**POSTCOLONIALISING GEOGRAPHY: TACTICS AND PITFALLS**

Jenny Robinson  
Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, UK

---

**ABSTRACT**

The moves within postcolonial theory to “provincialise Europe” encourage an acknowledgement of the parochial nature of much of what still passes for universal theory in the western academy. Within geography, postcolonialism has generated a strong interest in colonial histories and contemporary postcolonial politics, but this has not displaced the dominant parochial forms of theorising in the discipline. The paper argues for a more cosmopolitan theoretical project within geography, one whose routes through a range of intellectual traditions and contexts might encourage a broader scope to conversations about space and nature, and produce more lively and creative insights into some of the urgent political issues facing the world today. A geography whose intellectual vision is limited to the concerns and perspectives of the richest countries in the world has little hope of effectively participating in the debates that will matter in the twenty-first century. Within the frame of this long-term intellectual project, this paper will suggest some initial practical steps which researchers, writers, teachers and students in geography might take to start to decentre the predominant Euro-Americanism of the discipline. The specific sources of inspiration for this argument are drawn from comparative urbanism and Southern African geography.

*Keywords*: postcolonial, cosmopolitan, theorising space, cities, geography

---

**INTRODUCTION**

Postcolonialism has had a substantial impact within geography, where it has mostly been pursued within the fields of historical geography and cultural politics. The pathbreaking critiques of writers like Said (1978; 1993), Spivak (1985), Bhabha (1993) and many others have been explored by geographers interested in colonial histories and by those broadly concerned with the persistence of colonialism in the present. A revisionist politics of the colonial moment, as bound up with intimate, ambivalent associations, has replaced the too easy dichotomies of anti-colonial and Marxist accounts of these pasts (in geography, see for example, Blunt, 1994; Gregory, 1995a; Jacobs, 1996; Ryan, 1997). Moreover, an appreciation has emerged of how much the influence of the colonial past has persisted into a present characterised by the hybridisations embedded in empire’s reply to western cultural dominance, and also by the continuing exploitations and dominations of international politics (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989; Dirlik, 1994; Driver & Gilbert, 1998; Sidaway, 2000; Blunt & McEwan, 2002). Both the scholarship of and about the west, and that
exploring the dynamics of former colonial contexts have been profoundly shaped by a broadly postcolonial critique of politics and culture.

Rather less has emerged about exactly how academic scholarship itself is embedded within a postcolonial moment. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) path-breaking work *Provincialising Europe* stands as one of very few sustained attempts to question the theoretical and analytical concepts which frame western and international scholarship from a postcolonial perspective (see also Spivak, 1990; Young, 1990; Slater, 1992). In this paper, I wish to establish the potential for geography and geographers around the world to rise to the challenge of a postcolonial critique of knowledge. My priority is to set out a range of practical tactics and resources which geographers in different parts of the world might try out or draw on in postcolonialising the discipline. In my experience, there is much enthusiasm for this project, both amongst geographers working in western contexts and among geographers working on and in different countries around the world. But, very often, it is not clear exactly what it would entail to postcolonialise our practices, or how we might go about exploring this. So, rather than raise an extended critique of western geographical scholarship, this paper aims to establish the basic case for a postcolonial critique of geography, followed by a series of what I hope are pragmatic steps which could help to set us on a path towards more postcolonial – or, as some might prefer, cosmopolitan – theorising. The final section of the paper takes a Southern African perspective on some of these debates, both to offer an example of postcolonial theorising, and to explore some of its limits.

One of these limits is that the field of the geopolitics of knowledge is not absorbed by the postcolonial moment. The dynamics of power and the tracks of exclusion and inclusion in the production of geographical knowledge are certainly more complex than this. And, of course, the “colonial” moment was multiple, with many different European and, later, American projects coexisting. I prefer, then, to use the more positive term “cosmopolitan”, both to figure the possibility for a future in which the colonial is no longer such a relevant historical referent, and to indicate that I am seeking to promote a reconfigured field of the transnational production of scholarship in which entrenched power relations (of different kinds) and dominant geopolitical relations can be dispersed in the interests of new kinds of productive engagement.

I have chosen to focus on how scholars in the west might reconsider some aspects of the geopolitics of their intellectual practices. The paper also touches on the challenges of this project for scholars in the so-called “margins”: being connected to the scholarship of more marginal contexts does not imply an innocence in relation to the geopolitics of knowledge. Finally, the ambitions for transforming the western dominance of intellectual productions might come up against some tough historical realities: to the extent that certain areas in the west were and are at the centre of international systems of power, there might always remain a residual of asymmetry about the relation between these historic powers and more marginal contexts. But I insist that history is open to transformation, and that in the corner of geopolitical relations which is the production of academic scholarship, the opportunities for reconfiguring relations of power have to be more possible. This paper hopes to make a small contribution to this effort.

**Provincialising geographic knowledge: The postcolonial challenge**

My starting point in this paper is the observation by Chakrabarty (2000:28) that, in relation to historical knowledge, “Europe works as a silent referent”, in which “Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history [but] historians of Europe...
do not feel any need to reciprocate”. He continues (p. 28):

“They” produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that “we” cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing “old fashioned” or “outdated”.

For geographers, this asymmetrical “ignorance” within international scholarship carries a greater poignancy perhaps than for some other disciplines. For this tradition of scholarship was initially grounded in the exploration and understanding of different places and cultures. But contemporary geographical scholarship has retreated into a theoreticism that has, perhaps ironically, played an important part in parochialising, and possibly limiting, the purchase of its intellectual products. The assumed universalism of many theoretical claims within the discipline, usually developed, as Chakrabarty would have it, in ignorance of the range of different social contexts to which they are assumed to apply, is characteristic of much western geographical writing.

My hunch is that the turn to “theoretical”, “systematic” geographical scholarship from the 1960s on has slowly created a theoretically driven body of work that laid the foundation for an unchallenged parochialism to geographical knowledge. At the same time though, the claims to universalism that have long haunted western scholarship have persisted, without any basis in the substantive concerns of researchers. A very parochial scholarship has paraded the world in the clothes of universalism for some time, of course. But my sense is that in these late twentieth-century developments towards a stronger theoretical project, western geography has, in fact, lost some of the intellectual resources which were pushing in the opposite direction of universalising knowledge.

In response to this, it is the task of the postcolonial critic, firstly, to insist on broadcasting the parochialism of much contemporary western scholarship. And then, to create the conditions for an engaging and critical transnational, but also post-universal, scholarship suitable for the diverse, or “disreputant”, cosmopolitanisms (Clifford, 1997) of most societies. The challenges here are substantial, and should not be underestimated. But until western scholars learn to provincialise their claims to understanding, what Chakrabarty describes as ignorance is likely to be the best outcome; and, some form of epistemic violence (to follow Spivak, 1990), the worst.

My sense is that the postcolonial critique could encourage us to reconsider concepts at the very heart of the discipline, including theorisations of society, space and nature. Most especially, I have been struck by the growing interest in theorising spaces and identities as profoundly “dislocated”. This dislocation is understood as a privileged source of positive political change (a summary appears in Natter & Jones, 1997). Even a cursory reflection on the political and social contexts of places experiencing war, conflict or revolution would suggest the need for some serious caveats to any valorisation of a politics of dislocation. A politics of erasure, perhaps, would be more common in many places, and responses to this might well include bordering, establishing limits and valuing stasis. All these are equally valid and politically important ontologies of space, but ones that have been lost in the dominant emphases of Euro-American theories of space.

These “other” spatialities of location may indeed be sometimes divisive and harmful. But in places where dislocation is not a political good but a cruel and disastrous reality (as in contexts of civil war and forced displacements), spatialities of settlement and bordering can
be lifesaving components of social existence. The values and practicalities of settling in and being able to claim the rights to belong to a place as part of a community can be crucial for survival (Kibreab, 1999; see also Escobar, 2001). Moreover, for places seeking to establish stable forms of rule and to improve the quality of life for citizens, the ambition to always be dislocating things is hardly helpful, and some apparently old-fashioned concepts like communities and nations can play an important and positive political role.

Many of the central theoretical concepts of social science, and of geography, exist subject to a profound potential and actual postcolonial critique. Indeed, work on many of these concepts has already been published. Feminism may be the most widely recognised field in which this has already taken place (e.g. Mohanty, 1991a; 1991b; McGowan, 1998, 2002). Accounts of nationalism (Chatterjee, 1993) and the emergence of workplace organisation (Chakrabarty, 2000), as well as theories of the state (Mbembe, 2001), geopolitics and democracy (Slater, 1995; 2002a; 2002b), have all been developed, which helps to destabilise the Euro-Americanism of social and political “theory”. As Chatterjee (1993) famously poses in relation to the theorisation of nationalism, if nations are thought to be the same everywhere, what is left for people in India to “imagine” in the way of shaping their national identity? In “travelling”, theory is necessarily disrupted or changed in its meaning, but it also potentially returns to the places of its origin, a vital and demanding critique of ways in which social processes in the “centre” are understood.

Chakrabarty’s (2000) account of political and union organisation in India returns to the metropole – in this case the United Kingdom – an insistence that modernity there, and temporality too, is multiple. Forced to point out the inapplicability to the Indian case of accounts of processes of proletarianisation which discount and diminish popular cultures and spirituality in favour of a singular (assumed western) process of modernisation, Chakrabarty returns the theoretical reflection to England. The concept of heterotemporalities, developed in the Indian context, enables a recognition of the diverse cultures of the English working class and can potentially enrich English historiography. In finding ways to redress the epistemic damage that the persistence of neocolonial power relations in the production of knowledge can cause, western theorists can also find ways to learn from scholars working in and on other places and, hopefully, advance more creative accounts of social processes in the societies they study.

My comments in the section that follows are premised on a broad acceptance of the value of a postcolonial critique of geographical knowledge and practice. I hope to stimulate a debate around practical steps which scholars can choose to take, or which as a discipline we could institutionalise, as a contribution to the task that awaits us. My comments are specific to geography, although not irrelevant to other fields, and hopefully they are realistic about encouraging moves from where the discipline is (in all its divisions and differences), to somewhere else.

**TOWARDS MORE COSMOPOLITAN THEORISING: SOME TACTICS FOR POSTCOLONIAL PRACTICE**

**What is to be done?**

An increasing number of scholars are aware of the implications of the postcolonial critique for the relevance of their claims, and conscious that they cannot assume universal applicability. But many continue to research and write as if they had never encountered these concerns. One of the reasons for this, I think, is that very often it is not easy to work out what exactly to do about this critique. How is it possible to operationalise a postcolonialised scholarship?

These questions are as important for scholars in former colonial and contemporary
marginalised places as they are for scholars in the west, or in various centres of power. But my main point is that scholars from the margins (or places that seem like margins to those who think they live in the centre) have already developed a range of day-to-day tactics for staging encounters in theory across different contexts. Picking up from Chakrabarty, it is the colonial scholar who must always frame her scholarship within “the” literature, which, in most cases, is the authorised western canonical literature.

These tactics of encounter guide my advice here, alongside a determination to draw on the historic strengths of geography: to find in the resources of our own traditions, ways to move forward. For I think we have lost much of the energy for a broader understanding of different places which characterised the discipline under different geopolitical regimes of knowledge. My suggestion, then, is that we do not have to look far to find some hints as to how to produce more appropriate forms of “travelling theory” – and while Driver’s (2001:49) account of “Hints to Travellers” reminds us that the discipline of geography has a past littered with the skeletons of murderous neglect and encounter, thankfully, as he shows, this past was never fully determined by the power relations of colonialism.

**Acknowledging location**

Acknowledging locatedness is, of course, important and a significant recognition of the necessity for a postcolonial attentiveness in scholarship. My starting point, though, is that unfortunately this does not actually start the task of provincialising knowledge. There is no easy way out from thinking hard, working through the limitations of one’s analysis and assessing its contextual particularities. Statements such as, “of course we write this with Northern cities in mind” (Amin & Thrift, 2002:5) go no way at all to disturbing the ethnocentrism of, for example, urban theory. In this case, the rest of the work then has a license to reproduce all sorts of ethnocentrism in the name of a “new urbanism” – the western specificity of the argument forgotten by the very next page.

Consider also a recent comment by James Donald, who is quite clear in the preface to his book *Imagining the Modern City* that his account of urban modernity is a located one. Writing in Australia, having just moved from London, Donald (1999:xi) notes:

My new perspective from the most geographically remote metropolis in the world enables me to see just to what extent this is a European book. I defend my use of the problematic term modernity later, but I acknowledge fully that it is a Eurocentric term.

He goes on to observe that he foresees that to explore the limits of this “repertoire of acting and feeling, that is culturally and historically bounded” (p. xi) he would need conversations amongst “millions of citizens in other cities, especially Hong Kong, Algiers, Buenos Aires, New Delhi, Cape Town and Perth”! Despite his exaggeration of how hard it would be to explore the dimensions of diverse modernities, Donald is unusual in his sensitivity to the locatedness of urban theory (as are Amin and Thrift). But, obviously, these caveats do little to rethink the material they are discussing. They simply flag a task that is yet to be undertaken.

Unlike Donald, I do not agree that this is likely to be impossibly difficult or far too time-consuming to embark on this project. Far from it! Scholars working in and on places outside the self-appointed “heartlands” of theoretical production have always had to do the work of engaging across different contexts and different scholarly communities. In fact, much of the understanding Donald seeks about different urban modernities could already be found in sources published in western contexts. The rest of this section looks at some ways in which entrenched divisions of scholarship keep western writers from referring to or consulting existing work on other places.
Reincorporating area studies and development studies

How can scholars working in and on centres of power and scholarly authority learn from the practices of scholarly marginality in its attentiveness to difference? Here, I think, is where some of the traditional resources and practices of geographical scholarship could be useful. Some habits of learning to think and work as a geographer, and some aspects of geographic scholarship which have been increasingly forgotten or marginalized, might be recalled and reinvented. My overriding concern here is with the entrenched divide which has emerged between geographers who work in and on the heartlands of the discipline, whose work is read as generative of theoretical and general geographical knowledge, and that of the rump of what was once a central and vibrant component of the discipline, namely, area-based or regional studies.

Two trends, I think, have underpinned this marginalisation of regional studies. The first is the dominance of systematic or theoretical geography since the 1960s. This devalued and undermined the importance of the apparently less theoretically informed field of regional or area studies. The second is the hegemonisation of the field of regional studies by “development”. As the differentiation of the world into First/Second/Third-world zones mapped itself onto ways of knowing about and intervening in places outside of the west, western geographers who worked on and, to a lesser extent, geographers who worked in these places became caught up in the developmentalism which dominated understandings of and writing about those places. The consequence of this has been a geographically based separation between scholars who otherwise investigate closely related issues. As Jackson and Jacobs noted in 1996, on the conference circuit, a large divide separated those geographers who worked in the metropoles on “race” studies, and those whose engagements with questions of race arose out of postcolonial and regional studies.

And, perhaps disappointingly, even as the postcolonial turn has encouraged western scholars to turn to those working on and in other places to diversify the “voices” and “contexts” in their academic collaborations, these different contexts have usually been incorporated as add-on “case studies” (Davies, 2001:13). It is not common to see explorations of these different contexts used to transform theoretical accounts, or to change core conceptual analyses. Certainly it is true that scholars working on and in contexts outside the west have made significant, theoretical contributions, many of which have been widely acknowledged (see Watts, 2002, on the case of development studies). But the dominant orientation of Anglo-American geographers’ relations to work on places outside the mainstream, or in a different analytical register, has been (to follow Chakrabarty, once again) one of ignorance. The developmentalist turn has rendered “other” places as irreducibly different (if not backward) and, therefore, supposedly irrelevant to both the theoretical registers and empirical concerns of the heartlands. The task ahead is to find ways to encourage geographers to see the value and relevance of a wider range of geographical scholarship, and to move beyond this divisive geopolitics of knowledge.

The first, and easiest step by far, would involve a stronger and more integrated place for work within a regional studies tradition in a broader geographical scholarship and the inclusion of extensive area studies teaching in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Because of the geographical bias in the production of apparently “universal”, but profoundly located “theoretical” knowledge within the discipline, teaching “geography” anywhere in the world today necessarily involves a detailed engagement with European Union (EU) and United States (US) experiences. What passes for systematic geography, then, is already intimately regional. To bar other regions from curricula in the interests of generality and theoretical innovation is simply to hegemonise one (or both) region’s
geography and to fill the entire field of study with concerns generated from those places. There is nothing particularly wrong with learning about the US or the EU – in fact, in many parts of the world it could be crucial to encourage young people to engage politically against the structures of power that keep them impoverished. But there is absolutely no virtue in effectively outlawing teaching about other regional experiences in the name of the universalising impulses of a supposedly systematic or theoretical geography.

A revival of regional studies, then, and the closely associated work currently conducted under the sign of development studies, may well be an extremely important first step towards producing a postcolonial sensibility in geography. However, along with this, there would need to be some serious attempts to reconstitute the reasons why regions are studied. For, historically, the politics of compiling knowledge about the world has been particularly fraught (see Said, 1978, for an early statement about this). This would include both the early geopolitical manuals, which framed the universe for America, or for colonial exploitation (Godlewska & Smith, 1994), and the contemporary developmentalist constitution of need and poverty as the basis for framing knowledge of other places (Escobar, 1995). Clearly, caution is needed here. A recasting of “areas” or “regions” within a globalising world could redraw the bounds of the regions we consider relevant, or which are deemed geopolitically important by powerful nations. Concern with an “Indian Ocean” diaspora might renovate “African studies”, for example, and reorientate scholars there to exploring links with India and the East. Also, the emphasis on the transnational connectedness of regions and places, so conventionally a part of contemporary geography and anthropology, would mean many of the errors of Orientalism exposed by Said might be easily avoided. As Said (1978:301) himself noted, revisionist critics have reconfigured area studies in most fields – and since his writing, in the regions of the Middle East, North Africa and East Asia too.

It is too easy, though, in figuring different places from the places of privilege in the centre, to be driven by the interests and concerns of those places. In terms of teaching, different places come to stand in, stereotypically, for certain kinds of events or processes (see Myers, 2001, on American geography about Africa). What tactics might there be to avoid this? An important step would be to attempt to avoid the stereotype. Why not teach economic geography primarily through South America? Or economic policy through African experiences? Why not consider a feminist geography which only deals with Southern Russia? And why not a political geography whose focus is Southeast Asia? The suggestions that I make try to escape the contemporary biases which shape the ways in which different places come into view in the western elements of the discipline: for example, Southeast Asia is seen as “interesting” to western scholars because it has tiger economies and so-called “world cities”. We need to be constantly on the alert for such moves that reinstate a sense of “knowledge” of other places serving “our” purposes and concerns, whatever these might be. The orientation is, rather, towards learning from the complex and rich experiences and scholarship of different places.

Engaging with regional scholarship

The challenge to postcolonialise geography may seem daunting. But it is worth noting that no individual, and probably even no discipline, can hope to know about the whole planet! Indeed, this is the very same fantasy which sustains the “god-trick” of universalism I am arguing against here. The ambition, rather, is to disrupt and contest the dominant role of certain historically powerful locations in the production of generalisable knowledge. In this, western geography is fortunate, for amongst its number there are still many regional specialists who work within and across the dominant Anglo-American traditions as well as the scholarship of at least one other region. Geography could do much to transform itself simply by taking the small internal step of
paying closer attention to these scholars. But, as “academic middlemen”, the interpretive role these geographers play – mediating between powerful western centres of scholarship and other regional concentrations of scholars – is obviously fraught (as debates about the Chinese context has explicitly made clear; see Barné, 2001).

In this respect, I should be clear that I am not inviting a wholesale scholarly re-colonisation of the world outside the west by hugely well-resourced western academics. The perils of colonial knowledge, and the role of anthropology and geography, for example, in the service of economic power and political domination, have been well rehearsed. In this light, it is important to state that there is no necessity for scholars to pursue empirical research in different contexts in order to engage in cosmopolitan scholarship. Nonetheless, there is an important role for paying closer attention to the writings and researches of various diasporic and national networks of scholars associated with understanding the history and contemporary social dynamics of different regions. As Arjun Appadurai (1996:17) notes of area studies in America:

In a society notoriously devoted to exceptionalism and to endless preoccupation with “America”, this tradition has been a tiny refuge for the serious study of foreign languages, alternative worldviews and large-scale perspectives on socio-cultural change outside Europe and the United States.

Despite some problems, which he suggests indicate that “criticism and reform are certainly in order”, Appadurai (p. 17) also argues that area studies has nonetheless been one of the few serious counterweights to the tireless tendency to marginalise huge parts of the world in the American academy and in American society more generally.

The orientation I am suggesting, like that of the marginal scholar, is to learn from, learn about and engage with understandings generated in other places – at least one other place, perhaps. Perhaps scholars could make a point of selecting a region or country quite different from one that they routinely study or live in, and learn from writers and intellectuals inspired by and working in that place. Of course the divisions within any region’s scholarship are likely to be deep and contested: joining in the conversations of a community of scholarship will force one to engage with difficult political choices, and perhaps participate in action, support, or mobilising resources. It could also challenge western scholars to confront their deep prejudices about what forms of knowledge are valued: the epithet of “outdated” is far too easy to apply without understanding to different coexisting traditions of scholarship.

The ethical imperative will be to be challenged, even undermined, in one’s sense of importance and centrality. It would be a failing of postcolonial sensibility to embark on these tactics as a way to simply improve one’s own standing and intellectual capital. Thus, I insist that the relations of engagement need to be an attentive learning and a serious self-questioning: a “provincialising” of western knowledge and a learning of the limitations of western insights, not their re-centralisation. And, indeed, these tactics might involve some longer-term commitments – like learning another language (which might well be considered a crucial part of graduate students’ curricula).

Transforming the conditions of the production and circulation of knowledge

In addition to these initiatives involving a reorientation of scholarly attentiveness, I suggest that as a transnational community of scholars we need to attend to the structural imbalances in the circuits of production of geographic knowledge. Here I like the term, the “knowledge production complex” to
capture the way in which the knowledge produced within the contemporary circuits of intellectual labour is deeply uneven in its structure and profoundly biased against scholars working outside of the heartlands of geography. As Yeung (2001) notes in his call to postcolonialise knowledge, scholars in the margins must publish in international journals to seek credibility and recognition within their own careers and institutions. He encourages this, as a path to engagement and internationalising debate, to counter a parochialism of the margin. I have found myself making similar pleas in my own context. But the problem here is that engagement in international publication is deeply stacked against the participation of people from outside the Anglo-American heartland. Every journal I have played a part in has been very eager to encourage scholars from outside this area, from where the vast bulk of their submissions and publications come. But every journal, over the last decade, has more or less failed. And the reason is, I think, in the subtle (and not so subtle) and usually unstated assumptions made about appropriate forms of scholarship and what constitutes a relevant field of reference for topics of enquiry.

Referees are often asked questions like: does this paper contribute to original knowledge; does it draw on the relevant literature; are the methods adopted rigorous and academically reasonable? All of these, when translated into the hegemonic western scholarship, are profoundly excluding of scholars from many more marginal contexts (see Berg, 2001), including different language communities even in wealthier contexts. Places where the traditions of geography are different (are they outdated, then, to return to Chakrabarty’s point), or where the motivating political and economic concerns for scholarship drive researchers to different and perhaps less conventionally “scholarly” questions, or where the relevant literature is not only possibly irrelevant, but also quite likely unavailable. Even research published in the west on the places being discussed, or where scholars are based, may be out of reach for economic reasons (the writer never thought to place copies of his work in the university library, perhaps). For journal editors to postcolonialise the production of knowledge, these subtle refereeing practices will need serious reflection and conscious transformation.

The knowledge production complex also structures the publication of books, where “the market” for ideas – the US market – determines what will be published, and where the circuit of international (or US) conferences determines who meets publishers to convince them of the value of your work, and who gets to say whose work is publishable. And, perhaps more than anything, the informal international networks through which ideas, comments, support, or a word in someone’s ear about your favourite student, structure access and success in publishing and jobs. I have no easy ideas about how to change this, but we can start with addressing the criteria we agree to assess things by, by cultivating a different set of interests in the markets around the world, and by supporting publications by smaller, local publishers in poorer regions rather than the large multinationals who currently control many publishing outlets.

Towards a cosmopolitan scholarship

It should be clear by now that the postcolonial critique involves far more than reversing the lines of formal colonial influence in scholarship, and invites a complex reimagining of international scholarly practices. The complex cosmopolitanisms of the world mean that the tracks of knowledge are already proliferated beyond any simple lines of colonial influence. The call to postcolonialise knowledge might be better popularised as Chakrabarty’s intentions to provincialise universalising knowledge, whether it is European, American, “Islamic”, or Chinese (see Davies, 2001, on Chinese mainland hegemony of Chinese scholarship). Finding a new register within which to frame “theory” (which carries within it a profound tendency to assert a universal above the complexity of the “empirical”) is
likely to be hard. But we could start by reasessing the place of “social theory”, or the even more abstract “philosophy”, in our broader scholarly endeavours, and insisting on highlighting the usually parochial foundations of their claims.

The challenge to scholars in and of the margins, as we have acknowledged for some time, is to try and delink from these well-established, power-laden trails between our homes and the “metropole”, wherever that may be. The emergence of South-South linkages in development practice as well as in academic endeavour is part of these long-term reorientations. And there are already important resonances between theoretical and empirical work across these marginal contexts – the travels of subaltern studies (Chakrabarty, 2000), for example, whose routes include South America and South Africa, highlight the value of thinking across a new range of different contexts. And, indeed, there are diverse spatialities of difference that have been associated with fostering “postcolonial” sensitivities – including a “double consciousness” within western societies (Gilroy, 1993); a complex transnational and cosmopolitan citizenship (Ong, 1999); the mimicry of colonial complicity and resistance (Bhabha, 1993); and the importance of contextual distinctiveness (Chatterjee, 1993). All these indicate a range of strategies for tactically insisting on the provincial nature of hegemonic knowledges and for operationalising a series of dis/locating investigations. The final section offers two brief examples of what this might mean in practice, and which exemplify some of the pitfalls likely to be encountered along the way to a more cosmopolitan geography.

I offer now two examples of practising postcolonial theorising, both from Southern Africa. They illustrate some of what is possible through a broadly cosmopolitan commitment to theorising. But they also, importantly, highlight some of the pitfalls along the way. The steps to a postcolonialised geography are not always in good order – and need to be approached with some care!

**Comparative urbanism**

The first example comes from a group of anthropologists and sociologists who embarked on a range of studies of urbanism and urbanisation around the world in the 1950s and 1960s. Ray Pahl (1968:26) noted:

> The booming growth of Chicago in the 1920s is paralleled today in the rapidly expanding cities of Latin America, Africa, India and the Far East: in the same way that the Chicago social laboratory helped to stimulate empirical research and theoretical advance, so also, for example, did the towns of the copperbelt in Central Africa in the 1950s and 1960s.

My entry point to their work came as I embarked on a project of learning about Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, and slowly encountered the so-called “Manchester School” of anthropology, much inspired by Max Gluckman. Together with a group of colleagues and students whose lives took them on a mobile circuit from or through Southern Africa to the elite institutions of the UK, Canada and Australasia, he directed a research institute in Zambia and established the sociology and anthropology department in Manchester. A number of prominent anthropologists engaged on a study of urban life in Southern Africa, largely Zambia, and to a certain extent South Africa (see, for example, Epstein, 1958; Mitchell, 1969), with joint publications between the Manchester and Zambian research institutes, appointments between the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and UK universities, and research projects that in the span of their research careers stretched around the globe (in the case of Hortense Powdermaker (1966), for example, from

**SOME PITFALLS AND PRACTICES OF POSTCOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES**

I offer now two examples of practising postcolonial theorising, both from Southern Africa. They illustrate some of what is possible through a broadly cosmopolitan commitment to theorising. But they also, importantly, highlight some of the pitfalls along the way. The steps to a postcolonialised geography are not always in good order – and need to be approached with some care!
Hollywood, USA, to Luanshya, Zambia). Their interest in what were then seen as “complex societies” (Banton, 1966) (compared to so-called “tribal” or “simple” societies) meant that the traditional anthropological orientations were thrown up in the air. New urban contexts had to be taken seriously and explored both from first principles and with comparative reference to urban studies in “advanced industrial” societies as anthropologists followed their “traditional” subjects to the city.

With their wider reference community of urban anthropologists, the scholars working in Southern Africa shared a determination to inject their analyses of city life into the mainstream “theory” of western urbanism. What was a vast outpouring of work all reiterated the same plea, as Aidan Southall (1973:4) noted:

> It is also important for the Western nations to study with care and humility the new urban forms emerging in the non-Western world, to see if they offer any lessons as yet unthought-of in Western ethnocentric assumptions.

Urban studies today has largely forgotten this enormous comparative literature – readers, companions and compendiums find no space for these various contributions which sought to present “the evidence from all continents on how urban masses generate their own solidarities and defeat the threatened anomies of large cities” (Southall, 1973:13).

The implications of the Manchester School’s work for understanding the “urban way of life” were profound, and offered a substantial criticism of the simplistic versions of Louis Wirth’s (1964) rather categorical and teleological analysis of urban versus folk cultures. The emergence of new forms of social interaction in cities, deeply inflected with, yet transforming of, cultural practices from rural and tribal areas, offered a major new understanding of what and where a city way of life was. Moreover, in Philip Mayer’s (1961) work in East London, South Africa, the variable experiences of different communities in the city, in terms of the persistence of traditional cultures alongside what he called fully “urban” cultures, ran entirely counter to Wirth’s theoretical arguments (as did that of US writers like Gans (1962; 1995), who is still commonly cited in this regard). Indeed, a careful assessment of these and other comparative critiques of western urban theory could well involve reconfiguring how cities and cityness are understood.

But the divided practices of scholarship, in urban studies as much as in geography, have relegated these insights not only to the past (where at first sight their residual colonial inflections might incline us to assign them), but also to an elsewhere of cities and social life which seems to have no bearing at all on the experiences of city life in the west. The orientation to learn attentively from the diversity of urban experiences around the world, which this generation of scholars so enthusiastically embarked on, has been completely lost in the canons of urban theory. The inclination to see African urban experiences as definitively part of the field of the urban (as opposed to tribal or folk culture), for which Max Gluckman (see 1961) was both renowned and, more recently, much criticised (Ferguson, 1999), has dissipated in the face of the way in which developmentalism and other popular approaches encourage cities to be categorised according to their differences (Robinson, 2002). African cities, and African urban dwellers are largely brought into the field of urban scholarship as objects for development interventions, or as agents of “participation” in service delivery and governance. There is much to be done to postcolonialise urban studies. Overcoming decades of division between development studies and western-based urban theory is a big task, but one for which there are forgotten precedents to draw on.

In the light of these divisions within urban studies, there is much potential for
comparative studies to be mobilised in the interests of postcolonising scholarship. In reclaiming this tactic of research and theorising, there are opportunities to find some tracks across the entrenched divide between studies of so-called “Western” and “Third World” cities. Of course, comparative study is not a specifically postcolonial strategy but, in this context, it might perform the possibility of thinking across city contexts otherwise kept apart by the developmentalism that has scarred urban scholarship.

The pitfalls or loose stones on these steps towards postcolonising knowledge are also evident in the example I have developed here. These men and women, studying cities around the world, relied heavily on local translators and assistants to guide them around African townships, to gain access to moments of African social life and, often, to act as chief informants themselves. In advocating engagements across different contexts, the imbalances of power and accreditation in the production of academic knowledge need to be attended to.

South African geography

In the case of South African geography, similar senses of possibility and pitfalls emerge. As Crush (1993) has argued, geographers in South Africa have selected a range of different influences in shaping their distinctive contribution to both South African studies and geographical scholarship. Only parts of western geography have been helpful. During the 1980s, a largely Marxist influence shaped the direction of dominant trends in South African geography; alternative sources of inspiration have included the India-based subaltern studies, the English social history movement and local urban and trade union politics (see also Bozzoli & Delius, 1990).

The particular direction of South African critique was, for Crush, not simply a mimicking of western geography (with a lag for catching up with the latest theme). In fact, more recent trends in western geography have arguably had less influence, as more poststructuralist trends received relatively short shrift from many politically engaged intellectuals (cf. Dirusweit, 1999; Ramutsindela, 2001). Recently, the need for policy-related work has meant that South African geographers eager to assist in the post-apartheid reconstruction have become more influenced by policy debates within international development circuits (see, for example, Rogerson, 1999; Beall et al., 2000).

Of course there are always counter themes and minority voices, including a substantial local tradition of rigorous empiricist scholars who helpfully track and map changes in city life and population distribution (for example, Christopher, 2000). Moreover, increasing interest among British, European and American scholars in undertaking research in the region, alongside western geographers who have done so for some time and a small South African diaspora of geographers based in the west, has meant that a diversification of geographical scholarship in relation to South Africa has also emerged in the post-apartheid era. More opportunities for South Africans to travel abroad on funded exchanges with foreign partners have meant a stronger orientation to international agendas, while a more eclectic theoretical environment has enabled a determinedly post-Marxist (but still radical) strand of scholarship to emerge.

The value of learning from different places in the context of distinctive local concerns, though shaped by a diverse range of influences and connections elsewhere, is exemplified by the South African situation. And yet, perilously little theoretical or generalisable learning has taken place by western scholars from our work. We are often used to exemplify processes thought to be peculiarly South African – segregation and racial divisions being top of the list. We are a good “case study” in many teaching contexts and a useful “different voice” in many collections. To some extent, we may need to address the task of learning to speak more effectively to a wider audience. And, of course, the marginality of South African scholarship on the world stage of geography is
underpinned by the privilege and power relations which support tertiary education and academic scholarship in a very unequal, and still very racialised, country.

These challenges to find effective ways of engaging in international scholarly discourse face marginalised scholars everywhere (as Yeung, 2001, also discusses). But the task of listening and attending to the scholarship that is already there belongs elsewhere. The status of work on case studies (outside the west) as simply empirical evidence of different places (that is, recording their inassimilable differences or confirming their similarities) needs to be restructured. Similarly, the placing of work in different regions around the world under the limited (if important) sign of “development studies” diminishes its potential impact on wider scholarly debates.

Alongside these difficulties, though, there is also the reality that the west itself is frequently irrelevant to the concerns of different places. Like the scholars of Zambia who insisted their work had strong implications for western urban theory (and yet have been simply forgotten, if not ignored), South African scholars sometimes find interesting and relevant sections of western scholarship to engage with, learn from and critique. Right now, it is more likely to be smart and creative urban and development policy work (with all the problems of neo-imperialism embedded in these circuits) than the complex theoretical debates privileged in much western geography. Moreover, there is absolutely no reason why marginal scholars should continue to find western scholarship of any interest whatsoever. Maintaining a dialogue has been our responsibility for a long time. On one reading of this, we could suggest that it is now up to western theorists to demonstrate that their work has any purchase beyond its parochial origins.

CONCLUSION

The South African example illustrates that much of what passes for “parochial” knowledge is already diverse in respect of its origins and inspirations. The deep roots of what we now assume is “western” geography in exploration and colonisation indicate that, probably even more than in the South African case, the rest of the world has already shaped the trajectory and concerns of this section of the discipline. A call to “provincialise” geography is not a call to re-parochialise our activities, but an opportunity to encourage a renewed effort to challenge the Euro-Americanism of much geographical knowledge (Slater, 1992; 1995; 2002b).

In arguing strongly for a re-placing of regional and area studies at the centre of the discipline of geography in a reconfigured form attuned to transnational connections and new kinds of regional affiliations, I hope that I have spoken to the core concerns of this journal. A journal, based in the “Tropical” context of Singapore, signposting an affiliation to other Tropical contexts rehabilitates a range of connections and comparisons to other parts of the world. Perhaps the African examples I develop above speak to the enormous potential of geography in these contexts, however haphazardly related, to speak back to the supposed centres of the discipline in transforming ways. If this journal’s title reaches back into the regionalisations of an earlier geographical imagination, it simultaneously offers the basis for a future transformation of the discipline from this context, not least through its continued circulation and significance in English-speaking geography.

My ambition in this paper has been twofold. First, to encourage western geography to assume a position alongside the scholarship of all other regions, disavowing the hegemonic and dominating position which their scholarly production often adopts or produces through the theoretical tactics of universalisation and the excluding practices of hegemonic knowledge production. I offered a range of suggestions as to how this could be effected, including steps to reintegrate regional studies
(already within the western heartland of geography) and re-engage with scholars working in and on other parts of the world. The second ambition follows closely on, which is to encourage more sustained cosmopolitan practices in the production of knowledge, and more routinised comparative reflections on research topics. These tactics are relevant for scholars in and of the “centres” of the discipline as much as for those working in and on the more “marginal” contexts.

Failure to promote a more cosmopolitan approach within geography could imply greater isolation and increased intellectual arrogance – a western scholarship cut off from the urgent social issues of the century and from the vital concerns facing poorer countries. The politics of knowledge in this context might be in danger of more accurately mirroring the emerging conflictual, even unipolar, geopolitics of the twenty-first century. The alternative presents many challenges. A more postcolonial or cosmopolitan geographic scholarship will require quite different relations of engagement across different contexts and scholarly traditions than those which pertain today. In a way, then, I am asking the discipline of geography to put its own geopolitical house in order.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the Geography and Postcolonialism workshop in Singapore for the opportunity to develop and present this paper. As well as the SJTG editors, Alan Lester, two anonymous SJTG referees and my colleagues at the Open University have all made me think harder about these issues. Thanks are due, although I was unable to deliver on all the excellent ideas they had!

REFERENCES


Clifford, J. (1997) Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century,


