

Psychogeography and Well-Being



The Manifestation of Well-Being Through Psychogeography

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Definition

A psychogeographical understanding offers a contemporary view that can be concerned with finding personal connections with place, an expression of political dissent, an expression of spirituality, or a documentation and consideration of a journey. It could also be an amalgamation of any of these to greater or lesser degrees. This understanding considers the historical significance of the flâneur, the dérive, and psychogeography, from the urban to the rural, and how it has and will have significant impact on self-efficacy, self-esteem, community, identity, landscape, and above all sustainability today and tomorrow.

Introduction

This paper could or perhaps should be viewed as a conversation about a way of doing – promoting walking as a performative narrative and its relation to well-being. It is difficult to state categorically what well-being is. It is such a matter of perspective; it is a necessarily subjective, cultural, social, and political condition (Dodge et al. 2012). One position then, and perhaps the one that this article takes, is to problematize it as a concept. To accept it as an ambiguity, as non-measurable, non-generalizable, and as something individuals alone can seek for themselves. That, of course, does not mean that in the troubling of its definition, social import, structures, frameworks, praxes, or simply action-based approaches that might lend themselves or support various guises of our understanding of it cannot be recognized.

Hence, the perspective this entry develops is that well-being should not be viewed as productive – nor should the ultimate benefits necessarily be to do with health – it should be viewed as a connection or process. This perspective, that is, well-being as connection or process, can be manifested through many practices: in the simplest of terms, this entry looks at one such practice, walking.

Walking, in this case, is somatic and far more than a pedestrian, corporeal self, housing a mind that is determining a behavioral product. It is a

means of deliberating, understanding, and making meaning. As Ingold (2010, p. 5136) suggests:

Though it may not exactly melt into air, the body certainly walks, breathes, feels, and knows in it. This is knowledge formed along paths of movement in the weather – world. . . Far from being subsidiary to the constitution of knowledge, this ground, and the ways we walk it lies at its very core.

In tracking walking as a well-being process, this entry looks first at some of the ancient connections of walking and learning. It then briefly shows how it has been a familiar topic through history, in the writings of scholars, thinkers, authors, and poets alike. This is by no means an exhaustive account but one. Nonetheless, it is hoped to provide some context through a potted history of some of the views on psychogeography. Following this section, the entry then focuses more on contemporary views on psychogeography, before considering how it was once the urban and perhaps increasingly now the rural which is connected with psychogeography. Finally, the entry will return to the *dérive* and will consider more directly connections with sustainability. Sustainability in this sense refers to giving value to silence as an indispensable element in one's pace-of-life for well-being. This definition of sustainability is concerned with promoting an organic mode of living. Crucially, the entry concludes with the paradox that these connections of psychogeography are imbued with and perhaps even rely upon tensions to exist.

A Potted History of Psychogeography and *Dériving*

Most often attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo, the term *solvitur ambulando* is also often attributed to Diogenes the Cynic, who when confronted with one of Zeno's paradoxes concerned with being still or walking away and its contestation to the reality of motion that that might present. Diogenes, it is said, when presented with the paradox, simply got up, walked away, and stated "it is solved by walking."

The concept of walking and learning being interconnected is a common one among many thinkers of ancient Greece. For example, Aristotle's school in the Athenian Lyceum

known as the *Peripatos* was named because of the way in which the members learnt. They did so by walking. The Greek *περιπατητικός* (*peripatêtikos*) transliterates as "wanderer," "of walking," or "given to walking about" (Furley 2003).

While psychogeography was recognized as a term in the 1950s, the idea, as has been discussed, has been around a great deal longer. It is also a root that has been largely uninterrupted. There are in literature, for example, numerous writers who recognize its importance; its multifold interconnectedness, writers like Blake or Poe, indeed many of the Romantics, and De Quincey span decades. The latter's autobiographical reflections upon the writing of his work, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1886), are particularly salient:

... sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphinx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen. I could almost have believed at times that I must be the first discoverer of some of this terræ incognitæ and doubted whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London. (De Quincey 1881, pp. 79–80)

An unintended synthesis with the later work of Debord (1956) can be seen in De Quincey's writing. They both describe psychogeography as an "act of privilege, whereby those with disposable time and income can afford to wander the streets and discover their secrets" (Ridgway 2015a). The political drive behind psychogeography became more apparent in the 1950s with the Situationists. The Situationist movement was staunchly against what they called "commodity fetishism" and invested in the anarchy of play as a mode that defied the capitalist system. One of these acts of play was psychogeography. Exercises typical of a situationist psychogeographer include using maps of different cities to navigate, cutting up maps and rearranging them, and the art of *dérive* or unplanned journeys (Ridgway 2015a).

MacFarlane traces this interconnectedness through a differing route altogether. He uses a linguistic route to, somewhat conversely to the Greek philosophers, demonstrate their synergy: “A beautiful etymology, that which joins our very, as it were, dull verb ‘to learn’, if you follow the root, in both senses of that word, back, all the way to the proto-Indo-European, you’ll find our verb ‘to learn’, comes from, has a root meaning of ‘to find, or follow a track’” (MacFarlane 2012b).

Taking this interconnectedness, we can then, it is proposed in this entry, come to an understanding of how through walking and learning provide metaphorical sustenance for our well-being. This concept is often rediscovered by individuals by talking with others, exemplified by Chatwin who “‘passionately believed that walking constituted the sovereign remedy for every mental travail’ learned it from Patrick Leigh Fermor and immediately wrote it down in his Moleskine notebook” (Cooper 2012). The process of talking and walking is therefore also a noteworthy phenomenon and a common practice for those who undertake *dérives* or work from the perspective of psychogeography.

Contemporary Understandings of Psychogeography and *Dériving*

Psychogeography has its origins in theories about the urban, with roots in modernism, where the *flâneur* wanders without intent around a man-made environment. The concept first originated with Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and achieved greater definition with the Situationists (Debord 1956) in the 1950s; for them the act of walking around a city led to an interpretive reading of it. The term for this was *dérive* and was a practice of the Dadaists, which was influenced by Surrealism, before being incorporated into the fuller philosophy of the Situationists. The ideologies of all three informed the practice, so playfulness, nonconformity, dissenting political action, and intuition were integral. The interaction with the urban environment was also an essential element; using the “city as a site of mystery and [seeking] to reveal the true nature that lies beneath the flux of the everyday” (Coverley 2010, p. 13). The background to this activity is comprised of

society, community, and language, i.e., all derivatives of human existence. It is argued that the observations made during the process enable a deeper understanding of the energies at work below the surface while taking a “vertical descent through its past” (Coverley 2010, p. 14) into the historical pasts that infuse the contemporary experience.

Psychogeography is concerned with questions of how the individual “reads” her/his environment, applying practices that have resonance with the surrealist movement, allowing the subconscious to rise to the surface through the separation from conscious intent, and inspiring verbal descriptions and explanations that could be in a variety of artistic media. The responses that emerge are not the consequence of accidental activity; however, arising from the initial intent, the artist/writer executes carefully made plans for interaction with a situation, a material, or an environment that leads to spontaneous inspiration and understandings. This is a technique of the modernist movement, which saw the arrival of psychotherapy and psychology as a way of understanding and working with mental processes and innovative, creative styles and movements.

This approach, too, can enable an understanding of the urban experience, where identity is defined by social context and the spatial experience is the interaction with a man-made city (the metropolis), which is the epitome of modernism. In response to the man-made matrix that is the landscape of New York/London/Paris, the individual locates herself/himself in the world. A traceur who negotiates that setting as an exponent of the discipline of parkour is a protagonist of the post-modern response, renegotiating her/his relationship with the urban landscape and asserting her/his own traces in the form of new pathways across and through the environment. This pursuit was started in the 1980s by David Belle with a group of friends in France and was intended as a form of contemplative physical activity that was also “an exercise of power, subverting urban locations as a new form of playground, making a statement that redefines the built environment” (El-Hage 2011).

Certainly, it has been designed in part as a socio-political practice to express resistance in built locations and to redefine the setting. It involves making a careful review of an area in order to determine a different way of crossing it using movement across unconventional levels and in the most aesthetic way possible. In echoes of psychogeography, there are considerations in relation to ways of using extant maps and mapping the environment differently (Bavinton 2007).

Similarly, Sinclair (2003) is interested in the rewriting of community, protesting through psychogeographic activity against the contemporary developments of enforced changes to community that are overwriting traditional forms, cf. *Ghost Milk* (Sinclair 2012). The landmarks of a city provide social coordinates, which are then incorporated into the interior terrain of individuals, the inner world is mapped, and language is an intrinsic element. As these structures create tensions to which individuals must find responses that create the inner narrative, the ontology gives an explanation, which enables stability for both the writer and the reader.

An essential factor of the discipline of psychogeography is the type of activity that generates the creative thought and subsequent output, i.e., walking. There is nothing new about this connection; historically, writers have a strong relationship with walking. It has long been comprehended as a spiritual activity, too, taking the walker to metaphysical dimensions of thought and understanding. Then again, it may be an act of resistance. It may even be the process of mining for material for a gothic novel. For all, it is a liminal experience between worlds, between aspects of self, and between cultural identities.

This particular discipline involves interrogation of a route or urban area while strolling along or through it. Some practitioners walk the length of a river, such as the Thames, from source to mouth, stopping at significant sites, and then write about the discoveries from the experience, as in *Thames: Sacred River* by Ackroyd (2008). There may also be significance in the choice of place(s) – for instance, whether it is a pilgrimage in/to an area regarded as sacred or at a site which is not popularly occupied and is overlooked, such as

wasteland, or that has historical resonances. Indeed, too, it has a specific term for the practitioner, i.e., a flâneur, which was used to describe Baudelaire, an early protagonist.

There is a discussion among psychogeography's protagonists about the type of walking that is required; for example, whether it should be done without intent or with a previously specified objective. Richardson (2015) is very clear that it is an urban practice that is undertaken in cities, as is Ridgway (2015b): "Put simply, psychogeography is the exploration of the psychological effects of an urban environment." Is it a "sensory walk" as suggested by Henshaw et al. (2009). This is where "the physical environments through which a walk passes can provide many layers of meaning influenced by social and cultural norms, memories, experiences, expectations and power relationships" (Richardson 2015, p. 196).

The intent of the walker is a noteworthy consideration. For some it is finding the connection with the histories of the identified site, for others it is an expression of political dissent, for some it is a mystical exposition, and for others it is an exploration of an undetermined journey and may involve "urban drift." Certainly, Gros (2015) describes the type of movement as a "form of strolling" with three prerequisites: "city, crowd and capitalism" (p. 175). Gros (2015) proposes that the man-made, built environment has become a landscape of its own, which can be traversed using the same perceptive sensitivities as if it were a natural geography. The relationship with the "crowd" is necessarily one of separation, "anonymity," (Gros 2015, p. 177) and thereby aloneness, while "capitalism" is the dominant ideology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and provides a structure to interact with and against.

An example of psychogeographic practice may be seen in the walk of the length of the route of the M25 that was made by Sinclair (2003) counter-clockwise and from which he wrote *London Orbital*, 2003. It was a political, subversive act against the Prime Minister of the time, "The opening of the M25 in October 1986 (Margaret Thatcher's dome moment) signalled the end of London and its liberties." To walk along a course

which is being dedicated to the passage of vehicles that traverse the land at speed and solely in order to convey the travelers within from point A to point B and for purposes that are predetermined by capitalist exponents reminds us of how walking was used as a form of protest. The first marches of the common people against an oppressive system took place in France in the eighteenth century and were an act of revolution against the aristocracy, leading to their eventual overthrowing and the installation of democracy. Since then, Paris has seen other political marches, as has London, as has Berlin, and as has Prague, and such acts of resistance are described by Solnit (2014) as “a psychogeography of insurrection in which life is lived in public and is about public issues” (p. 230). Sinclair’s (2003) intent in his walk of the route of the “London Orbital” is very much in tune with this style of thinking; he was attempting to counteract the effects of the capitalist system through his actions. Self (2012) perceives that the execution of a *dérive* by a proponent of psychogeography walking through an urban environment with a certain frame of mind is conveying a political statement, “The contemporary *flâneur* is by nature and inclination a democratising force who seeks equality of access, freedom of movement and the dissolution of corporate and state control” (Self 2012).

Somehow, as the practice of psychogeography has evolved, it seems that there are rules that have been devised that need to be followed in order to reach the state of mind that produces suitable insight/inspiration/creativity in response to the engagement with the predetermined environment. Sinclair (2003) described his journey as “A voyage into reverie, narcolepsy, murder (road-rage stabbing at Swanley interchange), drug deals, madness.” It seems that he is opining that there are dark forces operating along the M25 route, and in the act of walking he is coming into contact with them, recognizing what they are and relaying this in his writing. This may be considered prototypical psychogeographic practice (Self 2012).

Walking is an activity that is intrinsic to human existence and a regular form of travel that has provided access to other places on the basis of want or need. Unless there is a difficulty with the

use of 2 ft, one after the other in repetitive movements, this is the first pattern of travel for every human being. The rhythm and speed can be varied, but effectively it is a fundamental necessity for living. The actions arise from a conscious decision to undertake physical activity and resonate with the automatic procedures of the lungs and the heart; Solnit (2014, p. 5) suggests that it is aligned with our innate, instinctive selves. Indeed, for many, once the skill has been acquired, the protagonist becomes “largely oblivious to its operation” (Coverley 2010, p. 11), which lends itself to the development of other cerebral activity. For Gros (2015), the act of walking creates the opportunity to be different, think differently, and experience a freedom: “By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and history” (p. 6). It can help the individual to step outside the limitations of who they are in the context of contemporary community or society. This suggests that it is potentially a pursuit that can facilitate a transcendental experience, which may explain why there is such a strong and ancient history of pilgrimages along routes in landscapes that seem to generate certain states of mind.

Whether traversing the landscape or crossing an interior space, the effect of walking can be to bring into union a variety of processes and experience, a harmony as described by Solnit (2014), “a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord” (p. 5). Thus, however great or short the distance, the effect of the physical activity is to generate greater clarity in the cognitive process, for significance to be better understood, and for stories to be construed from the experiences. The benefits of walking to thinking and, by extension, to writing have been evident for centuries. Gros (2015) says of Nietzsche, “walking out of doors was as it were the *natural element* of his oeuvre, the invariable accompaniment to his writing” (p. 12).

Virginia Woolf found benefits from walking in both urban and rural environments. Jabr (2014) cites Woolf in his article for the *New Yorker* about “why walking helps us think,” “Woolf relished the

creative energy of London's streets, describing it in her diary as 'being on the highest crest of the biggest wave, right in the centre & swim of things.' But she also depended on her walks through England's South Downs to 'have space to spread my mind out in.' And, in her youth, she often travelled to Cornwall for the summer, where she loved to 'spend my afternoons in solitary trampling' through the countryside." Having stated previously that psychogeographic practice is essentially an urban one, it seems that there is no reason why one cannot find inspiration from interaction with both the built and natural landscapes and that the techniques can equally be applied in both. Thus, this might be considered a development in this field, just as it has come to be described as "mythogeographic" practice or "deep topography." If the original purpose of the *dérive* was related to interaction with the urban environment, interplay with the modern community, being in the "public space," and creating an individual response while being a part of the crowd, the effect of the psychogeographic approach in a rural area must be explored differently. If the former is about identity in the social context, the latter may be about disconnection from the modern community, finding self-identity in different sorts of human relationships and/or through the natural landscape. The coherent sense of self gained through city life is likely to be different from that gained through rural life – and yet each is equally valid and valuable. If meaning is gained through interaction with others, the question may be about what is gained by the individual through an interface with the countryside and what may be the resultant self-construction and creative responses. Wordsworth conceived of a broad range of possible interpretation from experience of the natural landscape, which might also be applicable to that of the urban:

Happy is he who lives to understand,
Not human nature only, but explores
All natures, – to the end that he may find
The law that governs each. (Wordsworth 1888)

Chatwin's (1998) work gives us an indication of what such engagement with the rural might

offer the field of psychogeography and also what connection between the more established, historical tradition of the *dérive* and how broadening of our understanding of it may be beneficial in terms of well-being, especially when it comes to community, identity, and sustainable modes of living. In *The Songlines*, Chatwin (1998) travels Australia by foot, and through a combined narrative of fiction and nonfiction, he outlines his focus of study, which in short is Aboriginal culture. His book explores and presents a culture, or perhaps more significantly the process of a culture, through which the expression of song manages to simultaneously expose an interconnectedness and strengthen the said interconnectedness between myth, songs as maps, and an Aboriginal man's personal experience narrative. Poole's more recent work on the lore of the landscape (Poole 2016b), singing about place and personal experience (Poole 2016a), and perambulography (Poole 2017) are all resonant with Chatwin's (1998) ideas and develop them further by considering their place as practices in an educational context. They each deal with place identification, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. For a more specific paper on these topics and their interrelatedness, Uzzel et al. (2002) work offers a more scientific approach to understand the important relationship between identity and sustainability behavior that is also suggestive for future research.

Other works of note that consider *flânerie rural* and/or *le dérive Campestre* by Cloke et al. can be found in one volume (Cloke et al. 1994). As cultural geographers though, their work does not specifically deal with psychogeography although it is significantly apparent in the texts. Rather their work considers the "rural" as a rapidly changing cultural construct.

The most contemporary of writers, who perhaps also spearheads this growing understanding of the importance of walking to our sense of self and well-being, is Robert MacFarlane, having produced a number of titles now and written important introductions to numerous other texts on psychogeography too (Coverley 2010; MacFarlane 2012a, 2015; MacFarlane et al. 2013; Shepherd 2008) that explore the

experience, which in his words “is best illuminated or illustrated by story, by life, by pattern, by example, rather than by analysis” (MacFarlane 2012b). MacFarlane’s corpus sees landscape and the walking of it as a resource for metaphor, a capacity even for metaphorizing, whether that be for reasons of coming to understand aspects of the sociocultural, political, or the self. What is clear in his writing is a concern for the reciprocity between people and their landscapes.

So, through numerous examples of current thinking and trends in psychogeography, it is possible to conceive of new directions for psychogeography in relation to well-being. Cloke et al. (1994) suggested that gender, sexuality, and ethnicity were being remarkably connected to understanding of the rural in their work. The growing literature seems to indicate a growing possibility of exploring personhood or the politics of identity. If synthesized with MacFarlane’s work which has more than a touch of the pilgrimage about it, it is possible to envisage how the walking of old pathways not only keeps the paths open through the footfall but that the paths, in turn, in some sense, might also open up the walker. As MacFarlane notes and calling upon the poet Edward Thomas, “Landscape gives us ways of figuring ourselves to ourselves; for Thomas that provision of metaphor was absolutely vital” (MacFarlane 2012b).

Potential Directions: On What Might Come to Be Expected in the Future

The *dérive*, as a concept, can be understood as an act of creating from the circumstances in a given situation, as “useless” knowledge and production or decolonization as a form for well-being. The latter point supports the notion that to feel well one could consider sustainability in our lives. Furthermore, that sustainability from this perspective has to do with breaking down the dictatorship of the self-aid coach world and positive thinking and the “let’s do it” attitude; the proposition here is that individuals do not have to do things, nor be positive, and that instead the attitude could be: “hey, let’s see what’s around, and let’s decrease our production.” So, with this idea, one can focus

on the *dérive* as a methodology, a theorized way of doing, and an attitude.

The concept of *dérive* then, as a process of uncertainty, becomes interesting. In the sense, everyone of us can apply different perspectives and approaches to well-being. Thus, the experience of walking in the sense that has been described here is a way to embody its metaphorical dimension. Experiencing the strong connections and relations that emerge while walking a territory brings us to perform time and space in the form of an ongoing conversation – with all the symbolic contents that every talk brings within (Gómez 2011). As Freire’s (1970) dialogical learning theories focused the transformative dimension of conversation in the power of words, the act of walking referred to here expands this conversation space to a symbolic realm enhanced by its poetics (Bachelard 2014). Thus, walking can be an aesthetic experience which sets the conditions for what Farrero (2014) understands as a meaningful formative and cultural practice, a time and space where the self, the others, and the place interact with each other allowing each one’s own voice to emerge. Either this formative practice is performed individually or in group, experiences lived by Deriva Mussol (Freixa-Marichalar 2018), a cultural platform that promotes walks and derives, show the potentialities of these practices as a place for introspection and silence that allows people to find some of their own inner wills – especially those related to cultural expression, which then leads to a healthy level of self-efficacy and an important sense of well-being. From a symbolic gaze, these practices seem to set a landscape similar to that promoted by Stern’s *closlieu* (2017) and Eno’s *scenius* (Albiez and Pattie 2016). Experiencing *dérive* is also experiencing how to embody a time and a space for conversation that slowly takes you in a weave of relations where to feel caressed and touched. The action of talking, also silently to ourselves (the thinking), and walking go by in tandem. Our bodies perform and therefore vividly experience this walk-talk relation. The pace of the *dérive* takes this conversation to an organic rhythm where silence is finally allowed to play its crucial role.

Concluding Thoughts

Every time one sets oneself to a walk, one prepares oneself for uncertainty. It develops an interest in the tradition of embodying the unexpected fate of casual encounters and exploring the possibilities to create out of every single situation our environment gifts us with. It is also a way to understand and appreciate a time and a space that at first sight might seem useless rather than productive and that Ordine (2017) notes is especially useful exactly because of this uselessness. In fact, Ordine's (2017) idea echoes what Flexner (1939) was already arguing almost a century ago; the crucial role that people "who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity" (Flexner 1939, p. 545) played in the history of the most significant social and technological innovations. "Curiosity, which may or may not eventuate in something useful, is probably the outstanding characteristic of modern thinking. It is not new. It goes back to Galileo, Bacon, and to Sir Isaac Newton, and it must be absolutely unhampered," as Flexner (1939, p. 545) continues.

As an educational philosopher and social activist, Greene (2000) many years later masterly communicated that curiosity and imagination are key factors in developing the creative thinking that every learning process requires. This transformative potential is here again enhanced as sometimes being a merely daily (and even sportive) routine such as "going for a walk." But when one opens the door, it is not only uncertainty and adventure that you are facing but also community. Flexner (1939) and Ordine (2017) also point out the role that useless activities played in greatly useful discoveries. Every valuable discovery was also possible because many others were happy satisfying their curiosity. A recognized valuable discovery, then, should also be recognized as an achievement for a whole community and not solely as an achievement of that last person who happened upon the final solution. This is how organic processes work; they exist because of every part of the process, and this includes those parts that are meant to do nothing, such as the aforementioned element of silence and its connection to sustainability. Doing nothing is a significant part of every

maturation pattern, and it should be appreciated as such. In this same sense, each one in the community is playing its role in the ecosystem.

The paradox of these ideas is clear. Cropley and Cropley (2008) recognize similar tensions within understandings and definitions of creativity too. There is no surprise in these similarities. Psychogeography's relation to well-being lies precisely in the tensions that it evokes, indeed invokes. It revels in an unresolvable paradox that allows the subject to both think through walking and walk through thinking; it serves as a bountiful resource of metaphor.

Cross-References

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