a fundamental aspect of facilitating desired increases in participation. The aim is, therefore, to use mountain biking to examine in more depth how performative norms of conduct are mutually constituted with particular spaces – in this case particular 'natures' – and what this means for the practical realisation of outdoor citizen (or deviant) status. Specifically, I explore how trail centres and mountains are produced as particular 'wild' or 'domestic' outdoor spaces, and in ways that enable and disable particular outdoor subjectivities through their constitution together with the moral axes of 'responsibility' and 'play'.

Nature and outdoor citizens

Traditionally, studies of citizenship have been concerned with the allocation of rights and responsibilities (Marshall, 1950 [2009]), most often with regard to the freedoms, protections and obligations linking individual and nation state. More recent scholarship, however, has critiqued static and official notions of entitlement, and demonstrated how citizenship is not given, but involves the active negotiation of acceptance and belonging, and thus has to be learned, and continually worked at (Hall et al., 1999). It is increasingly understood as spatially and performatively contingent, which means that citizen rights are realised or denied as they are enacted through the normativities of grounded, embodied everyday practices, as well as through formal institutional apparatus (Valentine, 2008; Laurier and Philo, 2006; Dickinson et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008). In fact, it is helpful to think in terms of relational *processes* of citizenship formation, which unfold across a range of interlinked social and spatial scales (Desforges et al., 2005).

A number of authors have attended to the relationship between outdoor recreation and citizenship (Curry, 2002; Ravenscroft,

1998; Ravenscroft et al., 2002; Lorimer, 1997; Flemsæter et al., 2011), though fewer have dealt in depth with how such relations are geographically produced. A key exception is Matless (1994, 1998, 2000) who examines outdoor activities in terms of the moral geographies of associating particular environments with particular identities and forms of conduct. He explains that who counts as a legitimate citizen is judged against socially and materially situated normativities of how the outdoors and nature ought to be engaged with and appreciated. Here particular 'natures' can become the grounds for producing particular leisure identities, and the characteristics ascribed to a space form the basis for invoking moral judgements about associated forms of appropriate bodily conduct. Going further, Edensor (2000, 2006) highlights that it is not just a case of a contested delineation of which outdoor subjectivities are appropriate to particular domains. Rather, he asserts it is a case of particular rural domains being *actively* produced and reproduced as outdoor subjectivities are enacted.

The case of public rights of access in Scotland illustrates very well how legal rights of outdoor citizenship only become meaningful when enacted in and through practice, and with the tacit acceptance of others (Brown, 2012), and the myriad social and environmental contingencies upon which this depends. Rather than tying particular users to particular paths or areas, these rights espouse a multi-use ethic bounded behaviourally through the conditionality of acting 'responsibly' (the outline principles of which feature in an associated Code of conduct). A similar principle is also implicit in the outdoor access rights of many other countries (Ravenscroft et al., 2002; Parker, 2006, 2007; Flemsæter et al., 2011). Therefore, the capacity to perform a 'responsible' subjectivity is crucial to the ability to participate with legal legitimacy in outdoor activities, but also has to be performed in a way that is acceptable to other users and land managers who hold the most normative power in bounding a legitimate outdoor citizen on the ground. Whether or not mountain bikers count as legitimate citizens of the outdoors is, however, highly contested (Brown, 2012; Pothecary, 2012).

Mountain biking has emerged as an important and illustrative manifestation of shifting socionatural relations of outdoor recreation: creating novel openings and possibilities for where and how the outdoors can be done. Such new and differentiating modes of aesthetic and mobile engagement, and associated expressions of attachment, unsettle and reconfigure previously stabilised conventions, habits, and embodiments of outdoor recreation (Edensor, 2006). Often mobilised by those seeking to defend established forms of use is disdain towards anyone treating nature as a 'playground' (Edensor, 2006; Thompson (2010).

Play has been flagged in recent scholarship as a "significant geographical concern in its own right" (Woodyer, 2012, p. 313), where particular issue is taken with assumptions of play as solely the domain of children, and "as the 'other' of conventional adult behaviour" (Woodyer, 2012, p. 314). Instead, research illustrates the relevance and attraction of play throughout the lifecourse, including adulthood (Stevens, 2007), and indeed emphasises the benefits of play to health, wellbeing, vitality, creativity, self-validation and relationships which can permeate each facet of ordinary adult lives (Brown, 2010; Rieber et al., 1998; Schrage, 2000). Geographers have also recognised and helped to question other ways in which play is conceived dualistically, such as its prevalent positioning in opposition to work, rationality, seriousness, depth, purpose, productivity, necessity, constraint and morality (Dubin, 1956; Bowman, 1987; Chick and Hood, 1998; Stevens, 2007; Woodyer, 2012). Play in such dualisms often is framed in pejorative terms, for example, as Chick and Hood (1998, p. 5) state, "work has been seen as the fountainhead of progress while play and leisure are, at best, diversions and, at worst, potential settings for the handiwork of the devil". An important contribution of

¹ In Scotland, where the empirical material of this paper comes from, the rights and responsibilities of outdoor access are defined by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 Part I and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. This framework allows non-motorised access to most land and inland water on the condition that it is 'responsible'.

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