

Always engaging with others: assembling an Antipodean, hybrid economic geography collective

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Abstract:

Although sometimes thought of as peripheral to the ‘centres’ of economic geography in the Anglo-American ‘North’, Australian and New Zealand geographers have already made important contributions to global economic geography. In this commentary of Wray *et al*’s (2013) piece, I interpret their Antipodean economic geography project as a performative intervention that works to queer economic geography. I extend their project through asking what an Antipodean economic geography might become, and how we might extend its usefulness in this era of anthropogenic climate change.

Keywords:

Assemblages, Anglo-American geography, Australia, feminist economic geography, hybrid research collectives, New Zealand.

When I teach the economic geography module in my first year geography course at Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia), I begin with a slide titled ‘Famous Dead Guys’. These are four, white, male, ‘northern’ scholars who are best known to my students: Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman. By the end of the lecture, I have also introduced them to the groundbreaking work of a few important economists and geographers that do not normally appear in their ‘Northern’ textbook: New Zealander Marilyn Waring and at-least-half Australian J.K. Gibson-Graham. As I write, it is near to the start of my teaching year, and reading ‘Neither here nor there or always here and there?’ prompts the thought that although we may be light on Antipodean ‘famous dead guys’, we

are certainly not lacking in ‘real live’ active and thoughtful economic geographers who engage with others in and beyond the academy.

Although I am a ninth generation *Pakeha* New Zealander living in Australia, and researching in both these places in addition to western China, it had not previously occurred to me to filter our understanding of economic geography through the concept ‘Antipodean’. For a long time, my training in development studies had accustomed me to thinking of researchers in the ‘Antipodes’ as part of the ‘global north’. As noted in Wray et al., Raewyn Connell’s (2007) book *Southern Theory* makes the important – if not entirely original – point that research based in the ‘metropole’ of Europe and America is often considered global, theoretical, and even universal, and research elsewhere seen as ‘case studies’ or similar. I had previously applied similar arguments to my project of privileging the voices of non-academic ethnic minority and marginalised women in China, considering them as *global* knowledge-makers and even theorists (Dombroski 2011, Dombroski 2012), rather than mere ‘data’. But even here it seems I was unconsciously considering myself as part of the global ‘metropole’, as an academic based in a high-income ‘developed’ nation. Wray and Dufty-Jones have used Connoll’s work as a springboard calling us to a different sort of project – one which challenges the whole problematic division of metropole and periphery. Positioning themselves (and those of us enrolled in their project) as neither ‘southern’ nor ‘northern’, neither ‘peripheral’ nor ‘metropolitan’, they have pushed us to consider the contributions ‘Antipodean’ economic geographies have *already* made to economic geography in ‘the North’.

Another way of framing their project would be to say they are ‘queering’ Anglo-American economic geographies. Just as J.K. Gibson-Graham showed the diversity of economic practices already present in the ‘capitalist’ economy (1996, 2006), Wray et al. show how the ‘monolith’ of the Anglo-American metropole is in fact *already* fractured, diverse and shot through with a bright streak of ‘Antipodean’ brilliance! Chris Gibson further queers the metropole in his reflections on his stay at Clark University (considered a ‘centre’ for economic geography), noting that ‘those perceived to be at the core of Anglo-American hegemony are not at all uninterested in the outside world, or smug with centrality’ (pg 13). Highlighting fractures and fissures in Anglo-American economic geography is one approach to queering its apparent hegemony, and this approach is woven subtly through the article where northern scholars are not lumped into ‘a single homogenous category’ (pg XX), but

accorded complexity and hybridity. One way to further this project of queering the Anglo-American metropole would be to highlight all the different non-Anglo-American contributions to the subdiscipline (a sort of diverse economy of economic geography), some of whom were mentioned in the concluding remarks of Wray et al. The approach Wray et al. have taken is an alternative route of queering the monolith. Drawing on a sense of Antipodean otherness and difference, they trace some particular strands threaded through the cloth of economic geography. These strands, although already tightly woven in a complicated global garment, have been pulled and tugged a little, pointed out, and named as 'Antipodean'.

Assembling an Interconnected Antipodean Economic Geography

Wray et al. begin to assemble an interconnected Antipodean economic geography through first assembling a number of 'Antipodean' economic geographers, inviting them to reflect on their sense of origins and the concept of Antipodean economic geography. The resulting piece is a 'mess and mesh' of complex interconnections across diversity and difference and place. Each of the contributors has engaged with all kinds of others in their 'Antipodean' economic geographies: Antipodean, Northern, Southern and disciplinary others. Wendy Larner mentions many Antipodean individuals who personally encouraged her to be brave in her work. Chris Gibson mentions the pizza, beer, and conversations at Clark that were mutual exchanges of differing realities. Andrew Beer engages with others in the past, while also considering how Antipodean researchers might engage with others in Asia and each other. Richard LeHeron mentions co-presented keynotes with non-academics. Philip O'Neill engages with others writing about states, aware of the way in which his 'edgy position' pushes him to routinely consider epistemological questions.

These multiple and complex interconnections and engagements show that there is no need for us to re-perform and thus re-inscribe a binary in which it has already been determined who holds power and who does not. Through their intervention – a symposium, an article, many discussions, the term 'Antipodean Economic Geography' – Wray and Dufty-Jones have highlighted the potential responsiveness and reconfigurability of power globally. Wray et al. have shown some of the potential of an 'edgy' position that is both 'here' and 'there'. Rather than considering 'Antipodean Economic Geography' as a description of something that 'is' (that must be described, delineated, somehow proven to be correct), why not consider it as a springboard from which we might collectively think through what (an antipodean) economic geography might *become*?

If we take this approach, we do not have to read this article as ‘replacing’ one problematic economic geography with another problematic Antipodean version (which so obviously excludes indigenous perspectivesⁱ). A more generous interpretation would be to say that through the symposium, this paper, our responses, and the various conversations that have been started in response to these, Wray and Dufty-Jones have *called into being* an Antipodean economic geography. Wray et al. have tentatively gathered an ‘assemblage’ of the experiences and commitments of geographers, specific places of origin and research, a collection of articles and research projects, concerns and theories. They have named this admittedly slippery and emerging thing ‘Antipodean Economic Geography’. Rather than being an actual fixed and definite thing, I see this assemblage as more of a tool fashioned from the materials at hand, a tool which is being used to fracture/queer/situate the equally slippery (Anglo-American) Economic Geography. Wray et al. have noted the tensions in re-performing problematic divisions such as north/south, metropole/periphery, West and the rest, and of course Antipodean – yet they have persisted with the concept in order to draw our attention to a matter of concern they see as potentially *useful*.ⁱⁱ

How might we use this concept to further economic geography? In light of this piece, we might look for ways of producing geographic knowledge (in the Antipodes and our other places of work) that do not decide beforehand where the power lies. In the spirit of Connell's call for the development of a social science that serves democratic ends' (2007: 230) via the principles of mutual learning, respect, and recognition, an Antipodean economic geography might use its edgy position to highlight already democratising modes of research, those that extend knowledge-making and theory-making potential to those outside the global north – and also outside the academy and even beyond the human world. In the symposium session run by the Community Economies Collectiveⁱⁱⁱ (Dombroski et al. 2011), we attempted to share and demonstrate strategies for seeing and cultivating more diverse economic geographies, where possibility lies latent in multiple places and spaces. We noted that these possibilities often take the form of chance encounters and interpersonal relationships across difference, but are nonetheless important in our research practice. One of the concepts we used to help us see and take note of the role these relationships and encounters play in our research is that of hybrid research collectives.

Engaging with Others via Hybrid Research Collectives

Gibson-Graham and Roelvink employ the concept of hybrid research collectives to think about how we (as a collective of researchers including lay, human and non-human) might begin to enact an economic ethics for the Anthropocene (2009). ‘Hybrid collective’, as first used by Callon and Rabearisoa (2003), is a way of referring to a collective of researchers that includes non-academics and even the technologies and institutional frameworks that allow them to collaborate to produce new knowledge. Australian economic geographer Gerda Roelvink further refined the concept in her work, adding ‘research’ to the term to help focus attention on the directive agency of the collective particularly in research and knowledge-making (2008, 2010). The idea has been taken up by a number of Antipodean researchers in recent times (Cameron et al. 2011, Cameron et al. 2012, Cave et al. 2012, Dombroski 2012), in a variety of places and topics (Australian farms and community gardens, parent-child-community hygiene knowledges, lay researchers in the Phillipines, and most recently in community-university collaborations in Hamilton, New Zealand).

For our purpose here, a hybrid research collective is a useful way of thinking about how Wray et al. have engaged with others within and beyond the Antipodes to produce new knowledge in economic geography. But more than this – it allows us to think about how all kinds of ‘others’ have contributed to our knowledge-making, and provides a framework for better acknowledging and drawing on these others. One might say, looking at Wendy Larner’s contribution, that ice-skates, frozen lakes, Gloria’s café, and flat white coffees have contributed to the development of post-structural political economy! In my work, the concept of hybrid research collectives has helped me better think through how my knowledge-making as a geographer draws on the theory-making and research of those who would traditionally be seen as my ‘participants’. In Dombroski (2012), I gather a hybrid research collective of babies, parents in two continents, and the technologies that connect us (computers, mobile phones, airplanes, and their infrastructure) to rethink the concept of ‘keeping hygiene’ in the work of social reproduction. Without my direction, a Yahoo! connected group of 500 parents (and their children) in Australia and New Zealand were already conducting research into household hygiene, the marketing of hygiene products, the environmental effects of such hygiene products, and alternative methods of keeping hygiene. Drawing on the differing expertise of its members (including me, eventually), publically available research, collective experiments and analysis of results, this fluid and shifting hybrid research collective is effectively doing Antipodean economic geographies of hygiene.

So what then, might an Antipodean hybrid (economic geography) research collective become? Recognising the long-distance, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, inter-species, and extra-university linkages that make up our work, we might work together with non-academic others to continue to ‘queer’ economic geography. We might work at shifting it away from the hallowed domains of famous Northern dead guys and giving it new life in a new era, where engaging with all kinds of others to rethink the economy and our ‘high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies’ (Plumwood 2007:1) is of crucial importance.

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ⁱ For example Maori author Maria Bargh's important work on Maori, space, and neo-liberalism (Bargh and Otter 2009). The work of Jon Altman (2003, 2004, 2007) could be considered economic geography, although he identifies as a 'economic anthropologist'. See also the discussion of claim settlements in Coombes et al. (2012) and of course, Evelyn Stokes work on Maori economic geographies (1987), already mentioned by Wendy Larnar. Indigenous geographies tend to get labelled as such even when they deal with matters economic geography. Similarly, economic geographies in 'less-developed' regions are often considered as 'development geography', whether or not they are about intentional economic development or not. An inclusive Antipodean economic geography would seek out and embrace these contributions, especially those of indigenous authors.

ⁱⁱ In recent times, Bruno Latour has called us to gather our research more around 'matters of concern' than 'matters of fact', stating that 'the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles' (2004: 246).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Community Economies Collective is an ongoing collaboration between academic and community researchers and activists in Australia, North America, Europe and South East Asia. The goal of the Collective is to theorize, discuss, represent and ultimately enact new visions of economy. The project grew out of J.K. Gibson-Graham's feminist critique of political economy that focused upon the limiting effects of representing economies as dominantly capitalist. See www.communityeconomies.org.