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'Peripheral Re/Visions: Thoughts on the Geo-Politics of Place, Nation and Dis/Location'

Susan L. Robertson

Centre for Globalisation, Education and Societies
University of Bristol, UK

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Patriotism as Spectacle

This week as I write this, a staggering 4 billion viewers from around the globe tuned in to watch the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. It was a breathtaking spectacle. Fireworks exploded as screens flashed a quote from Confucius: "Friends have come from afar, how happy we are." However, as the competition hotted up, commentators shouted, medals were counted and chests puffed out with national pride, the dark side of excessive nationalism showed its ugly hand. Fingers pointed at the shopping and hopping strategies of sports coaches and athletes alike. Nationality and citizenship identities appear to have been traded with as much inventiveness and pace as stocks on a busy day on the London Stock Exchange.

More and more athletes, it seemed, were switching nationalities in order to compete at the Olympics. There were Brazilians representing Georgia, a Syrian representing Germany, a Kenyan representing the United States and an American representing Russia. One website asked its viewers: "Is it wrong to change your nationality in order to try and win an Olympic medal? What's more important - National allegiance or an Olympic medal?" Websites buzzed with an outpouring of opinion and indignation. Well-off countries with money to spend were accused of poaching sporting talent from poorer countries, whilst athletes were damned for distasteful displays of greed in the search for fame. True citizens, some bloggers offered, should not be allowed to forsake country; allegiance to country should be a lifetime decision. At this moment, origin of birth—it seemed—trumped all. It was our cultural DNA, defining who we were, how we thought and what we did – as nationals.

Now my intention in using this outpouring of concern over 'nationality swapping' at the Beijing Olympics is not to advance an argument around the politics of sport. Rather, I want to suggest that this event can be read as representing something more than that. In more and more spheres of our life, the unleashing of market liberalism has encouraged us to place a premium on competitive attitudes edged on, argues Bauman (2007: 26), by the insecurity of the present and the uncertainty about the future. In response, cities, nations and regions have focussed attention on producing and pampering their high-skilled labour and creative class (Florida, 2003), whilst a flurry of innovative government policies have been deployed aimed at recruiting the talent of its (highly skilled) nationals abroad for development 'back home' by strategically appealing to nationalism and patriotism.

Power: the 'Made Absent' Other of Diasporic Knowledges

At the outset I want to declare my own interest in this debate, not only as a keen observer of these policies internationally (see Robertson, 2007), but because I have found myself the target and subject of such policies emanating from Australia. In this latter case, I am officially represented as an 'Australian' (academic) who has left her 'home' in the periphery for the nerve centres in the metropoles of the globe. And, as patriotism is presumed to be a deeply inscribed virtue, then my knowledge, expertise and networks are assumed to be available for leveraging back into Australia. Will origin of birth and sticky patriotism trump yet again?

Now these debates are quite tricky, in large part because our identities, projects and politics are far more complex than governments' finessed human capital policies allow them to be. These hegemonic policies are, as Kenway and Fahey (2006) put it, deeply 'culture blind'. All of the complexities that arise from shifting identifications and identities as a result of dis/locations, are erased. At the same time, our own ambivalences around place and nation are tempered by deeper fears about charges of 'traitor'. Like Camus' Outsider, not valorising place and nation as a central pillar in our identity results in being viewed with suspicion; as pathological; an unfortunate display of 'cultural autism'.

However, these hegemonic policies are also 'politically blind' in that they fail to take account of the movement of knowledge itself – its politics and ethics. It does matter what and whose (both

diasporic and metropolitan) knowledges are being mobilised, moved and re/inserted into prior and new locations. Yet, see how easy it is for the discourses of patriotism and nationalism to make absent—as if by magic—the umbilical link between knowledge and power. ‘Knowledge’ is left to parade on the global dance floor—with its ‘made absent’ other (Santos, 2004: 12), ‘power’, rendered invisible by the promise of contribution to home communities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the World Bank’s Knowledge for Development Program—the Diasporas of Higher Skilled and Migration of Talent initiative. Sensitive to concerns over the affects on developing countries of brain mobility, the Bank has promoted the use of particular kinds of diasporic networks—such as GlobalChile (Chile), Red Caldas (Colombia), Redde Talentos (Mexico) and KEA-NZ (New Zealand)—on the basis that the knowledge of these networks of diasporic entrepreneurs can be leveraged back into their ‘home’ countries, in turn enabling these countries to enter the global knowledge economy. Now in this framing the diasporic entrepreneur is imagined to be talented, highly motivated, has access to global/local knowledges and financial resources, and is now in a position to make a contribution to their home economies (see Kuznetsov, 2006).

But what kind of ‘knowledge’ is this? For the Bank, these diasporic entrepreneurs are global elites: they have scientific and technological knowledges; they know how to take risks (albeit with other people’s money); they have high levels of intrinsic motivation, and are involved in global networks that give them access to venture capital. These diasporic entrepreneurs are also assumed to have reached a stage in their life when economic interests have now been replaced by more altruistic, ‘nationalistic’ sentiments and interests. They are therefore well placed to broker economic projects because of their assumed knowledge of local culture and their links to global capital and markets. Far from merely being a benign agent for moving knowledge from the centre to a peripheral local economy, these elites are part of the transnational capitalist class well placed to act as nodes and conduits for circulating and embedding a new global order.

Now clearly not all diasporic elites act in this way. Yet, nor do I want to encourage the more prevalent view in contemporary mobility discourses—that all knowledges produced in the metropoles and exported to the periphery, including those produced by the diasporic elites, are economically useful, socially uplifting, and politically benign. Dezelay and Garth’s insightful book, *The Internationalization of Palace Wars* (2002), on the export of good governance and the rule of law to Latin American countries via the networks of (local and diasporic) experts established between the metropole and the peripheries, shows how these strategies were also embedded in international and national fields of power. Brazilians, for example, who gained access to US legal technologies, US credentials and US contacts, mediated by Brazilians who also stayed in the US, were able to turn these US-based assets into impressive careers; as brokers between their home countries and multinational business investors. Similarly, the core of Chile’s local lawyers had spent time in the legal powerhouses of the metropoles, making them well disposed to a particular set of knowledges around law, good governance and development that were then being leveraged into Chile by the World Bank and US capital.

Knowledges are, and will always be, geopolitical. As the Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell (2007: vii) argues, the global metropoles—and the locations of these diasporic elites—have been highly successful at “...exporting a picture of the world as seen from the rich capital exporting countries of Europe and North America”. Connell uses the idea of ‘northern theory’ to argue that modern social science has embedded the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of society, while presenting itself as universal knowledge. And while Connell is not pointing a finger at diasporic elites, as necessarily directly complicit in this project, she does argue that while that intellectual relationship has dramatically changed over the past century, the social sciences in (or about) Australia have never generated a distinctive point of view. The direct consequence of the geopolitical assumptions of ‘northern theory’ for early Australian sociology, for example, is that it led to grand assumptions (as in the ‘primitivism’ of the Aboriginals which was presumed illustrative of extreme degradation) and grand erasures. Dependent upon metropolitan concepts and methods, Australian sociology has continued to reproduce the hegemony of the knowledges

of the hegemonic ‘north’ rather than draw insight from, and let flourish, those marginalised, made absent, ‘southern’ subaltern knowledges.

Peripheral Re/Visions

At this point a crucial set of questions now present themselves. Is it possible for diasporic elites to use their peripheral vision, and their experience of dis/location of place and nation, to think through and articulate a strategy for leveraging counter-hegemonic knowledges in the periphery or at the margins?

One possible line of thinking that might help take this forward is advanced by the theorist Ulrich Beck (2002), around what he calls a cosmopolitan sociology. Beck’s project is to expose the mono-logic imagination of methodological nationalism inherent in all social sciences, though as we can see from my arguments above, not all nations are equally powerful in being able to reproduce their own ‘national’ frameworks and assumptions. For Beck, cosmopolitanism as a perspective is dependent upon a dialogic imagination – one that corresponds to the rival ways of life in the individual experience (2002: 18). This is a clear challenge to the universalism of modernity – or northern theory. Could cosmopolitanism be a methodology for southern theory?

For writers like Argentinian Walter Mignolo (2000; 2002), the problem with Beck’s project is that the idea of a ‘cosmo-polis’ continues to be stained by the hidden agenda of modernity—coloniality and racism. Thus, while on the one hand cosmo-polis implies the possibility and capability of all people living together, on the other hand the racial underpinnings and Euro-centric bias of cosmopolitan thinking, running all the way from Kant, is that not all races or nations were regarded as fully human and therefore should not be treated as qualifying for equal rights. From the initial pagans, infidels and barbarians, to the foreigners at the edge of the European nations, and the later communists during the Cold War, all depended on the identification of frontiers and exteriority. That is, there was a racial component in the making of the frontier as colonial difference, and an ideological component in the remaking of imperial difference. Once cosmopolitanism’s historically deep racial politics are exposed, it can no longer be articulated from one point of view; within a single logic; as this is the mono-logic discourse of Euro-centrism (Santos, 2004).

So, how might a diasporic elite, or for that matter any dislocated individual or group, use their very dislocation to think about, and think into, peripheral spaces from the metropole in ways that avoid the current hegemony of talent wars or the baggage of past cosmopolitanism, and reveal, instead, the geopolitics of knowledges? How might our distant past places of location, and the inevitable dislocations that come with new places, re/shape the way we think about and contribute to, the worlds where we are, and the worlds through which we have travelled? Is it possible to develop an ethic of place that is not reducible to nationalism, not susceptible to patriotism, not romanced as undivided global or local community, and not leveraged as ‘talent’?

For Mignolo (2000) the ‘dust’ and the ‘noise’ of past locations accrete, and therefore shape our ability to see and hear the margins and other spaces that make up the non-metropole. This is clearly a first step. However I would argue that we are equally attentive to which elements of ‘noise’ and what particles of ‘dust’ are registered in our accreted experiences. From there we must examine the frameworks and ways of seeing on which we filter the dust and noise of place and experience in or out. How do we recover the dust that languished at the edge of our peripheral vision, and bring it in, to the centre of our gaze? To revision? How might I bring my experience of living in a small mining town in the 1950s and 60s in Western Australia, and my experience of a deeply entrenched patriarchy and the dehumanising racial injustices meted out to the indigenous Aboriginals (they were required to live outside of the three mile boundary that circled the town and needed to apply for a pass to enter or pass through the town) to how I think about knowledge and power? Can we reach back into the past and into the materiality of place and, drawing on ‘dislocation’ as epistemology, reveal the frontiers that produced, or made absent,

difference? And, in revealing this to ourselves, can we use this knowledge to shape counter-hegemonic re/visions of the world. This, it seems, is a worthy project for those 'Australians' who find themselves in the global metropoles - called upon to contribute to the society where they once lived.

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