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Towards an Antipodean theory of space

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Abstract: The paper explores the idea of a critique of Antipodean theory of space as one agenda for the Spatial Theory paradigm in ARCRNSISS. The paper has three parts. First it seeks to resuscitate aspirations for a distinctive Antipodean understanding of Australia's socio-cultural, economic, personal and organisational spaces. It argues that theoretical advances underpinning such a project require an appreciation of the role of intertextuality and metaphor in theory building. Second, it identifies the nature and role of imported metaphors of space, especially those from northern hemisphere academic hearths, and how these have impacted on Australian life. Third, it speculates on the dimensions of a collaborative research project for the building of a more self-conscious understanding of space useful in both academic research and public policy settings.

A key sub-theme to the paper is an investigation of the historical use of concepts of space in the social sciences and the ways these have been translated to material form through, among other things, nation building tasks, planning projects and organisational operations. Key to this sub-theme is a curiosity about the interplay between theory and practice including the identification of moments when a distinctive Antipodean spatial imagination has developed; and a corresponding audit of the contemporary period – one disturbed by globalisation, postmodernism, a post-colonialism and border insecurity.

Introduction

A meeting of Allied war powers was held in Bretton Woods in New Hampshire, USA, in August 1944 with the intention of designing an international monetary and trading system as the basis for a post-war economic settlement. The key theoretician at the meeting was John Maynard Keynes, and not his LSE competitor Friedrich von Hayek, so it's not surprising the world's new economic system had a major emphasis on national economic sovereignty with a strong belief in the effectiveness of the macro-economic and monetary intervention powers of the state. Of course, Bretton Woods also acknowledged the economic and monetary power of the USA and gave it privileges such as making the US dollar the world's trading currency, freeing the US economy from pegged money supply targets and so on. Yet translating Bretton Woods onto the Australian political economy landscape was not such an easy task for Labor PM Ben Chifley. So concerned was Chifley about cabinet and caucus opposition to the agreement that Chifley did not even introduce Cabinet discussion on the agreement until late 1946, did not call for a cabinet vote until November 1946 (with passage by a vote of only 12 to 7) before ratification by caucus in March 1947. Biographer David Day calls it: "...the most difficult political problem that had confronted Chifley" (Day 2001, p.446). In 2001 Gough Whitlam likewise declared that Chifley's toughest battle was persuading the caucus to accept the Bretton Woods agreement on global finance,

declaring Chifley's speech to parliament on Bretton Woods to be "...the voice of Australian Labor at its noblest" (Kelly 2001, p.23).

We wish to make this point from this case study. Bretton Woods was an imported model that subsequently drove a particular structure for the Australian national economy, gave us a way of seeing our national economy, of measuring it, of managing it. Yet consciousness of this role of imported devices is minimal. In this paper we argue for greater attention to the processes by which we source and transfer our socio-spatial models, be they of economy, settlement, culture, society, whatever. Moreover, we argue that in times of crisis, for example, when Australia moved from colonial to nation status; from a British commonwealth economy to an independent Keynesian economy, from an Anglo culture to a multicultural one and so on, we draw down new theories to re-inscribe our spatial landscapes in different ways. Arguably, we have just been through one of these crisis periods, one involving globalisation, postmodernism, post-colonialism, border insecurity and so on. The spatial concepts used in the management of Australian space (the nation, cities, regions, wilderness and so on) have been unsettled by contemporary events including, for example, deregulation of national markets, border insecurity, reviews of notions of progress and nation-building.

This paper sets out some preliminary considerations and directions. It argues for an innovative interdisciplinary project to audit the nature and use of spatial constructs, how these affect the ways Australian space is being managed, and what opportunities emerge from new or revised spatial conceptualisations. Such a project could trace the use of concepts of space in the social sciences in Australia and identify the ways these have been translated to material form. Key to this investigation of the interplay between theory and practice would be: the identification of moments when a distinctive Antipodean spatial imagination has developed; and a corresponding audit of the contemporary period.

Socio-spatial theory, intertextuality and the role of the metaphor

An aspiration for an Antipodean theory of space must be conscious of the nature of theory building. Here we use Trevor Barnes as a guide, especially Barnes (1992) and Barnes and Duncan (1992), and make comments about two language analysis devices: intertextuality and metaphor. We employ these devices to put an argument showing how socio-spatial theory in Australia derives predominantly from the texts of the northern hemisphere, especially those from Britain. In a sense this transfer is inevitable. Yet without self-consciousness about the transfer, our understanding of how the socio-spatial landscape in Australia is constructed is limited and opportunities for alternative constructions are diminished.

Intertextuality is the understanding that all theory (indeed all text) is based on prior interpretations. That is, one theoretical text draws on other theoretical texts. Here, we mean texts in a broad sense including writing but also maps, equations, and diagrams. These constitute our world such that we have no contact with the world except through these texts. The construction of the Australian socio-spatial landscape, as we see later on, is an excellent case study of the process.

The consequence of an understanding of the role of text and intertextuality, according to Barnes (1992, p.3),

“...is that writing is constitutive, not simply reflective; new worlds are made out of old texts, and old worlds are the basis of new texts.”

The idea of intertextuality can be used directly in our theoretical problem here: any theory of the Antipodean socio-spatial landscape is constituted by either the old texts of the northern hemisphere, or it is rendered new (and the northern hemisphere old) by the construction of new texts. Either way, it is in the interplay of texts that our theories are built.

Understanding the role of metaphor enlivens the process of intertextuality. Metaphors give our language the shape that allows us to build an understanding of what is going on. All theory is metaphorical. Mary Hesse demonstrates how (as cited in Barnes 1992, pp121ff). She makes these arguments:

- metaphors allow us to observe that one thing is similar (or dissimilar) to something else, so are central to formulating a problem and finding a solution;
- metaphors function best when the words depicting the characteristics or processes of one system (the secondary one; for example, the operations of waves in Isaac Newton's explanation of the operation of sounds) transfer readily to another system (the primary one; for example in the work of Isaac Newton, the operation of sound)
- metaphors are most effective and durable when both the appearances of the secondary system resemble the appearances of the primary system, and the internal characteristics and operations of the two systems are in accord.

In geography, metaphors are employed to interpret observations – Barnes cites von Thunen's rings, Weber's triangles, Christaller's hexagons and the like – and these then act as “our interpretative schemes and theories” (Barnes 1992 p.118). Moreover, and this is critical for our understanding of the need for a metaphorical analysis of the Antipodean, our socio-spatial landscapes are created by these imported schemes – they have no material pre-existence. We have neither the power nor the option to place our theorisations outside the material world that we observe. Hence, what we do when we transfer metaphors across hemispheres onto Antipodean space, onto our primary metaphorical system, is create and recreate our world in their likeness. According to Hesse (in Barnes), we,

“...select, emphasize, or suppress, features of the primary; [with the result that] new slants on the primary are illuminated; [and that] the primary is seen ‘though’ the frame of the secondary.” (Hesse 1980b, p.114, cited thus in Barnes 1992, p.122)

The broad argument

Representations of space through models, metaphors and theories are fundamental to the social sciences and their understandings and representations of society, culture, economy, and environment. Yet disciplinary self-consciousness of the use of ideas about space varies widely. For example, there is a long history of awareness of the significance of spatial concepts within the disciplines of geography and sociology, while in economics – notwithstanding its role in building the idea and composition of the nation and the region – space has been rarely accorded prime consideration. In industrial relations, though, interest in space is burgeoning. A reasonable summary might be that space in the social sciences has been seen as a stage on which key

relations are played out, but with little or no active presence. Moreover, the common perception has been of space as a material thing, expressible in absolute and quantifiable terms.

Disruption of this view has come most strongly from post-colonial thinking and writing, via an examination of the interplay between space as idea and the material realisation of space, such that the moments at which ideas of space materialise can have dramatic effects on a landscape. Postcolonial conceptualisations see spatial constructs as shaping ideas about the material world, building complex landscapes of symbols and meaning across it, and thereby creating and legitimising arguments about borders and tenure. Post-colonialism thus advances a view that space is performative and representational. We can learn from post-colonial thinking, therefore, that understanding space requires investigation of the genealogy and intent of the constitutive concepts encased in its texts. Problematising space involves questioning the purpose, translation and effects of spatial imaginings.

The socio-spatial theory project might use post-colonial understandings of the interplay between spatial ideas and materiality to devise a research exercise involving a more concerted development of Antipodean theories of space. A focus on Australian space allows for a specific exploration of the material realisation of space from its existence as an idea – and here, Australia, post-colonial writings have exposed an embedded Anglo-hearth bias in Antipodean spatial reasoning. The imperial legacy of Britain and a resultant colonial history have influenced significantly the way Australians have viewed, organised and interpreted space. Gelder and Jacobs (1998) refer to an overall “unsettled settledness” of Australian society that is reflective of its colonial history and continues to be “played out” within the contemporary landscape. While post-colonial analysis has taken the colonial subject as its focus, the approach is also broadly effective in revealing the interrelationships between space as idea and materiality across a range of subjects. Thus postcolonial insights are attractive to this project as an entry point to unsettle ideas of space – in a wider sense, including economic, environmental and political spaces – and their material realisation in Antipodean landscapes.

Hence, this project proposes a review and exploration of the genealogy and intent of spatial constructs both within the social sciences generally and, specifically, in an Antipodean setting. The following aims might guide the project:

1. explore space as an idea: provide a genealogy of spatial concepts and their representation across the social sciences
2. expose the material realisations of space as an idea in Antipodean space: initiate critical inter-disciplinary discussion about the way representations of space have been understood and utilised to varying ends in Australia

Investigate policy outcomes: identify and evaluate the way spatial policies ensue from thinking about space in particular ways.

The approach

An inter-disciplinary approach is proposed in this project so as to expose the social sciences to scrutiny about their construction and use of spatial concepts. The analysis proposed in the project, and the discussion here, eschews a compartmentalised, disciplinary account in an attempt to produce an approach that is flexible in its capture of various social science approaches. Understanding the interplay between space as an idea and as a material realisation is at the core of this approach. Certainly, the discussion here privileges human geography and post-colonial

theory as starting points, arising from the background of the authors and an *a priori* interest in space by scholars from these two study fields. However, we also draw on examples from a range of social science disciplines to demonstrate the perception and operation of spatial concepts in a number of moments across time and, in particular, the presence (or absence) of Antipodean spatial imaginings.

Our review to date of the genealogy of space in the social sciences reveals major junctures in understandings and representations of space. Simplistically, there has been a major shift in understandings of space from Enlightenment-based rationalities through to understandings drawn from contemporary discussions of globalisation and postmodernism. As noted, the default view across the social sciences is of space as sets of fixed containers across which social relations shift and are impressed upon. Spatial concepts thus become naturalised as categorical terms describing fixed realities without any consideration of their creation, intentional or otherwise, for analytical or political purposes. As such, a set of spatial concepts and metaphors is used not just as specific devices for sorting empirical observations but also – and this happens in an unconscious manner (Foucault 1970) – as high-order governing devices within Australian social landscapes. For example, spatial metaphors such as “wastelands”, “outback” and “frontier” are entrenched in historical and contemporary accounts of Australian society, but without conscious attention to their colonial origins and or silences that ensue from such representations.

As noted, attempts to destabilise the fixed and predetermined nature of spatial concepts have occurred primarily in the discipline of human geography. One recent advance here has involved a reconceptualisation of “scale” and “scalar categories” as relational concepts capable of intense political and ideological mobilisation beyond the role of scale as an inert, mathematical ordering technique. Other advances in human geography, postcolonial theory and elsewhere in the social sciences are less easily identified. Nevertheless, a preliminary overview follows.

Key moments in a genealogy of space, and some examples

Post-Enlightenment thinking prioritised the rationality of knowledge and the intrinsic power of reason. It generated a specific spatial consciousness that naturalised European ways of living as the advanced form of civilisation and Europe as the natural authority for world governance. Central to Enlightenment imaginations of space were European-led ‘discovery’ and ‘settlement’ of new territories, thereby bringing ‘progress’ to those outside elsewhere. The logic of empire building proceeded hand-in-glove with acts of ‘discovery’ while legitimising territorial invasions, settlements and other colonial endeavours. Carter (1987) describes this process as one of transformation from the uncertain “haze” of primitive *space* to the clear and logical boundaries of imperial *place*. Spatial binaries such as core/periphery, inside/outside, North/South, have been integral to the architectures of power driving the construction of empires and colonies, the (re)production of the social and economic flows across them, and thereby in the (re)construction of the spaces involved.

The imperial/colonial processes emanating from Europe had a particular translation and realisation in the Australian landscape. Early colonialism in Australia is represented as a transition from discovery and exploration to the fit-out of the continent by implanting British society and practice onto a ‘foreign’ landscape. The romantic side of ‘discovery’ is recoverable in painting, literature and scientific research which present an idea of a landscape populated by noble savages in a Garden of Eden setting. The rationale for colonial occupation of a landscape

available for development represents a process of materialisation of particular – in this case imperial – logic (Malouf 2003), a process described by Howitt (1993) as a simultaneous “emptying” of the i(I)ndigenous and a “filling” with the new. An example of the practice of “filling” is the use of the imported Cartesian spatial ordering of mapping and, in particular, the adoption of an urban grid pattern in settlements. Inspired by the Wakefield model of civilised colonisation, the grid flourished in political discourse up until the 1860s as the method through which the physical landscape could be tamed and agriculturally- and socially-productive townships created. The English myth of contented rural life was embedded in these representations, and maintained through visions of Australiana by a large number of artists and poets. However, the spatial translation and realisation of these spatial ideals was rarely in the hoped-for form. The impacts on Indigenous People and their landscapes, for instance, were negative and severe. Yet the imperial/colonial roll-out of space even suppressed realisation and understanding of these impacts, a necessary suppression if a territorially-expansive colonial logic was to dominate and succeed.

As new spatial connections accelerated and expanded by the end of the nineteenth century, territorial boundaries and national imaginings became embedded in political geographies, while the nation-state emerged as the desirable form of territorial organisation of broader society – and, later, as the most common basis of spatial analysis across the social sciences. In pre-Federated Australia, we now know that competing ideas about the spatial configuration of the Australian nation varied according to the class, cultural, ethnic and ideological positions of their proponents. The publication of *Liberty and Liberalism* in 1887 (and republished this year by the Centre for Independent Studies), an intervention in Australia’s nationhood debate by *laissez faire* advocate Arthur Bruce Smith, is one example of a positioned play. The space of the nation thus set the physical boundaries to both society and economy, while the idea of the nation as the dominant organisational space for society was utilised to varying ends and for particular political goals, for guarding territorial “possessions” and “identity” against threats from “outside” and “inside” the colonies and so on.

Such Antipodean imaginings of the nation are particularly revealing of the persistent reinforcement of national boundaries and spaces. In Australia, nationalism developed in a variety of arenas in response to a multiplicity of forces including the growing pressure to break-away from Britain, to forge a shared social and economic identity, to establish political coherence of the states and to accept and contain the foreign landscape. Yet an Australian identity that can be sourced in the late 19th century literature of Morant (“The Breaker”), Paterson and Lawson endured into the mid 20th century with the works of Ward (*The Australian Legend*) and Horne (*The Lucky Country*). Concurrently, landscape painters that concentrated on Australian themes expanded through the prominent works of artists such as Tom Roberts (1856-1931), Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) and the Heidelberg School. While the subject and intent of these literary and artistic works are immensely varied, they reveal attempts to create a unified Australian identity grounded in ideas of the bush ethos which stressed mateship, self-reliance, communal effort, distrust of authority and the harshness of the Australian landscape; despite evolving frequently in Australia’s dominant urban regions.

While the Australian identity was promoted as an arena for a newly found cultural expression onwards from the late nineteenth century, the social sciences participated similarly in the nation-building project. In economics, studies of national economic and industrial performance and

policy, and later, Australia's relationships with other nation-states, reinforced national boundaries and territory. Early geographers generally took an environmentally-determinist view of the Australian nation in mapping, pioneering even, the untraced spaces of the interior and the economic spaces of the cities. The geographical representations reveal how, despite new forgings of identity, extant forms of colonialism and silences regarding Indigenous People continued.

So, throughout the twentieth century, social scientists accepted the space of the nation uncritically as a key unit of territorial analysis, even at times of crisis in Australia's modernity project. In parallel critiques of the direction of postwar Australian society, for example, Robyn Boyd's (1960) *Australian Ugliness*, Donald Horne's (1964) *The Lucky Country* (Penguin, Melbourne), and Peter Coleman's (1966) edited collection, *Australian Civilization* (Cheshire, Melbourne) worry about the progress of Australia, but assume, nevertheless, that the nation had come into being unproblematically with natural correspondence between continental, political, societal and cultural boundaries available for playing out an Anglo-sourced nation-building project.

Perhaps awareness of the constructed nature and hence the uncertainty of the nation as a territorial space emerged in the 1980s. Academics and the polity, in particular, in Australia and elsewhere, showed growing understanding of the constructed nature of the concepts of nationality, community and ethnicity. Most prominently in Australia, there was a rising tide of academic and political awareness of a catastrophic clash between the aspirations of white Australia and the lived experience of the Indigenous Peoples. It was slowly being realised that for Aboriginal People the idea of nation had represented more a threat than a desired form of society. Postcolonial writings quickly exposed the relationships between nationalism and colonialism and the consequences for Indigenous Peoples, recognising, still, an underlying, even nationalistic hope among white Australians that reconciliation can be engineered within the national political space so settler Australia would finally be "at home".

Other events from around the 1980s have similarly unsettled the Australian nation as normal territorial vessel. Most powerfully these have involved reconstructions of national economic and political spaces through the forces of globalisation, nation-state deregulations, neoliberalism and new forms of transnational migration. Thus, the nation state as an absolute category has become increasingly destabilised by changing political-economic and cultural relations, though with varying levels of survival.

From within the academy, contemporary debates on economic crisis, globalisation and postmodernism (captured controversially in Harvey's 1989 *Condition of Postmodernity*) reveal ideas on space that have dramatically reconceptualised spatial theory and the colonial/national realisation of space. These shifts are attempted to be captured through political-economic terms such as "post-Fordism" and "flexible accumulation" and are partly representative of significant changes in global structures featuring transnational circuits of capital and supra-national regulatory realms as new and dominant organisational devices of the contemporary world. However, the idea of postmodernism also signals (to many) the end of the idea of modernism as the western world's motivator, with the practice of modernity (especially in the UK and USA) providing the tool box of choice for nation-building tasks elsewhere. Postmodernism necessarily rejects meta-theory, is suspicious of the existence of general process, elevates the importance of signification and embraces contingency. Postmodern research, then, has generated interest in many scales beyond the nation. Perhaps most commonly, urban space is seen as the centre of

postmodern activities. For example, it is the global or postmodern city that features in analysis of consumption, signification, gentrification and so on, alongside new ways contemporary economic processes are performed. So, too, the city is used to explore the enculturated nature of economic spaces and behaviours.

Yet the Australian experience of postmodern space and times is analysed largely (and once again) via ideas and metaphors appropriated from the northern hemisphere, especially from Australia's Anglo-hearth. The urban condition, for instance, is measured off on a scale of movement towards global (underpinned by economic criteria) or postmodern (underpinned by cultural criteria) city status. Spatial concepts underpinning Sydney's alleged re-spatialisation involving inner-outer, east-west and knowledge worker-ancillary worker binaries and polarisations, for example, are imported from, and related back to, US and UK urban research, applied uncritically as a type of universal theory of urban space. Metaphors such as "industrial clusters", "knowledge arcs" and "creativity hot spots" – like "ghettos", "sun belts" and "rust belts" in other times – have become embedded in Australian analytical and political discourses and, thereby, rebuild imaginings of the urban; which, of course, have enormous implications for the enactment of urban management.

As in the case of postmodern theory more generally, however, studies of specific urban contexts, patterns of work and colonial heritage are capable of yielding alternative concepts for imagining space and rebuilding its material form. So too, with appropriate critical awareness, imported ideas and concepts can become Antipodean through processes of conversion and performance. Moreover, many spatial representations can be incorporated into policy and popular discourse with material results that are necessarily Antipodean in effect. Thus the key to exploring the policy outcomes of spatial concepts is an understanding of the origins (genealogies) and translation of ideas on space. This project seeks to advance such an understanding.

Translating spatial imaginaries into practice and materialities

A genealogy of space as both an idea and as material realisation is a worthwhile practice in its own right, providing a timely review of space in the social sciences in an Antipodean context. Yet, spatial management policies ensue directly from these conceptualisations of space through their intent, translation and realisation. As discussed above, the Australian landscape and its Indigenous Peoples were mapped and contained by colonial boundaries and frontiers arising from early colonial imaginings of space. The importation of urban grids and their necessary translation into ideas for property delineation and transport routes formed the foundations of Australian settlement. Civic and economic imaginings were translated into the creation of national boundaries, a national capital, government powers and roles, and the conduct of international relations. In contemporary settings, technical constructions of space through new data configuration and collection technologies (for example associated with GIS-based delivery of national census data) build new performance measurement tools for human services delivery, while new forms of international migration build new legal definitions of Australia's maritime boundaries, and so on. Simply, how we conceive space and the spatial constructs used to order our understanding of social processes translate directly into policy forms.

One series of events in recent Australian history demonstrates the complex interrelationships between space as idea and space as material realisation, and that there are specific policy outcomes of ideas on space. The High Court's *Decision on Mabo 1992* and the subsequent *Native Title Act 1993* represent significant spatial moments in which colonial/Cartesian imaginings of

space are challenged. The overturning of *terra nullius* as a legal precept occurred in the political context of expanding recognition of the rights of Indigenous People, especially those involving land. The Mabo decision offered the hope of a widespread shift in consciousness among white Australians that might include recognition of a history of colonially-inspired land occupation practices involving violence, paternalism and containment. Yet while many non-urban spaces have been re-negotiated along these lines, outcomes have been largely incomplete and unstable with continuing regression of rights in succeeding acts of parliament, exclusion of certain aspects of Aboriginal culture such as sea rights and protracted legal processes driven by Western understandings of space, among a range of other issues. Rose describes the post-Mabo process as a “hall of mirrors” in which the European self has reflected itself in subsequent dialogue, continually verifying its dominant position and worldview. The “hall of mirrors” metaphor can also be used to capture how hegemonic ideas of space can be (re)claimed through contained political and popular debate. The concept is similarly useful in describing the frequent repression of spatial imaginings within the social sciences. Certainly, there is Australian work that can be enlisted in this investigation: Instone (2000) on Australian animals, and Kerkin (2002) on public space in Melbourne, for instance, provide specific examples of the human behaviours that derive from specific spatial imaginings. Examples like these – in a post-Mabo, post-modern, post-structuralist, globalised world – need assembling in an audit and assessment of spatial ideas for the enrichment of social sciences in Australia.

Conclusions

So three brief conclusions. The first is that rarely will we encounter neatly recoverable events like Chifley’s importation of the Bretton Woods agreement which became the architecture for a post-war Australian national economy. We live in a hall of mirrors, acquiring and deploying a variety of spatial metaphors concurrently, reflecting these back on existing metaphors and moulding them into hybrid forms to reflect and mould our spatial landscapes once more. Unpacking and recovering key theoretical metaphors will always be an incomplete, partial process.

Second, and irrespective of this partiality, the process builds a self consciousness about how we build and use spatial theory. This is important for its own sake, for building greater understanding about the interrelationships between thought, language and the work we do.

But, third, beyond this indulgence, the process of building a theory self-consciousness shows us how we are complicit in the construction of our spatial landscapes, how we frame policy possibilities, who gets a say, who wields power, and how success is judged.

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