Theory in research on higher education
Imagining global scale and global agency

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[Opening slide]
For me theory, not methodology, has always been the main zone for new thinking, though theory is continually interrogated via empirical observation and also vice versa. In academic terms I was self-taught. Through observation of the flow of events I formed for myself philosophical precepts I later found in critical realism, such as rejection of empiricism and positivism, the Heraclitan character of reality, ever-emerging, an open ontology and unknown future.

Early in my career I moved to Monash University, where my friend Fazal Rizvi recruited me to his new Centre for Research on International Education. Until then I had worked mainly on national policy issues, like most people in higher education studies. I suddenly had to get to grips with the international and global dimension. This started my inquiry into worldwide relations in higher education, which has been my main scholarly work since then.

[Monash University Centre for Research on International Education]
Positionality is important. In commencing this inquiry, first, I was a scholar in Australia, an Anglo-European settler state located on the edge of Asia. Many people there identified with Britain, and still do. But many wanted Australia to be a republic and break all colonial ties. A minority of us were wholly convinced our future was in the region, East and Southeast Asia.

Second, before my PhD I worked in the student, teacher and faculty organisations: social democratic, preoccupied with equity, fiercely opposed to neo-liberal economic policy in education. Internationally, we understood anti-colonial movements. Australia had been an imperial possession, and the only partly independent Australian nation-state was a neo-colony that wanted to be a deputy imperial power in the Asia-Pacific. We had nothing but contempt for the post-imperial dilemmas of UK and other European powers, and for Australia's pretensions, and rejected the claims of the US to order the world.

We sided with colonised people everywhere, though we never did enough. The struggle against apartheid in South Africa had been a shaping issue that advanced support for the struggle of indigenous people inside Australia.

[Thinking through the world]

Third, I had a personal bias to 'thinking through the world', as in *tianxia*. I have carried with me a lifelong rejection of nation-centred thinking and its pathologies – war, racism and parochialism. There is more than one way of thinking through the world: mine was, and is, social democratic and Asia-focused. I no longer use a specifically Australian lens but I think that the Australian regional problem, the need to reconcile and hybridise Euro-American cultures with Asian cultures, especially the Sinic tradition, ancient and deep, is a strategic issue in the world as a whole.

So these were the normative political and cultural sensibilities I took into what became the long inquiry into 'international' and 'global'. There were also immediate scholarly issues.

Two decades ago a rapid transformation of the higher education landscape was taking place. It was not well understood. We needed to understand it, to explain it to the world and as a guide to action. This transformation had two primary aspects:

[Getting to grips with global transformations]

First communications had created a new inter-subjective realm at global level, based in the convergence and integration of knowledge, ideas and culture, including models and policies of higher education. I wanted to theorise spatiality, especially the global and its differences from and interfaces with the national. We saw the global as both a material fact and a space where agency was exercised. Manuel Castells's account of the network society, and David Held and colleagues, were especially helpful. Like them we saw global spatiality as an ever-emerging mix of positive and negative potentials.

The dominance of American perspectives and free market claims was obvious but the enlarged global space was ontologically open, less bound by history than the national, with a great range of possible imaginings and practices.

[Arjun Appadurai and global 'scapes']

With his notion of global 'scapes' Arjun Appadurai highlighted the partial openness of global social structures and potentials for diverse agency and cultural change. Diasporic communities use media and communications in the unregulated global space to develop new identity and agency. I immersed myself in the voluminous writing on the lglobal in social theory and geography. Where the global is often presented as a universal Americanisation. And often presented as the opposite to that, as a critical inter-cultural heterogeneity.

[Glonacal positionality in higher education]

With Gary Rhoades I theorised 'glonacal' higher education. We argued that higher education is active simultaneously in global, national and local dimensions or scales of agentic action. We argued that the global scale had become qualitatively more important but without diminishing the potency of the national scale, which remains central in higher education. Geo-spatial scales are not zero-sum. The scales exist simultaneously, and action in no one scale is necessarily or always dominant or determining in relation to the others. The primacy of the global, or the national, in higher education varies. It is contextually determined. It shifts and changes. This argument has stood the test of time and has been widely used.

[Commercial international education]

Second, there was much new higher education in the unregulated global space: fast-growing international student mobility, branch campuses in Asia, online educational delivery, research collaboration, and inter-university partnerships and consortia. We had mixed feelings about the growth of international education into Australia, because of its commercial character. Our continuous critique had little effect on the aggressive marketing, but did affect the rhetoric and just might have helped to humanise industry practices.

[Intercultural education and student agency]

In research on international education, we came to focus on the human rights of international students and the methodologies underlying cultural engagement. We drew from the research on mobility and identity, cosmopolitanism, racism and stereotyping. My research on international students focused on the agency of international students, for whom higher education was a process of reflexive self-formation, and on cultural

engagement on the basis of mutual respect. But in Australian universities the default position, as in the UK, was cultural superiority, 'othering' international students as inferior versions of the ideal Euro-American with global English.

[White Supremacy in the education provider countries]
As Riyad Shahjahan argues, this is a claim to White Supremacy, and this is wholly incompatible with our claim to build the educated agency of graduates. We in the Anglo-American universities must tackle this contradiction.

In Australia we were influenced by the sensibilities of the post-colonial literature, especially Edward Said, though Australia did not have an Empire problem. It was only after coming to work in UK that I became more fully aware of the wealth of decolonising writing from Africa, Latin America and de Sousa Santos in Portugal.

[Internationalisation vs. globalisation – a battle between good and evil??]
Early at Monash we came across Jane Knight's argument about the international and global. Jane saw 'the global' and 'globalisation' as a neo-liberal ideology, supporting world markets, a solely economic view of higher education, and competition as a driving principle of cross-border relations in education. She contrasted this with 'internationalisation', a positive cross-border engagement driven by educational not economic purposes. Jane later modified the negative account of globalisation, but retained her normative version of internationalisation. We rejected the argument, on several grounds.

[Geo-spatial terms without ideological baggage]
First, it was too normative. It turned geo-spatial terms like 'global' and 'inter-national' into ideological weapons, but these terms were neutral in other social science. Norms should be attached to geo-spatial descriptors rather than subsuming them. More than one interpretation of the same reality is always possible, and if we seek to control perceptions and manipulate behaviour by closing off language, we reduce the explanatory tools available to all.

Second, the Knight argument reduced what we know and understand. If the global was an ideological fiction and cross-border relations just outgrowths of nation states it was impossible to explain networked communications and the science system, which were not contained by nation-states, or to appreciate

the full impact of cross-border connections, mobility and policy diffusion, as Sebastian Conrad points out in his outline of global history as method. Third, by eliminating the global as a site of agency, Knight set aside the opportunity to explore its potentials and remained confined to the national container.

Fourth, as Rui Yang points out, the Knight position embodied a Euro-American centric view of the world, in which 'internationalising' action by Western universities was seen as uniformly positive, legitimating their intervention anywhere, freeing them to do as they wished, regardless of the often culturally dislocating effects of such interventions in situations of unequal power.

[The global, like the national, as a 'space of possibles']
So I stuck to 'global' and 'international' as neutral descriptors, and the 'global space' as what Bourdieu calls a 'space of possibles', in which all agents and projects are in play. These early theoretical moves – neutral geo-spatial concepts, multiple scales not zero-sum, ontological openness about agentic potentials– have allowed me to explore higher education empirically and to explain it in terms of relations of power and inequality, without blocking phenomena from view by theoretical closure, or ideological dogmas.