



The fertility of mobility: Impulses from Hawaii

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“Concepts are more important for what they do than for what they mean. Their value lies in the way in which they are able to provide a purchase for critical thought upon particular problems in the present”

(Rose, 1999, p. 9)

Introduction

As a concept, mobility has permeated many disciplinary frameworks with the possibilities evident in the variety and continuity of the ebbs and flows of women, men and children. The antiquity and persistence of mobility among people living in the Western Pacific has been a fertile site for the geographical inquiry into mobility beginning with Chapman in the Solomon Islands (1970) and Bedford in Vanuatu (previously the British New Hebrides) (1973). In the absence of vital statistics and where many languages aside from English co-exist, Pacific population geographers focussed on population mobility and undertook the challenge of working in colonial and post-colonial places. As a direct refutation of Zelinsky’s demographically inspired theory of the mobility transition that cast population mobility and modernisation as intimate companions (Zelinsky, 1971), Chapman and Prothero (1985) were interested in the existence and nature of pre-modern mobility patterns in the Western Pacific. In the energetic scholarly and policy debates around issues of population distribution since that time, the concept of mobility has proved to be both remarkably resilient and remarkably fertile. Few North-based population geographers have actively engaged this literature (but see Lawson, 2000), but the fertility of this early scholarship has been marked by the mobility of population concerns into other sub-disciplinary areas of critical geography. In this brief paper I trace some trajectories from the teachings of population geography at the University of Hawaii that successfully engendered this geographical scholarship at the same time as other American geographers have rendered it insignificant.

Pacific mappings

A scholarly focus on mobility in the Pacific shows much mainstream migration analysis in population geography to be narrowly focused on substance, approach and regional concern (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993). This continues into other areas of concern for population geography. For instance, Boyle (2003, p. 616) focuses on fertility research

and identifies a particular ‘geography of geographical study of fertility’ but appears content to leave ‘the South’ as an undifferentiated part of humanity in much the same way that theories of ‘European’ fertility patterns have persisted. Various reasons have been posited for why Pacific population geography, and by implication geographies from other ‘out-of-the-way places’, has been rendered invisible on the intellectual canvas of both geography and population studies but some arguments point to the marginalizing effects of the politics of knowledge (see Skeldon, 1995; Underhill-Sem, 1999, 2001). Although much of this early work in the Pacific was cast in the mechanistic and technocratic framework common to much early migration work undertaken at the same time, there were distinctly different approaches that had distinctly different trajectories. This was most evident in the use of the concept of mobility as simultaneously a material and symbolic process. Scholars with a humanist leaning worked fruitfully with this concept while those focusing on migration as a concept succumbed to increasingly obsolete mechanistic explanatory systems. This humanistic impulse of mobility studies as taught by Professor Murray Chapman, in the Department of Geography at the University of Hawaii of Manoa, was enough to move my own work in the direction of feminist post-structuralist analysis of fertility in Papua New Guinea. This paper pays tribute to Professor Chapman’s work in sustaining an interest in population mobility as a concept and his keenness to encourage people from ‘out-of-the-way’ places to undertake graduate studies in geography in North America. There is little doubt that there are still too few ‘under-represented’ voices in the academy, a feature that amplifies the long understood complicity of Anglo-American geographical imaginations to reinvent geography in its own image (Berg and Kearns, 1998; Vaiou, 2003). Yet, as in any intellectual discipline there were spaces for engagement with the unfamiliar, and in this paper I argue that the concept of mobility provided fluidly fertile ground for critical population geographies.

Beginning with circulation

Circulation in population movement, especially in the Western Pacific was the intellectual passion of Professor Murray Chapman at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the East-West Centre (Chapman and Prothero, 1985; and Bedford, 1999 for detailed review of Chapman’s contributions to geography). Building on his experiences as an antipodean scholar in North America, Chapman’s efforts to instil in his

graduate students a concept of population mobility went further than he might have expected. Far from being cloned Chapmanites, many of Chapman's graduate students, the majority of whom were from Asia and the Pacific, became mobility (as distinct from circulation) scholars. Rather than faithfully working to a source of authority, Chapman's students took the possibilities provided by a fluid concept to develop an ethos of enquiry that was able to be inventive and articulated in non-English-speaking environments (Ashan *et al.*, 1999; Firman, 1999; Mantra, 1999; Singanetra, 1999; Underhill-Sem, 1999; Liki, 1999). Much of this work built on micro-level research into geographic mobility in the Pacific and Asia in the 1970s that revealed complex forms and directions of movement.

Over two decades ago, a year-long seminar series organised by the Development Studies Centre of the Australian National University focused on 'Population Mobility and Development in Southeast Asia and the Pacific'. The published papers of the conference of scholars and planners that concluded the seminar series (Jones and Richter 1981) recognised the multi-faceted nature of population mobility and the need to recognise that "the variety of forms of movement must be considered if we are to reach a balanced view of the role of mobility in the development process" (Jones and Richter 1981, p. 5). Smarter and more imaginative analysis was called for to capture the short-distant, short-term and seasonal mobility evident in the work of, for instance, Hugo (1981) and Mantra (1981). In addition it was recognised that the analysis of population mobility needed to "*mesh a series of micro- and macro-studies so that synergistic benefits [would] be realised and the frontiers of knowledge expanded*" (Jones and Richter 1981, p. 8).

This scholarly effort showcased a number of studies set within a range of different intellectual frameworks that together highlighted the importance but complexity associated with understanding population mobility in the region at that time. Stimulated by continued interest from Pacific policy-makers, two large-scale studies were published in the mid-1980s with similar objectives to synthesise the results of the large number of research findings specifically on migration and use them to guide appropriate development policy. Based on reviews of the same studies, these two studies came up with two contrasting sets of conclusions and policy recommendations: one arguing that international migration has a negative impact on economic development and the other arguing that it plays a positive role in maintaining a satisfactory standard of living in the islands. In analysing these contradictory findings, Hayes (1991, p. 49) correctly notes that "*it is impossible to purge social science of theory, restricting discussion only to matters of established fact. What counts as a fact is in part determined by the theory employed to explain it.*" Hayes (1991, p. 49) continues by arguing "*the implication is not that social science is unable to make a contribution to policy formulation but that such contributions will be more effective if the nature and limitations of social science knowledge are openly acknowledged.*" This rare analysis of the partialities of population research stands alone on the intellectual landscape of policy development

in the Pacific. It is not surprising that the substantive focus of this critique was population mobility given the enduring impact population mobility has had on many countries in the Eastern Pacific.

Hayes (1991) also lays down a clear challenge to acknowledge the theoretical frameworks used in analysing the interaction of population movement and development. Compared to the number of PhD dissertations on migration in the Pacific undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s (such as Bedford, 1971; Friesen, 1989; Haberkorn, 1987; Hayes, 1982) there was a relative scarcity of scholarship until the end of the century (for instance Young, 1998; Liki, 1999). But another approach to population movement in the mid-1980s, that was also evident in Jones and Richter (1981), was the humanist impulse to mobility studies. It has been markedly more successful in the Pacific as it has dovetailed with the new critical social theory in the form of new cultural studies in the Pacific.

Humanism provided the underlying energy behind the 15th Pacific Science Congress in New Zealand in the form of an interdisciplinary symposium on mobility, identity and policy in the Pacific (Chapman 1985). The expressed rationale of this symposium was to explore the "*approaches and techniques from the humanities ... for the light they might shed on human processes*" (Chapman 1985, p. 2). The result of the symposium was to recognise the "*many-layered meanings ... unresolved - and often unspoken - nuances*" (Lowenthal 1985, p. 316). This sentiment was energised to some extent in the 1980s but it was not able to effectively engage with innovative scholarship, such as new social theory including feminist geography, until the mid-1990s.

Even as I wrote my masters thesis in the late-1980s on population mobility as a household strategy among a small population living on Manihiki atoll in the Northern Cook Islands, I was not tuned into feminist scholarship. Rather, drawing on my own Polynesian heritage of mobility, my small-scale ethnographic study focussed in the contradiction of some family members moving in order that others could stay on the home islands. This connection of humanist approaches to mobility and identity was part of the growth of Pacific scholars writing in other modes, with other different insights, and from other places on the margins of the Pacific (Marsh, 1999; Greenwood, 1995; Teaiwa, 1995). But it required a different and explicit political positioning to be fruitful. Driven by a growing desire to counteract the continued encroachment of colonialist endeavours, Pacific scholars engaged with the ever-changing hybridity of Pacific identities resulting from continual population mobility, both contemporary and historical, rather than the misplaced authenticity of tradition which too often featured in uncritical humanism. This required a careful act of balance because, as Diaz and Kauanui (2001) correctly note, "*the injection of mobility in how we conceptualize identity and culture can be liberating so long as the native is not lost altogether.*" In paying attention to contemporary impacts of colonial and post-colonial realities, mobility scholarship has been able to fruitfully dovetail with the exciting scholarship around of

contemporary Oceanic studies (Peters, 2000; Greenwood, 1995).

Gender in absentia

In the mid 1980s Chapman and Prothero published two collections of essays to underline the importance of more empirically informed theoretical work in the broader field of population movement. Both books, *Circulation in Population Movement: Substance and Concepts from the Melanesian Case* (Chapman and Prothero, 1985) and *Circulation in Third World Countries* (Prothero and Chapman, 1985), advanced the humanistic project to recover the individual and tune into meanings that both research subjects and scholars had of the world. However as with much humanist work of the times, there were blind spots. I recall Chapman's surprise when while proudly showing his graduate class the final covers of these books, someone in our class, the majority of who were women, commented that there were no women in the photographs. The absence of women's bodies in the group pictures in these book was highly representative of the disciplinary times at the University of Hawaii, the shores upon which feminist scholarship had yet to arrive. While women were not neglected as the focus of many studies, the key writers of feminist geographers were not on our reading lists. While there are still many geography departments reticent to engage with this scholarship for its disciplinary contributions, others have actively embraced it and, perhaps not surprisingly, other more politically inspired scholarship such as that concerning modernisation processes from a social theory perspective (Lawson, 2000).

By the time I began my doctoral studies in the 1990s, feminist geography had already shifted from a focus on claiming diversity to theorising differences. Despite the fact that population mobility remained a critical issue in the Pacific, I moved myself and family westward and in the movement my scholarly sensitivities shifted towards another critical bodily issue for women – that of their fertility – or more specifically their mortality related to their reproductive lives. So while many population geographers retained their focus on migration, I moved to join the handful of other population geographers in studying fertility with a wider framework of 'maternities'. Not surprisingly, few geographies of fertility engaged with feminist geography (but see Sporton, 1999) and hence my intellectual framework involved moving into intellectual spaces in other disciplines. Thus combining the fertility of my early study of mobility studies with the fertility of feminist geography, I am keen to develop a feminist post-structuralist population geography that would look at how biologically grounded categories are formed and the ways by which women and men are achieving identity through performing mobility and fertility (Underhill-Sem, 2000).

Critical to my feminist geography was the recognition of politics in the academy. My simultaneous involvement in an international feminist research and advocacy non-government organisation DAWN (Development Alternatives

for Women in a New Era) ensured that my intellectual pursuits were articulated in a variety of forms, such as articles in academic journals and publications by non-government organisations, advocacy within United Nations conference processes, presentations in scholarly conferences, and advocacy videos. In spite of many arguments that feminist post-structuralism was incompatible with emancipatory women's movements, I found otherwise. Like many of my colleagues in the women's movement, I recognise that there are many possible ways of advancing the feminist project to ensure women and young girls are able to fully achieve their desires, hopes and ambitions. These possibilities emerge not from complex theoretical undertakings, but from a political urgency to make changes that benefit women.

Conclusion

Arguments that render the Pacific invisible (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993) or poised to disappear (Ward, 1995) overlook the insights that came from early Pacific population geographies. These insights have not emanated from the growth in data made possible by advances in computer technology. They do not arise from the reduction of data collection to manageable and affordable law abiding processes. Rather, it has been the fertility of the concept of mobility that has allowed for conceptualisations of population processes and issues that has moved Pacific scholarship into new terrain. Much can be said about the individuals who made this possible but place also matters. It is also the constitutive nature of place and people that promises to reinvigorate both population geography as well as other critical social geographies.

More recently, in the context of geo-political reconfigurations wrought by globalisation, the concept of population mobility retains a critical purchase on framing many of the problems associated with people moving between territorial boundaries at a variety of scales. Successful engagement with theorising mobility has occurred where population geography has engaged with social theory. Lawson (2000) shows this particularly well, especially as she works with transnational studies. This highlights the problematics of place in a geography that holds too tightly to regional imperatives. I argue that the fertility of working with the concept of mobility rather than migration, has contributed to more inclusionary geographical imaginations. Early humanist geography made a sensible critique of modernist hierarchies by returning to 'authenticity'. But in the current geo-political situation, personal politics centred on the concerns of post-colonialism and feminism provides a more nuanced analysis that advances both critical thinking and eventually more progressive social policy.

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