

Antipodean Analysis of HE Perspectives: Notes in the Margins

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Questions...

The questions that I have been asked to grapple with today regarding the three presentations (Marginson, Carter, Boud) making up this panel: “Is Antipodean research distinct from that carried out in other Anglophone contexts?”; and “Do Antipodean researchers bring to their work – culturally and geographically influenced perspectives that elude or challenge their UK-based counterparts?” These questions are clearly huge ones, in the sense that they ask us to think through, not only whether it is possible to identify a distinctive Antipodean knowledge and perspective, but whether this kind of knowledge and ways of looking at the world sets them apart from their UK-based (or other global) colleagues. Some reframing of these big questions might help us circle around, and circle in upon, what might form the basis of an adequate response. For instance, we might ask: “Is the intellectual formation of Antipodean researchers conditioned by the history, geography and cultural politics of the Antipodes?” And, if so: “How is this materialised in academic work in the social sciences, and in areas of knowledge creation, such as higher education?” Or, to put it another way: “In what ways is ‘locatedness’ manifested to produce a particular approach to social science research on higher education?” My attempt at answering these questions should be viewed as ‘notes in the margin’, with the view to developing through an ongoing conversation.

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A first response, of course, is that in this case, the Antipodes is referring to Australia *and* New Zealand, and though they might be geographically ‘in the region’, their histories – culturally, economically, and politically - are very different from one another. Having lived and taught in both countries, that difference is lived out through a series of contrasting prisms: their geographies, their histories with regard to the indigenous populations, the composition of migrant flows, the basis of economic development, their different political systems, and so on. All of these, of course, mean that it is not sufficient to be co-located in the region (Australasia/Oceania), or even to have an historic link to Great Britain to colour them Antipodean, and therefore the same. They simply are not. A second relates to who might count as an Australian or New Zealander, and does nationality make a difference? Does Boud’s earlier biography of being English matter, or, is it erased in favour of a new perspective – that of being an Australian and if so, what does this newer perspective look

like in contrast to the older UK one? Or, what of Carter's Pakeha status, as all non-indigenous are called in New Zealand? What difference does this make to her knowledge creation, and what might this mean for an Antipodean perspective. My own view is that were we to travel down this path (essentialism/nationalism/indigeneity), it would take us in the wrong direction. Essentialist claims might be politically expedient and necessary at times, but is it good social science? No, I don't think so. However that is not to say that locatedness does not matter. Of course it does, and it matters in ways that shape who we are, what we see around us, and how we develop accounts of these things. References to the Antipodes must therefore go beyond geographic essentialist understandings to thinking about what metaphors about the margins and the periphery tell us about knowledges, knowledge creation, and knowledge flows.

.....in the margins

We can argue that reference to 'the Antipodes' signals Australia's and New Zealand's 'periphery' status in regard to the metropoles of trade, finance, ideas, culture, politics and power. For more than two centuries, London and Paris, Washington and New York, and so on have featured large in the Australian mentality. And, as we will see, these things matter for where, and how, knowledges are created, circulated and consumed.

Knowledges are, and always will be, geopolitical. And as the noted Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell (2007), argues - the global metropoles (home to the many well-cited intellectuals, such as Foucault, Bourdieu) have been highly successful at exporting a picture of the world as seen from the rich exporting capitals of Europe and North America. Connell uses the idea of 'northern theory' to argue that historically, modern social science has embedded the viewpoints, perspectives, and problems, of northern western metropoles, whilst presenting itself as *universal knowledge*. Connell (2007: 206-7) directly challenges the tendency to abstract and universalise knowledge and in doing so, makes a useful distinction between *abstracting->universalising* as opposed to *abstracting->generalising*. *Abstracting-> universalising* tends to escape specific settings, yet of course like all knowledges, they have been produced in locations, by disciplines, paradigms, and world views, which continue to mark that knowledge in powerful but undeclared ways. *Abstracting->generalising*, on the other hand, is highly attentive to the specific social contexts in which generalisations grow, and the contexts in which they are made. Recently Brenner et al (2010) have referred to the contexts in which knowledge is made as the 'context of contexts'. In other words, in identifying the 'context of contexts', we are able to see, appreciate, and take into account, the wider socio-cultural and geo-political bases for the creation of knowledges, the generalisations that are generated, and how this might speak to, or not, new social and political contexts and relations.

In proposing this, Connell (2007: 206) is directing us to an approach to theory which begins with the ground on which she argues the theorist's boots are planted. Playfully suggesting a different take on 'grounded theory', Connell is asking us to begin with what is around us.

From here situated data criticises theory, and theory criticises data. She goes on: “In this continuous argument, one tries to arrive at a configuration of knowledge that reveals the dynamics of a given moment of history. All such attempts produce generalisations, but only the weak ones are universals” (Connell, 2007: 207). This suggests an argument against abstract universal theories in favour of what Connell calls ‘dirty theory’; that is theorising that is mixed up with specific situations. “The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but with new data at hand, to clarify; not to classify from outside, but using theory to illuminate a situation in its concreteness” (Connell, 2007).

The ‘situatedness’ the social science researcher, and the located nature of data and their generalisations as theory, needs to be made visible in our practices of knowledge production. For Mignola (2000) this is to take account of the ‘noise’ and ‘dust’ of accreted past locations and experiences in our perspectives and accounts of the world. But, how might we methodologically attend to the noise and the dust, and to come to a deeper understanding of the specificities of time and space, to the interconnected nature of our lives and worlds, and what this means for our role as researchers?

Australian philosopher of education, Fasal Rizvi (2006), offers a way forward with what he calls those ‘epistemic virtues’ that enable an intellectual to act as a critical cosmopolitan. And it is these virtue, I will suggest, that are central to the social scientist engaged in ‘dirty theory’. Not only does s/he have their boots on the ground, but they are acutely aware of the plurality of knowledges available, the importance of being able to reflect upon multiple and diverse knowledge/power relations, to have the imagination to think differently about future worlds and worlding, and to think with, and outside, the boundaries that are inevitably created when claims to expertise are leveraged. These epistemic virtues are relationality, reflexivity, imagination and criticality (Rizvi, 2006). By *relationality*, Rizvi means viewing others as formed out of, or in relation, to us. In other words, each of our cultures are uniquely historically formed, yet are also interconnected. By *reflexivity*, he means being able to see the cultural traditions that form us as located selves. *Imagination* refers to the variety of ways we make our futures, and therefore our present and past, and with that, our relationships to each other. Finally, *criticality* means moving beyond parochial disciplinary boundaries and their narrow cultural assumptions, to think about the ways in which communities (in this case higher education) around the world differently experience the world. In short it is an ethic and attitude toward ourselves, and others. It views research itself as a learning process that is, indeed must be, acutely aware of the ground in which it walks.

If we take the Antipodes as a geographic metaphor for the ‘other, the periphery, or the non-metropole, then the question before us is whether, and in what ways, and indeed with what outcomes for knowledge, each of the three papers share a perspective (as I have defined it above) that might be called Antipodean?

Take 3 Antipodean papers...challenging metropolitan knowledge...

In their very different, and indeed unique, ways all three papers reflect upon the geopolitics of knowledge, and are suggestive of new ways for reading the world. For Marginson, in the *Rise and Rise of Higher Education in East Asia*, we need to be more aware of the societal paradigm that has shaped the demand for higher education in the region. This 'post Confucian' societal paradigm has a very different view on the value of education and its role in producing the good person. Reading East Asia through the lens of the metropole will simply lead to huge gaps in our understanding of the expansion of higher education in China and the rest of East Asia. Susan Carter, in her paper on generic doctorates, asks us to think about what might be the basis of the genre – 'doctoral thesis' - and from there, the different ways in which the situatedness of the New Zealand academic and academy, particularly with regard to the indigenous Maori's oral culture, might offer new challenges and new possibilities for knowledge creation and knowing. Finally, David Boud, in asking us to think of something as ubiquitous yet profoundly important as feedback between the student and the lecturer, points to the deep structuring metaphor from industrial era; of 'feedback loops'. This metaphor is particularly powerful for staying the course of a practice that typically leads to unsatisfactory ongoing transformation in the learner. By problematizing this, and exploring the basis for a different kind of practice, Boud is demonstrating the importance of criticality, reflexivity and imagination. All three papers seek to avoid an essentialising understanding of the knowledges they are producing. So in answering the question about whether the Antipodes signals a particular perspective on the world, my answer is yes, but that does not confine it to either New Zealand or Australia. Rather, we need to view the Antipodes as a metaphor for the periphery, and what being on the periphery can, and does mean. It means an asymmetrical relationship to knowledges created by the metropole, and the easy seduction of frictionless universal knowledges that flow as if they have no point of creation. It also means drawing upon the idea of the antipodes as metaphor for the periphery and how an awareness of this might help open up to more critical, reflexive, relational and imaginative approaches to knowledge creation.

References

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