New Global Studies

Transnationalism and the Scalar Politics of Imperialism

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In this paper I would like to reflect upon the transnational nature of my research, especially the particularly geographical rationalities that inform it, and the methodological challenges and opportunities that arise from this transnationalism. One point I will return to throughout this piece is that transnational approaches should foreground *experience* as a useful antidote to the reifying tendencies that infuse much work on globalization. This focus on experience refers to the objects and subjects of our study, but also to our experiences as researchers: our transnational experiences in conducting research; our engagement with transnational processes during our careers; and the experiences more generally that make us attentive to the significance of transnational movements, frames of analysis, and political agendas. I have been prompted to reflect on such issues as my work has migrated from a micro-political interest in Delhi's landscapes of ordering to a more networked approach to its very internationalist spaces of prostitution regulation.[1]

The latter project obviously raised a new set of research questions compared to my earlier work. Firstly, *who* are we to consider as transnational? This question was inspired by debates in urban and economic geography regarding whether "all cities are world cities" or whether we must consider all cities to be ordinary and thus in some way unique.[2] The correlative question would be who is transnational? Anyone who has been affected by a piece of visual culture, a spike in grain prices, or the military conscription of a family member; that is, acts which can be traced to an origin outside of one's nation? Or does one have to have physically transgressed the boundary of the nation, or have been directly affected by someone or something that has? While imperial agents are often accepted as transnational, attention is gradually turning to charity workers, missionaries, traffickers and nationalists as agents of transnationalism.[3] The second question regarded *what* is transnational? One of the chief motivating problems for colonial administrators was that venereal diseases were as successfully transnational as European capital (and were transferred by the same agents) within the vast networks of "British syphilization."[4] Similarly problematic in their mobility were obscene publications and traffickers.[5] These morally

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[1] S. Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Oxford, 2007). , S. Legg, "Governing Prostitution in Colonial Delhi: from Cantonment Regulations to International Hygiene (1864-1939)," *Social History* 34:4, (2009), 447-467,

[2] A. King, *Urbanism, colonialism and the world economy; cultural and spatial foundations of the world urban system* (London, 1990); J. Robinson, *Ordinary cities: between modernity and development* (London; New York, 2005).

[3] D. Lambert and A. Lester, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2006).

[4] J. Joyce, *Ulysses* (London, 1922 [1986]). 266.

[5] D. Gorman, "Empire, internationalism, and the campaign against the traffic in women and children in the 1920s," *Twentieth Century British History* 19:2, (2008), 186-216; D. Heath,

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degrading outflowings from Europe threatened to degrade the view of imperial metropole from Enlightened centre of progress to global contagion.[6] The response was to foster a market for the export of ideas, championing the abolition of tolerated brothels, the abandonment of state registration of prostitutes, and a new hygienic purity of conduct that would defeat both venereal disease and the contamination of the imperial social body.

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In addressing these historical events and research questions I was drawn to a broader body of research that has been termed the "new imperial history."[7] Through drawing upon the methodologies and theoretical leanings of cultural studies and post-structuralism, this reinterpretation of imperial history has brought to light previously neglected imperial relations of gender-race, violence and power-knowledge. But it has also helped to end the cyclical debate about the metropolitan or peripheral source for the impulses of imperial expansion or retraction by emphasising imperial "networks."[8] Rather than emphasizing the relations between, say, London and Calcutta, this broad school of research investigates the links between sub-imperial poles or between colonies and empires. As applied to India, this research has teased out the legacies of nationalist historiographies on Indian self-representation, analyzed the networks through which India engaged with the outside world, and has highlighted the significance of colonial India as a sub-imperial node.[9] Other studies have sought out networks that stretched Indian influence further afield, and through different agents, such as Indian revolutionaries in interwar Germany, San Francisco or London. This collection of works provides an increasingly rich and provocative body of research that forces us to confront the question of India's outside life.

But one potential problem with this work is that it can encourage us to respond to the questions *who* are transnational and *what* is transnational with the answer that it is those people and those things that are *mobile*. The result is that we as researchers must become similarly mobile, tracing out Indian experiences in the police archives of Singapore, the railway account books of Uganda, the

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Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia (Cambridge, 2010).

[6] P. Fleming, "Fighting the 'red plague': observations on the response to venereal disease in New Zealand 1910-1945," *The New Zealand Journal of History* 22:1, (1988), 56-64,

[7] S. Howe, *The new imperial histories reader,* (Oxon, 2010).

[8] A. Lester, "Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass* 4:1, (2006), 124-141,

[9] D. Ghosh and D. Kennedy, *Decentring empire: Britain, India and the transcolonial world* (London, 2006); A. Tambe and H. Fischer-Tiné, *The limits of British colonial control in South Asia: spaces of disorder in the Indian Ocean region,* (Oxon, 2009).

debating halls of Berlin or the revolutionary meeting halls of San Francisco. An alternative to this approach is to view India itself as always already transnational and cosmopolitan. The majority of people in India could not afford to be transnational and, even if they could, they may have had no desire to cross the caste-defiling black seas. How, then, to balance an interests in the mobility of influences, ideas and materials with the fixity and immobility of life than many Indians experienced? One solution to this methodological quandary is to explore the rich literature on relational geographies. While Geography for many people still equates fairly directly with either rivers or maps, human geographers have etched out a sophisticated lexicon which helps us to create a more complex cartography of our relationships to the earth. These terms include space, place, scale, network, environment, and landscape. Over the last twenty years in particular, geographers, philosophers, and scientists have worked to consider the relational properties of each of these terms. For instance, space is now commonly viewed not as a Euclidean absolute, nor as a relative measure between objects, but as a series of relationships between subjects and objects that is constantly being remade.[10] Similarly, the emotional and cultural attachments that make places out of space have been de-romanticized and de-essentialized to expose the external and worldly constitutions of the most intimate of places. Cultural geographers have long shown that "landscape" as a way of seeing, or as an experienced material place, draws upon distant traditions of visual representations, town planning, agricultural labor management, or photographic composition.[11] Similarly, debates over climate change or ozone depletion have illustrated both how global environments, as well as global politics, economics and cultural dispositions, impact upon local ecologies. One spatial metaphor that has come to encapsulate these relations is that of the "network."[12] The term has been taken as especially pertinent to contemplating the technological time-space compression of the distance between places in a globalized world, and the social activity or contact formation that result. It has also been used to think about new processes of "governance" that are not bound to states, and which transgress boundaries of public/private, economy/civil society and of the local/transnational.[13]

The danger of thinking in the terms above is that it may encourage the belief in processes that operate at particular scales: global capital; international

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[10] For example see M. Jones, "Phase space: geography, relational thinking, and beyond," *Progress in Human Geography* 33:4, (2009), 487-506,

[11] D. Crouch, "Flirting with space: thinking landscape relationally," *Cultural Geographies* 17:1, (2010), 5-18,

[12] H. Knox, M. Savage and P. Harvey, "Social networks and the study of relations: networks as method, metaphor and form," *Economy and Society* 35:1, (2006), 113-140,

[13] W. Walters, "Some critical notes on 'governance'", *Studies in Political Economy* 73:Spring/Summer, (2004), 27-46,

health; national identity; regional economics; local politics; domestic violence.[14] A progressive transnationalist perspective would examine the way in which such processes get named into being and highlight the consequences of such reification. This scalar politics is, I would argue, inherent to Foucault's approach to understanding the *Birth of Biopolitics*.[15] In his recently translated lecture courses he outlines the emergence of the belief in population, economy and society as domains with their own semi-autonomous processes.[16] This epistemic shift was at once one of political theology, in which godly processes at a level "higher" than the human were supplemented by those of demography, political-economy and civil society. But it was also an epistemic shift, in that reified processes, akin to the laws of nature, were imagined into being and statistically quantified. This risks sacrificing the importance of the individual to the priorities of the economy, population or society, and demotes individual agency beneath structural change. A counter-approach highlights the dependence of reified processes upon individual conduct and discipline, and thus highlights the capacity of local processes to disrupt and challenge broader-scale phenomena. Such an emphasis can disrupt, therefore, the natural appearance of scalar processes. One way of doing this is to focus on the *experience* of transnationalism, focusing on place and period specific ways in which scalar processes appear autonomous, how the lengths of their networks become apparent, and the effects they have through naming.

Operationalizing this, however, poses its own challenges. Performing transnational research necessarily involves the study of more than one nation, with all the differences in context and historiography this suggests. But this also forces the researcher into new types of academic engagement. My research into prostitution in Delhi augmented my previous work on urban housing, policing and improvement with work on zoning, sexuality, and colonial health. However, the subsequent attempts to increase the length of the networks which I followed out from the archive in Delhi brought different challenges of writing and research. Working on national scale legislative debates required an awareness of debates over women and colonial law, and debates in sexology over the nature of the brothel. My investigation of imperial scale campaigning for the abolition of brothels, in this case by the representative of the Association for Social and Moral Hygiene (AMSH) in India, brought me into dialogue with debates regarding

[14] S. Legg, "Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers NS* 34:2, (2009), 234 - 253,

[15] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke, 2008).

[16] S. Legg, "An 'Indispensable Hypodermis'? The role of scale in *The Birth of Biopolitics*," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 2:1, (2009), 219 - 225,

"imperial feminism" and international civil society.[17] Finally, an analysis of the influence of the League of Nations on Indian trafficking policies necessitated an awareness of literature in geopolitics, international relations and international law.[18]

As such, is transnationalism inseparable from interdisciplinarity? This need not strictly be the case, as it is quite possible to move from a national to an international historical methodology. Indeed, it may well be *more* provocative to maintain one's approach to research and apply it to a different scale. As Foucault commented of extending his work from local sites to those of national and international governmentalities: "… the analysis of micro-powers is not a question of scale, and it is not a question of a sector, it is a question of point of view."[19] But there must also be great value in shifting ones register, reading and form of questioning, even if retaining ones "point of view." In this sense, the parallels between interdisciplinarity and transnationalism become apparent. Just as interdisciplinarity emerged against the restrictive constrains of disciplinarity, so transnationalism emerged against the striations of methodological nationalism. Drawing upon Foucault's work, Reese suggested that disciplinary knowledge seeks the advancement of scientific understanding, even if it does limit ones freedom of enquiry.[20] Likewise, nationalist historiographies have advanced understanding whilst drawing up territorial epistemic borders. There have, however, been more cautious readings of the benefits of interdisciplinarity that can encourage a more critical approach to transnationalism. Mitchell, in reflecting upon "visual culture," asked whether it was genuinely interdisciplinary, or whether this term was just a euphemism; an assumed "good thing" that doesn't actually tell us much: "Interdisciplinarity, in short, is a way of seeming to be just a little bit adventurous and even transgressive, but not too much."[21] For Mitchell, the more continually provocative approach, and the one least amenable to institutionalisation, was "indiscipline"; the turbulence or incoherence at the inner or outer boundaries of disciplines. Implicitly drawing, again, on Foucault's comparison of discipline as routinized and surveilled behavior and disciplines as categories of knowledge, Mitchell contrasted disciplines (as continuity of collective practices) with indiscipline (a rupture or breakage; a questioning that has not yet been routinized). To what extent, drawing upon these comments, can

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[17] S. Legg, "An intimate and imperial feminism: Meliscent Shephard and the regulation of prostitution in colonial India," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28:1, (2010), 68-94,

[18] Legg, "Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India."

[19] Foucault, 186.

[20] T. F. Reese, "Mapping Interdisciplinarity," *Art Bulletin* 77:(1995), 544-549,

[21] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and visual culture," *Art Bulletin* 77:(1995), 540-544,

transnationalism be thought to have retained its transgressive nature, before slipping into institutionalisation? And what disciplining work does it do?

Firstly, there is no doubt that transnationalism is well on its way to institutional embeddedness. Grants, institutions, symposia (like the one from which this paper emerged) and even academic departments are now devoted to exploring transnationalism and its potential to provide histories of the global present. This need not mean that transnationalism becomes any less transgressive, so long as it remains attentive to its own origins and limitations. One of these, which forms part of its inherent disciplinary nature, concerns the nation itself. Despite the best intentions of transnationalism, it must necessarily retain the nation as its semiotic core. Just as with post-modernism or postcolonialism, what comes after is tethered to what went before. Likewise, transnationalism is necessarily defined by the nations which is transgresses. How, for instance, does its methodology compare to that of studying *inter*nationalism or globalization? And how does it exclude transgressive forms of movement that do not cross a national divide? Can one study transnationalism in a period before nations? Was colonial India a nation-state? Or did India only acquire a nation when it acquired independence? If so, and if we identify nations with an ethnic or racial affiliation to territorial space, was pre-independence India a series of smaller nations within the colonial state? And if so, were the nationalists that worked to thread them together transnational? Such nominalist debates are not of purely academic interest; they were intensely debated during the interwar period that is at the center of my research. The League of Nations was delimited to investigations of inter-national trafficking, for instance, not of trafficking within India. As the head of the AMSH in London, Alison Neilans, wrote to her representative in India of the difficulties facing the League's Commission into trafficking in India: "The real truth about the Commission's work in India is that they were held up by the terms of reference, namely, that they were to investigate International traffic and not Inter-State and Inter-racial traffic."[22] The British Government and the Government of India fought fiercely to define what transnationalism was in the interwar period, and were successful at keeping it beyond the boundaries of the subcontinent. How, then, to retain the radical edge to transnationalism?

One way to do this is to think of transnationalisms as assemblages. This approach is gaining increasingly common currency, although it has well established intellectual forbearers.[23] Emerging from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage theory focuses on heterogenous and emergent multiplicities

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[22] Women's Library, London (file 3AMS/C/5/6) Alison Neilans to Meliscent Shephard, 14th June 1933.

[23] For an early use of Deleuze in regard to transnational fractals and ethno, ideo, media, techno, and finance "-scapes" see A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2:2, (1990), 1-24,

that stress relationships over structures, change over stability, and variable scope over delimited space.[24] It can be applied to subjects such as the body or a factory as much as to a work of literature, a political concept, or a desire. So as to emphasise the radical instability at the heart of both assemblage theory and the subjects it is applied to, existing work has emphasised "lines of flight" and Deleuze and Guattari's much quoted emphasis on "de-territorialization," which push us to look beyond scalar delimitations of our work in a way inherently appealing to transnational analysis. What I have argued, however, is that assemblages also settle, have periods of stability, and re-territorialize. [25] Assemblages emerge from, and temporarily return to, ordering forms of security, which Foucault referred to as apparatuses.[26] Assemblages, therefore, both destroy and transgress territorial boundaries as well as solidifying and creating them through the very act of their mobility and diversity. I would also argue that, in the same process, they de- and re-scale space, determining what is considered to be local, regional, national etc. in any period or place. It is this interflow between security apparatuses and trans-local, -regional, -national assemblages that inform my research. Assemblage theory works to de-reify structural processes into specific manifestations, studying the "global" through its local sites and workings.[27] It is with these theoretical lodestars that I am attempting to navigate a route through the archive that highlights the historical experiences of transnationalism, and encourages us to reflect upon the academic privileges of transnationalism in the present which we exploit in order to analyze these mobilities of the past.

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[24] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987). , G. E. Marcus and E. Saka, "Assemblage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23:2-3, (2006), 101-106,

[25] Legg, "Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India."

[26] P. Patton, *Deleuze and the political* (London, 2000), 42.

[27] W. Larner and W. Walters, *Global governmentality: governing international spaces* (London; New York, 2004); A. Ong and S. Collier, *Global assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological questions,* (Oxford; Malden, 2005).