

The big “switch-back”? Challenging and (re)creating landscapes of the peripheries

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Peripheral actors and places often attract normative labels of ‘disadvantaged’, ‘poor’ and ‘lagging’ compared to those in more central positions of society. Such conceptualisations are not useful in either theory or practice, given that what is core in one temporal network may be periphery in another. Indeed, such normative ways of thinking are often based on unfounded or misplaced assumptions, and can lead to policy which exacerbates rather than alleviates core-periphery inequalities and to research which confirms embedded ‘norms’. For example, spatial ‘proximity’ and ‘clustering’ are often used in regional development to support knowledge creation and innovation. Following this, policies and strategies in Australia aiming to address inequality have most frequently used firm and labour spatial clustering to redress core and periphery imbalances. Within metropolitan areas, it has been through the hierarchical development and decentralisation of employment nodes to redistribute and equalise socio-economic activities between the urban core and suburban peripheries. In regional Australia, it has been through the bolstering of regional growth ‘centres’ which assumes labour migration and/or economic spillovers leads to the growth and development of surrounding regional communities. But, rising inequality within and between metropolitan and regional areas in Australia indicates that such policies have had limited effect.

This presentation will explore this policy paradox by first unpacking *how* and *to whom* system exclusion or inclusion occurs by looking at *who* has ‘access’ to *what*. To do so, it will first examine access and equality, as well as their links to the institutional technological and industrial drivers shaping society and economy. It will highlight the importance of spatial versus non-spatial forms of proximity (e.g., social, cognitive, organisational) in facilitating long-term development, as well as the issues that arise from such theoretical framings in the Australian context. Drawing on findings of several research projects examining the redistribution of knowledge, material and corporate resources across Western Australia, this presentation will highlight how contemporary economic and societal transformations have led to a “switch-back” in who has market access and power. It will challenge normative assumptions regarding peripheral actors and places, arguing for a more nuanced research agenda to understand the distinct processes and dynamics generating inequality and disadvantage. Such knowledge is critical to the formation of appropriate policy capable of addressing spatial imbalances between the core and peripheries.