

Regions and Regionalism in a Resource Based Economy: Australian Perspectives on Regional Studies

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Australia's pattern of regional development diverges substantially from the experience of Europe and the USA and this is a reflection of Australia's brand of Federalism, the nature of the economy, urban settlement processes and the adoption of neoliberal philosophies of government. These processes have affected the nature of regional studies in Australia with respect to its subject matter, geographical focus, the distribution of both practitioners and researchers and engagement with wider societal debates. This paper builds upon earlier work to map out the major concerns of regional studies practitioners and researchers in Australia in the 21st Century. It argues that there has been a significant change in the scale of regional development engagement in Australia by policy makers and that academic research into regional issues reflects both an on-going concern with the performance of our national economy and an enduring focus on rural issues.

Regional research and regionalism has a long history in Australia. To a certain degree regionalism was built into the constitution of (white) Australia when it formed in 1901 with the conversion of the existing colonies into states within a federation. Certain rights, responsibilities and entitlements were preserved for the states, thereby ensuring some degree of regional devolution of power and development. Regionalism as a political movement and philosophy gathered pace in the 1940s when the Chifley Labor Government sought to establish a set of approximately 60 regions for 'development and decentralisation' at the October 1945 Premier's Conference. While this plan for a national system of regions abandoned by an incoming conservative government, both the desire and political movement for the development of decentralisation policies remained evident in Australian political life. The decentralisation ethos – essentially focussed on encouraging economic and population growth away from the metropolitan centres – gained strength in the 1960s and up until the 1980s the NSW Government retained a Department of Decentralisation (Collits 1997). Over the last 20 years regionalism and regional research has waxed and waned in response to political circumstances, shifts in the economy and a changing understanding both of Australia in itself, and its place in the world. This paper seeks to locate contemporary regional research in Australia with respect to both the history of regionalism and changing intellectual traditions. It argues that the history of regional debates in Australia – as much as geography - has shaped regional research in Australia and that the landscape of regional research across Australia has continued to evolve. The paper briefly reviews two recent summaries of regional research in Australia before sketching the evolving research agenda for Australia's regional researchers.

Understanding Regional Research in Australia

Regional research in Australia has a long history and one which has been tied to the broader political and economic debates around the development of non-metropolitan regions. Beginning in the 1960s and gathering strength in the 1970s urban and regional researchers such as Max Neutze and Frank Stillwell examined the processes

of regional growth across Australia. At the same time, researchers drawn from economics – and especially the applied areas such as agricultural economics – began to develop or apply models of regional economic growth to questions of public investment and policy.

By the early 1990s questions of regional policy had shifted from a focus on the need to decentralise population and economic activity to one concerned with measures to encourage growth locally or regionally, and this was in part a response to the on-going sluggishness of the economy after a downturn that started in the mid 1970s (see Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003; Zagorski 1989). From that point research and policy development had a much clearer focus on the strategies and actions necessary to encourage growth locally (see Stephens and Laughton 2003). This sea change in policy direction was perhaps best exemplified by the Hawke-Keating Labor Government's Regional Development Program (RDP) which was informed by advice from McKinsey and Co (1994) and sought to promote development at a regional scale in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions. Critically, however, such programs retained both a strong non-metropolitan focus and identity. It is one of the – much commented upon (Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003) – features of regional policy and studies in Australia that 'regions' appear to end at the metropolitan boundary. In Australia, regions and regionalism remains strongly associated with non-metropolitan issues, regardless of the intellectual merit of such a position. This has inevitably shaped the nature of research in this area.

In one sense, regional research and policy in Australia has been strongly influenced by local conditions and the national history of regional debates. At the same time, regional research has remained strongly connected to international debates and developments with the on-going import of ideas and concepts. Over the last two decades Australia – along with the rest of the world – has borne witness to debates around New Regionalism (Rainnie 2003), the 'creative class', cluster development, knowledge regions et cetera (see Beer 2009). Inevitably, there is a tension between local and international influences on regional research and policy and in many ways it has contributed to the continuing fluidity of this policy area.

It is important to recognise also that timing has a significant influence on political attention paid to regional issues and the volume of research undertaken on regions. Within the Australian polity, Labor Party governments have tended to focus on urban issues while conservative governments (the Liberal and National Parties) have been both politically focussed on non metropolitan regions and less receptive to independent social and economic research. Regional research, therefore, tends to be appear in 'waves' as political attention shifts into non metropolitan issues and out again, with funding for research following this cycle of political attention. For example, in the mid 1990s the conservative Coalition Government was threatened by the reactionary One Nation Party, which undermined its support in its traditional heartland. The latter part of the 1990s, therefore, witnessed substantial growth in the number of research projects and publications addressing issues of concern to non metropolitan communities (see Pritchard and McManus 2000).

Maude (2004) reviewed regional development research and policies in Australia for the period 1994-2002. He identified a number of key themes within the Australian literature on regions including research into:

- Divergence and convergence in regional incomes and growth trajectories;
- The processes of resource dependent regional growth;
- Spatial centralisation of the economy;
- New forms of spatial divide within the Australian space economy;
- The social construction of regional identity and regional problems;
- Differentiation between the capital cities;
- The processes of differentiation in rural and non metropolitan Australia;
- Indigenous issues;
- Suburbanisation versus centralisation in metropolitan areas;
- The regional effects of economic reform;
- Regional policy debates; and,
- Industry clusters.

Maude (2004) also suggested a range of ‘neglected themes’ within Australian research, including:

- New manufacturing industries such as biotechnology;
- The role of technology parks and technopoles;
- Regional innovation systems;
- Networks;
- Learning regions;
- The application of regulation theory;
- The role of social capital in regional development; and,
- International capital flows.

Beer, Tually and Cutler (2004) also produced a review of regional research in Australia but used a meta analysis of key data bases on publications. Their results are presented in Box 1 and it is worth noting that by number of publications found, the most important areas for regional research were social capital, Indigenous development, labour market development and analysis, and community development. Issues such as regional analysis or regional governance received scant attention within the corpus of published work, though it is reasonable to assume much more would be in the unpublished ‘grey’ literature’.

Box 1. Key Themes in Regional Analysis in Australia, 1998-2004

Labour market development and analysis

In excess of 150 articles were found through the meta-analysis on labour market development and analysis. A significant proportion of these articles discuss Indigenous Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). The CDEP programs plays an important role in facilitating ‘welfare to work’ among the Indigenous population and particularly in remote areas of Australia. Much of the remaining literature on labour market development and analysis discusses problems of regional labour market depression, particularly in rural areas affected by industry restructuring and structural change and concentrations of unemployment among certain demographics, i.e. youth.

Indigenous development

An extensive literature on Indigenous development was uncovered through the meta-analysis (over 160 articles). While a large section of this literature concerns the CDEP, a number of examples and case studies of Indigenous community development projects, localised Indigenous business enterprises and Indigenous cultural and heritage tourism ventures were found.

Technology transfer and industry clusters

The meta-analysis did not uncover a lot of literature on technology transfer or industry clusters. The literature surveyed largely discussed a few pre-existing examples of clusters such as the Adelaide scientific and industry research cluster and the Hunter Valley wine region cluster. The technology transfer literature largely focused on the potential for new technologies (GIS, ICTs) to assist in developing sustainable regions by improving business and agricultural practices and therefore competitiveness.

Community Development

An extensive amount of community development literature was unearthed in the databases surveyed. Much of this literature presents localised examples and case studies of community development activities being undertaken in communities across Australia. A significant proportion of the 100+ articles on this research area also highlight how community development initiatives can have a positive affect on the communities which implementing them, building social capital, community pride and a sense of identity.

Social capital, health and welfare

This research area unearthed the largest body of literature in the meta-analysis. This literature is of importance given that the Indigenous population has the poorest health and welfare outcomes of all Australians. The literature collected that does not directly relate to Indigenous health and welfare outcomes can be considered in two parts. First, is the social capital literature. As the concept of social capital has risen to prominence in recent years, there is extensive literature on this research area, most of which looks at definitional issues, measuring social capital, how a community can build social capital and the benefits of doing so. The second subset in this research area discusses regional health and welfare issues, specifically shortages of rural health care and welfare services and practitioners and demands on these services brought about by an ageing population.

Social sustainability and services

The social sustainability and services search uncovered around 40 relevant articles. Much of this literature concerns the declining provision of services in rural and remote Australia and the community and local government responses to the decline in community and social services and infrastructures in these regions. A number of articles on this topic point to the opportunities presented to communities suffering decline as a result of new information and communication technologies.

Regional Analysis

A small number of articles were located on the topic of regional analysis. These few articles used mainly census data to investigate the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of particular geographic regions. Data discussed point to the ageing of the population and declining fertility. Further, this research shows that not all regions are uniformly experiencing decline and disadvantage: rural is not synonymous with decline and disadvantage and urban is not synonymous with prosperity and advantageous economic growth.

Regional Governance

The majority of articles on regional governance concerned the Indigenous population. Such articles focused on how best to recognise and incorporate traditional Indigenous ideas of governance in economic, regional and community development and acknowledged the diversity of opinions on governance among the Indigenous population. The search for literature on regional governance in Australia revealed a shortage of non-Indigenous governance literature.

Environmental Management and Environmental Science

The environmental management literature collected through the meta-analysis largely discusses the importance of and conflicts in managing the triple bottom line: economic, social and environmental issues. The literature emphasises the need for Australians to be less environmentally intensive in their production and consumption methods and more aware of the impact they are having on the environment through economic and social processes, i.e. to consider their 'ecological footprint'. The meta-analysis unearthed a dearth of environmental science literature revealing a significant gap in regional environmental science research. Much of the environmental science literature surveyed falls under the broader environmental management research area.

Source: Beer, Tually and Cutler 2004

Beer, Tually and Cutler (2004) recognised a number of significant gaps in regional research in Australia and these included:

- Regional economic modelling;
- Forecasting the social, economic and environmental futures of regions;
- Regional governance and governance for natural resource management;
- Innovation and mechanisms for technology diffusion;
- Health outcomes and the physical and social environment;
- Social wellbeing and regional processes;
- Regional labour markets as drivers of social and economic outcomes.

Contemporary Regional Research

Current research into regional issues in Australia has been affected by a quiescence in policy concern *per se* with non metropolitan issues but at the same time there has been growth in social science research generally under the Rudd Labor Government. There are a number of new drivers shaping this research area and these reflect:

- **Australia's resource dependent economy.** Unlike most developed economies Australia barely noticed the impacts of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) which first emerged in 2008 and came to prominence in Australia in 2009. Critically, demand for Australian resources from China and India has remained strong, resulting in a resurgence of economic activity in resource-rich regions, many of which are remote. Current research has focussed on the regional impacts of a 'two speed' economy where traditional industries – such as manufacturing and agriculture – languish while mining activity burgeons. Current research is examining the impact of these changes on housing markets and social services, workers made redundant in declining industries, the labour market generally and the implications for population distribution.
- **A political concern with the impacts of climate change.** Climate change and adaptation research has emerged over the past two years as a key area for social science research focussed on the regions. The establishment of the Department of Climate Change under the Rudd Labor Government resulted in the establishment of the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) and it has released funding to examine the social, economic and institutional responses necessary to deal adequately with climate change. It is worth noting that prior to this political intervention, a number of researchers had already begun to examine these issues and investigate ways to assist the most vulnerable communities – including Indigenous communities – deal with both a carbon constrained economy and a significantly altered environment.
- **The impacts of on-going population growth on the economy and the environment** are a third contemporary driver of regional research. Australia's population grew at almost 3 per cent per annum up to 2010, and this was entirely due to a large scale immigration program. Increasingly, researchers have been concerned with the impact of such a rate of population growth and the consequences of continuing – or discontinuing – this rate of population expansion.

These new drivers of regional research in Australia add to the already established body of work summarised by Maude (2004) and Beer, Tually and Cutler (2004). Australian researchers remain active in areas of regional labour markets, the documentation of growth processes, regional development policy and social capital. Research into Indigenous development issues has probably declined over the last decade, probably as a consequence of the Howard Coalition Government's decision to terminate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Some of the gaps identified by Maude (2004) have been filled, with greater attention being paid to questions of innovation and networking over the last decade, though there remains a dearth of literature on technology parks.

Conclusion

Australian research is both similar and different to that found in other nations. While sharing a strong intellectual legacy with researchers from other countries, both geography and history distinguish Australian regional research. Historically, the association between 'regions' and non-metropolitan issues, has been highly influential and continues to shape both research funding and investigative frameworks. The geography of Australia has been influential also as the sparseness of non metropolitan populations has meant that 'local' regional development solutions have been applied at a regional scale, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The concentration of Australia's Indigenous population in non metropolitan regions has meant that much research into their concerns has been influenced by their non metropolitan locations and they, in turn, have defined the character of many of these regions.

Finally it is worth recognising that regional research in Australia remains a relatively small undertaking on contemporary academic scales. In some respects the Australian research environment in this field is less dynamic and innovative when compared with larger nations, but in large measure this reflects the diseconomies of scope and scale affecting researchers. Variable – and highly skewed – political commitment to regional issues also constrains this sector of the wider research community.

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