

Dialogues in Human Geography: Commentary, Accepted March 2013

A different kind of difference: Knowledge, politics and being Antipodean

Katharine McKinnon

Macquarie University, Australia

Abstract

This commentary explores the implications of identifying an Antipodean economic geography distinct from an apparent Anglo-American hegemony. I explore Wray et al's proposal that there is a different kind of 'edginess' to the work produced by those on the underside of the world. Using an example from fieldwork in the highlands of northern Thailand I suggest that identifying with perspectives of the so-called periphery, and striving to see those perspectives as, in fact, central is a crucial part of critical knowledge production.

Key Words

Antipodean geography, Metropole, identity, politics of knowledge production, looking for difference, Zomia, Thailand

Corresponding author

Katharine McKinnon

Department of Environment & Geography

Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia

Email: katharine.mckinnon@mq.edu.au

Inspired by Raewyn Connell's book *Southern Theory* (2007) Felicity Wray and Rae Dufty-Jones have brought together five antipodean geographers to explore the question "what, if anything, made the economic geographies produced from and within the Antipodes 'different' to those produced elsewhere?" (Wray et al, 2013). The contributors reflect on the components of their Southern Hemisphere experience that lead to scholarship and a scholarly community that is distinctive in some important ways. Phil O'Neil sums this up with the phrase "an edgy position can give critical attitude to Antipodean work", referring perhaps to a general sense that 'we' here on the underside of the world can not so easily assume that the dominant perspectives of Anglo-American geography are, in fact, true – since familiar examples close to home often contradict them.

Such 'edginess' may indeed be helpful, even essential, to more critical perspectives. And certainly the situatedness of geographers, both in terms of where in the world geographers are from as well as the kinds of intimate engagements geographers maintain with research sites globally, lend a critical viewpoint to the discipline of human geography as a whole. If one takes seriously the disciplinary imperative to engage with people in place, the understanding of the particularity of different places that emerges makes it very difficult to unthinkingly impose theories and perspectives produced in the Metropole (as Connell accuses sociologists of doing). As Robyn Dowling and I have noted elsewhere (Dowling and McKinnon, in press) this produces a human geography that is somewhat amorphous, with no grand theory, but that is also the very strength of the discipline as a whole.

That said, I find it rather puzzling why the claim to a distinctive Antipodean perspective should be an appropriate or useful thing to think about. Connell's concern is to remind sociologists that the Metropole is not the world and to put forward a call to democratise knowledge production. The call for the democratisation of knowledge is a useful reminder to keep doing what geographers have been doing for a while now, that is simply to take seriously the perspectives and experiences of the people we work with in all our different research sites around the world. What is problematic in Connell's work is its reliance on a binary of Metropole versus Other that, through the very language being used, positions everything metropole at the centre, and all the rest at the periphery. In their introduction to the piece Wray and Dufty-Jones are at pains to state that they do not seek to position Antipodean "knowledges as singular and homogenous, nor as a conscious set of 'other' economic geographies". To my view, however, this is an inevitable effect of phrasing the question in terms of what is different about Antipodean economic geography. Implicit is a positioning of Antipodes versus the rest. Language of the Antipodes as 'edgy' or peripheral', and anecdotes recounted about how hard it could be to get Australian or New Zealand case studies published in Northern Hemisphere journal, reinforces the sense that 'we' are somehow not at the centre of things. Perhaps this is indicative of how things have changed with a new generation of geographers, or perhaps my experience is unusual, but I have never felt peripheral within the discipline due to an Antipodean identity granted by a New Zealand birth certificate (despite having been born in Fiji), my location in Australia, or the location of my research sites in Thailand, Sydney, and the Pacific.

One of the key research sites for my research has been, in Connell's terms, the periphery of the periphery. Given the name 'Zomia' by Van Schendel (2002), the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia cross the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and China, and are home to a diversity of distinct peoples who are reliably cast as undesirable or problematic minorities within each of those nation-states. Learning about highland communities in the abstract I expected to feel 'out there' on the edges of everything when, in the year prior to starting my PhD research, I went to commence a year of volunteer work with an Akha NGO in northern Thailand. Living in an Akha village on and off over that year, it quickly became evident to me that I was not visiting the periphery. Instead it was I who had come from some far off place to be in the centre of the world. Here in the mountains different things were true and to fail to accept that would, for me, have taken some considerable effort.

One moment during my time there comes to mind to illustrate my point: It was early January, and I'd just returned to Thailand after a month in California. A few days after I got back to the village one of the elders died. Four days of ceremony followed. A tree was felled and carved into a coffin the shape of a boat. Every day and all through the night the village gathered at the elders home while the team of shamans sang and sang and sang to guide his soul through its necessary farewells to home and family, and finally calling on the spirits of the ancestors arrived to guide him back to their land. The women gathered around the stove and cooked and cooked. The children and I learned funeral songs. Nobody slept and nips of rice whisky kept everyone going. Finally on the evening of the fourth day it seemed a darkness gathered in the ceiling of the house. Everyone was crushed inside and the air became suddenly heavy. The shamans singing changed and moment later it was

like the weather had changed - everything and everyone was lighter, the heaviness had gone. Later I was told this was the moment when the ancestors arrived and gathered the soul of the deceased - and it seemed entirely the correct explanation. It was reasonable and it felt true.

Sitting in my office back in Australia it is very difficult to take seriously that this is the truth of what happened. Equally, it would be dishonest to write about that funeral in any way other than taking seriously both the experience I had and the sincerity of the explanation I was offered. Taking seriously the experiences and perspectives of people in 'far away' field sites is difficult and uncomfortable (as has long been acknowledged by an array of human geographers, including for example, Katz 1994, Rose 1997) especially when their knowledges do not accord with those that dominate in the University corridors back 'home'. Certainly many researchers working in northern Thailand have opted to treat their field sites as sources of raw data from the periphery that could feed into metropole theory making – the outcomes of which were sometimes presented as a more insightful interpretation of highland societies than highlanders themselves had access to. One researcher I worked with during my PhD was told by her respondents that in order to understand the village she was working in she just had to read the work of the Anthropology professor who had worked there in the 1970s because he understood their culture much better than they did. The history of knowledge-making in/about the highlands is, however, more ambiguously positioned than this anecdote implies. Much of the support provided to highland research in the 1960 and 70's was due to the fact that highlanders were identified as a potential source of communist rebellion. Northern Thailand thus became one of many sites simultaneously central and peripheral to Cold War struggles. Central because it was here that the ideological battle translated into armed rebellion, peripheral because the location was distant from both Washington and Moscow - the epicentre of Cold War politics. Sixty years on highlanders remain marginalized, international concerns have moved on, and these days it is highlanders themselves who are often driving the political agenda behind new research as they battle for recognition as indigenous peoples in Thailand. There is a very deliberate political strategy behind the push to be named as indigenous, part of which is the visibility and support that it can bring as a result of recognition by international accords (McKinnon 2012). It is a push that places highlanders as the centre of a global political struggle, by virtue of their status as people that have been placed always at the periphery of the Thai state.

The purpose of my detour into the highland of northern Thailand is to illustrate two points. One is simply to hark back to an area of debate familiar to geographers, and that is that once you take a careful look the comforting hierarchies around centre and periphery (global/local; dominant/marginal) they begin to fall apart. Hegemonies are never quite so dominant as they seem (Gibson-Graham 1996; McKinnon 2008), global forces always more local and particular than familiar language of scale can convey (Howitt 1998; Marston et al 2005). These long standing dialogues ought to make us hesitate before invoking an Antipodean peripherality against an Anglo-American hegemony.

The second point is to highlight that there is always a politics to identifying something as *this* or *that*. Certain things become enabled with a certain identifications: certain truths step into view while others become obscured, certain

perspectives take precedence (whether the scholar's or the villager's), certain actions become possible (whether the bombing of so-called 'rebels' or the chance for a communities rights to be properly acknowledged). A certain fixity comes into play as something is named. What, I wonder, is the politics behind fixing 'us' economic geographers of the antipodes as Antipodean Economic Geographers?

Perhaps, as Dombroski suggests in her commentary, the right question to ask is where could this newly named entity help us to go? I would add, and what politics does it enable us to enact? The features that make the contributions of antipodean geographers 'different' – edginess, and an awareness of 'whereness' – are not exclusive to Australia and New Zealand (as Aalbers commentary aptly points out). But they do seem features essential to critical research, essential to the democratization of knowledge that Connell is calling for, and essential to any commitment within the discipline to use knowledge-making as a way to act upon the world rather than simply accepting the legitimacy (or even existence) of hegemonic formations. Perhaps an 'Antipodean' identification is a way of capturing, valuing and placing at the centre the deliberate effort to look at the world from the 'underside'. This may be a different kind of 'difference' from that which Wray et al are concerned with: an edginess which is not dependent on where you are in the world. But it does accord with the lessons I learned in the highlands and with the desire to 'look for difference' that runs through the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective: looking for what feels strange, what does not fit, what seems edgy to the dominant explanations of the world. For me, the first step in any research ought to be a feeling of discomfort and strangeness rather than recognition, not to think 'I know what is going on here', but to try to feel my way back again to that moment when I could feel the spirits gathered in the ceiling of the house and know that the elders soul *really* was being sung home, and it was I who was strange and peripheral, a marginal player permitted brief entry to the centre of the world. If Connell's Metropole represents a bad habit of researchers taking for granted that they speak from the centre of the world, then perhaps we can adopt the term Antipodean to represent a habit of speaking from the 'underside' and of looking for difference.

References

- Connell R (2007) *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Dowling, R. and McKinnon, K. (in press) 'Identity', for Lee, R., Castree, N., Kitchin, R., Lawson, V., Paasi, A., Radcliffe, S., Withers, C.W.J., (eds) *Sage Handbook of Human Geography*, Sage Books
- Howitt R. (1998) Scale as relation: musical metaphors of geographical scale. *Area* 30: 49-58.
- Katz, C. (1994) "Playing the Field: Questions of Fieldwork in Geography." *Professional Geographer* 46(1): 67-72.
- Marston S. et al. (2005) 'Human geography without scale', *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, 30, pp. 416-32.
- McKinnon, K. (2008) "Taking post-development theory to the field: issues in development research, Northern Thailand", *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint*, 49 (3): 281-293

- McKinnon, K. (2012) "Indigeneity as political strategy in northern Thailand", in Venkateswar, S. (ed) *The Politics of Indigeneity: Dialogues and reflections on indigenous activism*, Zed Books: 145-171
- Rose, G (1997) Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics *Progress in Human Geography* 21(3): 305-320
- Van Schendel W. (2002) 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20: 647-668