Philo, C. (2014) Insecure bodies/selves: introduction to theme section. Social and Cultural Geography, 15(3), pp. 284-290.

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http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/105409/

Deposited on: 15 February 2016

Insecure bodies/selves:
introduction to theme section

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This short piece introduces a three-paper theme section on the theme of 'Insecure bodies/selves', growing out of a conference session held in 2012. Using the brief example of a brain-injured soldier's 'shattered world', creating a thoroughly 'unsecured' self/body, attention is given to how contemporary human geography has gradually opened itself to engaging with the multiple spaces of insecure bodies/selves. The three papers are then formally outlined and situated within these new currents of geographical and trans-disciplinary scholarship.

Key words: bodies, selves, bodies/selves, security, insecurity

A shattered world

Through and beyond the objects I see there are endless numbers – a myriad really – of tiny, shifting swarms of midges that make it hard for me to look at the objects themselves. Because of this swarm, I can't see the first letter of a word clearly. It doesn't come through clearly but looks like it's been plucked, gnawed around the edges, and what's left are scattered points, quills, or threads that flicker like a swarm. I can see this now with my own eyes – when I look out the window I have a very small span of vision, but in and around that span I see this swarm racing back and forth. (in Luria 1972: 38)

This passage was written by Leva Zazetsky, who, as a 23-year old Russian soldier was wounded by shell fragments during the WWII battle of Smolensk in 1943, a Red Army strategic offensive designed to secure the region by clearing it of all German presence. Zazetsky suffered damage to the left parietal-occipital region of his brain, seriously affecting his visual-field perception, motor coordination, memory and also more conceptual capacities for combining objects, gestures and actions. His experience of the world became mired in a constantly shifting 'visual chaos', conveyed above and remarkably captured in a pair of landscape drawings representing his vision before and after the injury (see **Figure 1**). For him, the 'geography' of the world became fundamentally different, and exceptionally hard to traverse, not least because basically 'the right side' of everything had disappeared. Indeed, he could not see or even imagine the right side of his body – it had simply vanished from his self-perception – while other parts of his body became curiously 'mobile': sometimes he would sense his head becoming inordinately large, his torso exceedingly small, his legs displaced (his right leg curiously reappearing above his head and shoulders) and the location of his anus unknown. 'The ability to carry out actions in space was another casualty' (Gardner 1977: 417): conjoining needle and thread became a serious challenge, hammering a nail a mystery and participating in sports or games impossible. So impaired was his sense of spatial orientation, of knowing right from left, forward from back, 'that he could scarcely undertake any action out of doors' (Gardner 1977: 418). His memory was totally fragmented, just scraps of a personal biography in no discernible order, and yet, because his frontal brain lobes remained intact, he was fully aware

of this fragmentation, as if a 'rational' brain was forever observing the 'irrational' mess that had survived the injury. For Zazetsky, many of the 'normal' attributes of the functioning human body had been destroyed, and most of what are routinely regarded as the essential qualities of the human self – of how it conceives its self-hood as a spatially coherent entity with an ongoing story to tell of its time on earth – had also been lost. His embodied self, and his sense of that self, had indeed shivered into fragments, leading him to experience both himself and the external world as ceaselessly shifting, unstable through and through, entirely bereft of secure foundations.
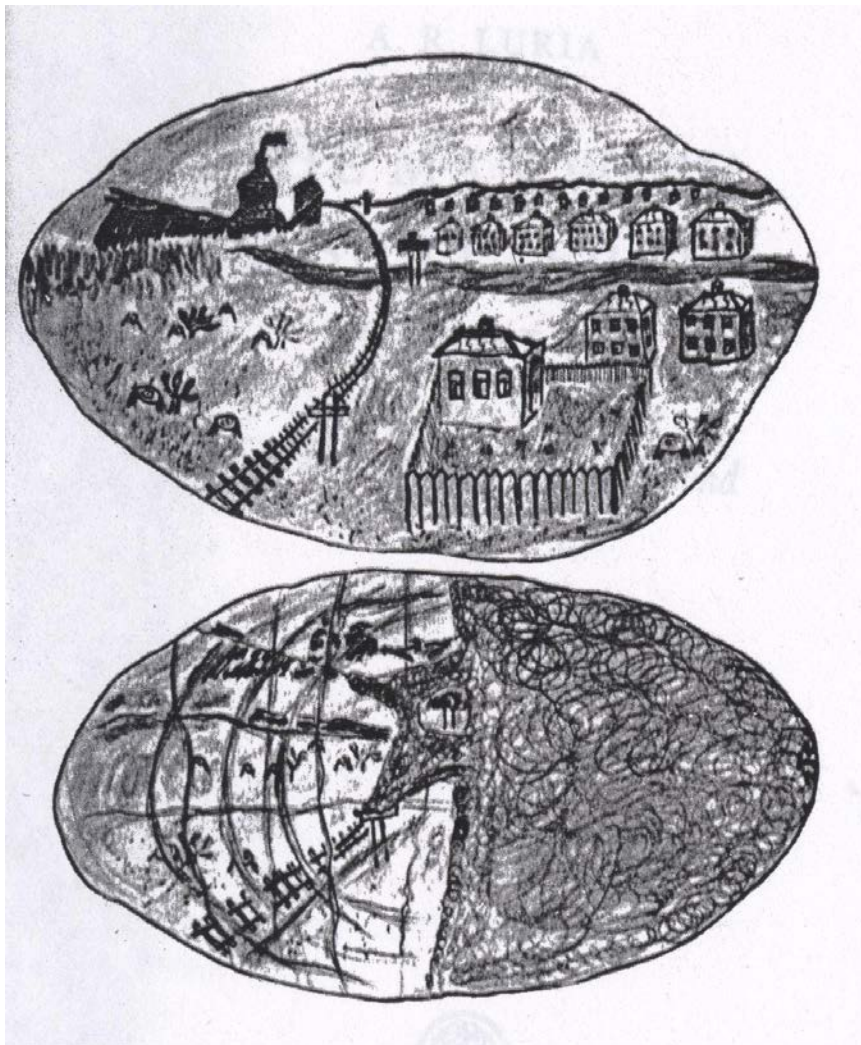

Figure 1 Vision before injury (top); vision after the injury (below)
Source: Zazetsky's own drawings, in Luria (1972), Figure 2, p.39.

Zazetsky became a patient of the esteemed Russian psychologist, Alexander Romanovich Luria (1902-1977), who worked with Zazetsky at the Budenko Neurological Hospital in Moscow, helping him to create some sense of and for his life after the brain injury. With Luria's assistance, Zazetsky found a way to begin writing a journal of both his memories, as they intruded, and his reflections on his own multiple embodied peculiarities. He continually jotted down scribbles, a few sentences a day, drafting some 3,000 pages of notes over the 20 years of his acquaintanceship with Luria, and the suggestion is that the writing itself stopped him from being wholly 'lost': very literally, then, he

wrote him*self* (back) into being. Eventually, Luria undertook to edit these first-person notes into a book form, published in English as *The Man With a Shattered World* (1972), a remarkable document for many readers, not least the geographer interested in alternative spatialities of being-in-the-world for someone experiencing extreme body/self fragmentation. Chapter titles include 'His Vision', 'His Body' and 'Space', and Luria summarised an existence where everything – body, self, world – 'would appear fitfully and become displaced, making everything appear as if it were in a state of flux' (Luria 1972: 38). This book comprises a compelling literary-psychological-neurological hybrid sometimes seen as a pair with a second work by Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1987), recounting the case of another individual, S., with a vast, apparently unlimited memory (but incapable of discrimination or abstraction). Bruner (1987: xiii) positions both books as case studies in what Luria himself called 'romantic science', arguing that Luria was unusual for the care displayed in both his 'classical' scientific investigation of brain-altered individuals – asking about their bodies or, more specifically, the unique properties of their physical brains – and his unstinted clinical-practical effort 'to bring them back to the fullness of life' (Bruner 1987: xix). Luria thereby attended to both bodies and selves, striving to re-unite the fragments, to stitch back together marginally more secure body-selves, as a mission 'both in the light of love and in the light of justice' (Bruner 1987: xix).

Meeting insecure bodies/selves[1]

Questions about the fracturing of bodies/selves have gradually crept into the orbit of contemporary human geography, taking seriously how these 'entities', previously taken-for-granted as relatively coherent packages of either material (fleshy) or immaterial (psychic) phenomena, might actually be instead rather *insecure* in terms of their boundaries, internal organisation and overall integration (of the material and immaterial). If academic geography in its spatial-scientific guise from the 1950s onwards tended to see human bodies as these unitary 'atoms' whizzing around responding soundlessly to the impulsions of geometric-spatial laws, then arguably time-geography – as such as deep-seated if under-acknowledged anchorage for much of human geography's turn to social theory from the 1980s – repeated much the same physicalist depiction of these bodies-in-motion. Radical and Marxist versions of human geography have injected alertness to how these bodies might be scarred, sometimes irretrievably in both physically and mental registers, by capitalist exploitation in the appropriation of surplus value, while humanistic geographers have added a crucial awareness of how these bodies always possess interior dimensions of experiencing, feeling, hoping and fearing (and perhaps of being alienated or belonging).

The discipline's 'cultural turn' arguably introduced a deeper grasp of how humans become imbued with and find ways to express (and act upon) a diversity of identities, acknowledging that such identities serve as the connective sinew between senses of self (who am I? what is my 'place' in the world?) and senses of shared collectivity with larger groupings of selves (communities, nations, identity affiliations of all sorts). Profound insights from feminist, queer and post-colonial perspectives, wrapped around with complex offerings from the poststructuralist lexicon, have all substantially enriched what might be said about how bodies and selves – set within multiply

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[1] The following paragraphs in this section are informed by a multitude of readings over many years, far too many meaningfully to cite or, in the space available, to honour with the proper work of critical synthesis. I nonetheless hope that many of the allusions will be appreciated by the reader, and that the trajectory of my remarks, while over-simplified, will nonetheless be thought not entirely ill-conceived.

differentiated spaces of political economy, social discourse and cultural politics – circulate, articulate, practice and (re)produce. Slowly and haltingly, these moves have all served to query previous (largely unexamined) certainties about bodies and selves, so that the seemingly self-evident secure foundations of both body and self – epitomised by the (if stereotyped) Descartesian unity of mind-body, a coherent rational mind that knows *it*self encased within the bounded shell of the walking-talking human body – have been progressively undermined.

Attention to non- and post-human geographies has arguably *dispersed the human body*, tracking its molecular, genetic and epigenetic promiscuousness, regarding it as a precarious assemblage, changeable from context to context, and showing how human bodies are always terrains of lively encounter, stress and combat, forever being (re)created anew. Inputs from the likes of critical disability/health/population studies have added to this pot, fostering an enlarged biopolitical geography of thoroughly embodied life-and-death, demanding critical research into the (geo)political ecologies of bodies, state and capital. In this vein, human bodies become these intrinsically insecure 'strange attractors' – very obviously when caught up in migrations, violence and war – which are themselves ruptured material landscapes traced through and over by disease, hunger, limb-loss, shrapnel, persecution, exclusion and even dubious experimentation. In so doing, they may become de-humanised, possibly *homo sacer*, but more positively, in league with (spatially uneven) welfare and technological advances, maybe re-humanised, given a chance to live when previously only death awaited.

Attention to emotional/affectual and psychoanalytic/therapeutic geographies, meanwhile, has arguably *dispersed the human self*, demonstrating that 'our' psychic economies are anything but whole (or wholesome) but rather fragmented into different, more-or-less connected regions of un-/pre-/semi-/barely conscious mental activity, some full of thoughts/words with others empty of such contents, and some exerting a direct influence on the more conscious capacities of 'self' with others providing a more subterranean 'hum' of feeling-production and -management. It might therefore be appropriate to speak of each self really being many selves, a parliament of selves, more-or-less aware of and attendant to one another, all traversed by a network of psychic 'energies – however exactly conceived, neurologically, spiritually or purely metaphorically – that may (or may not) impel the self to do things, to speak, to conduct itself or take actions in its life-world. In this vein, human selves become another order of 'strange attractors' which are themselves immaterial landscapes layering together different records of wider environmental, social, personal and (perhaps) sexual encounter, many if not all of which will serve to shape the self (or selves): helping to fashion its identity (or, likely, many identities), to provoke its desires and passions, to fuel its (dis)contents, to sustain or destroy its relationships, to enflame or dampen its anxieties, and so on.

Even if abbreviated and ideally needing more elaboration, this thumbnail account above clarifies why contemporary human geography, set within extensive bodies of trans-disciplinary literature, has opened up a picture of bodies/selves which would have been entirely (?) unimaginable to earlier generations of geographers. Such a picture suggests bodies/spaces spread across and constituted within a diversity of spaces, real and imagined, exterior and interior, scrumpled, scrunched, squeezed, scattered, rolled out, torn apart, blown away. The latter words here are at once playful and deadly serious. They also point to something decisive about security and insecurity, in that: on the one hand, at issue is the challenge to that vision of *secure* entities (coherent, bodily-bounded, self-contained) about which certain knowledge can seemingly be generated; but, on the other hand,

at issue is the intimation that these entities are now sallying forth in a world which is growing ever more *insecure* precisely because the churning of its peoples and related predicaments has now reached a level previously unknown in terrestrial history.

Caution is needed about such presentist and doom-mongering narratives, but there are popular and critical versions concerning the end-games for humanity in the Anthropocene, trapped in the 'everywhere war' and with the neo-liberal pickings of the 'late-late capitalism show' (with scant optimism about any socialist or any other reparative nirvana anywhere any time soon). Tracking across this pre-apocalyptic world, today's human bodies/selves do seem extremely insecure, pathetic little things, battered and buffeted by the winds of climate change, spiralling violence and plummeting markets. Even the pace of technological change seems irrelevant in this context, and for many the spectre of new technologies – new ways of engineering/preserving life; new forms of the post-human occasioned by successive revolutions in computing, robotics and genetics – only adds to the mounting insecurity about what it is to be human and to survive as humanity on this planet. To talk about insecure bodies/selves against these scenarios seems warranted, even if part of this talk is to refute or at least qualify the meta-narratives in play, and even if attention shifts away from the victims back to the perpetrators, the human agents of state, capital, terror, genocide, urbicide and nature/resource-abuse. Chances are, of course, that these perpetrators are themselves dramatically insecure or, rather, driven by fears about their own insecurity. Just possibly, though, some of this talk, maybe the quieter murmurings, can be a touch more optimistic, striving to convey the creative ways in which insecurities might be faced down, even from the heart of deeply insecure lives, *without* at the same time heightening the insecurities endured by others elsewhere. A little glib perhaps, but, just as – from the position of his so-comprehensively 'shattered' body/self – Zazetsky declared that 'I haven't given up hope. … I'm fighting to recover a life' (in Luria 1972, xxii), a focus on insecure bodies/selves need not always be about giving up hope for something different and better.

A conference session and the three papers (that follow)

It was my privilege to be nominated Chair of the 2012 Annual Conference (AC) of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG), in which capacity I proposed a conference theme of 'Security of geography/geography of security' and authored a short essay encompassing what this theme might tackle (Philo 2012). In conceiving both this essay and a conference session for AC2012, I wanted to trace the theme of (in)security across a diversity of terrains, baggily indexed as 'environment', 'state', 'society' and 'self', with a sense – notwithstanding certain objections to scale in recent literatures – of progressively down-scaling the argument from the planetary to what I termed 'the 'closest-in' human geography of security' (Philo 2012: 3). In characterising the latter, I drew upon the psychiatrist-psychoanalyst R.D. Laing's notion of 'ontological security' (Laing 1959: esp. 39), which specifically references those people who end up feeling *un*placed in the 'real world' (of everyday interactions) and who, consequently, often devise contorted strategies for manipulating social spaces/boundaries in a desperate quest to 'secure' themselves in this world. Laing's principal concern was people diagnosed as schizophrenic, individuals who may slip into delusional states wherein the security of their own bodily boundaries become compromised to the extent of feeling themselves to be 'leaking away' into the air or being shattered 'like glass' into a thousand shards (see McGeachan 2010; also Parr 1997). Laing did not

necessarily intend his ideas to apply to the likes of Zazetsky, but it is likely that they would have purchase – or be usefully set alongside parallel conceptual resources – when dealing with the geographies of other human groupings with different, unusual, impaired and 'disabling' physical and mental conditions. The concept of 'ontological security' has travelled into other literatures, moreover, so that it now becomes a familiar refrain when discussing how all manner of peoples, cultures and societies strive to attain a secure status when confronted with threats of many kinds (such as hinted previously). That said, my own intimation is that the concept does its best work when kept close to the immediacy of grounded bodies/selves, which is why its deployment in the three papers that follow – as a sensitising device in the first two, but then as a more substantive touchstone in the third – strikes me as so effective.

And this comment does now bring me to the three papers. One module within an overall session that I convened on '(In)secure geographies' at AC2012 tackled '(In)secure selves', and it was to my delight that this module showcased the three contributions which have now been converted into the papers following below. Extending her prior critique (Noxolo 2009) of how discourses/practices of 'development', 'migration' and 'security' coalesce in the biopolitical regulation of asylum-seekers and refugees, Patricia Noxolo (2014) brilliantly excavates the 'embodied securityscape' of bodies/selves 'waiting' to replace the insecurity of asylum-seeker status for the relative security of formal refugee. Through a reading of Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* (also Noxolo and Preziuso 2013), she tracks how the body of the 'unreliable' narrator, a Zimbabwean asylum-seeker in London, becomes imbued with the multiple insecurities of his tenuous positionality, increasingly prone to strange corporeal sensations, and how his sense of self similarly decays and fragments: an interior wastage synchronising with the spatial fractures of his exterior body-in-motion-and-hiding. Picking up on the subject-matter of the migrant body, Louise Waite, Gill Valentine and Hannah Lewis (2014) explore what they term the 'hyper-precarity' of asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK, peeling back different layers of bodily, psychological and other 'hurts' directed at the forced-labouring body which then initiate a collapse of these migrants' ontological security, progressively stripped of confidence in their own self-identity as they are ferried from one unpleasant, demeaning and even dangerous work-site to another (also Waite 2009; Lewis *et al* 2014). These authors also explore the 'hurts' that some members of the UK's majority population perceive as visited upon their persons and places by the migrants, revealing that profound senses of insecurity arise on *both* sides of the majority-migrant divide, and wondering if, just possibly, a new 'politics of compassion' could be fostered through explicit recognition of these *shared* insecurities. Finally, continuing her pioneering attempts to foster dialogue between geography and psychotherapy (eg. Bondi 1999, 2005, 2013), Liz Bondi (2014) brings us squarely to the ontological insecurities 'closest in' – pushing towards what she calls 'an emotional geography of ordinary insecurity' – by confronting her own anxieties, how they are triggered, become felt, embodied, corrosive of self and inhibiting of decision and action. Additionally, she accents the often unfathomable entangled geographies of home and work, of personal and professional, of exteriors and interiors, which for some may provoke ramifying insecurities that no amount of striving to produce 'certainty' can ever navigate. In sum, my own hope is that, taken together, these three papers can be heard as a substantial fresh voicing of possibilities for writing/'righting' vexed geographies of insecure bodies/selves, maybe in echo of Luria heeding the simultaneous calls of both love and justice.

Acknowledgements

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