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Critical review

Remoteness and remote places. A geographic perspective

Gerardo Bocco

Centro de Investigaciones en Geografía Ambiental, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Antigua Carretera a Pátzcuaro 8701, 58341 Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Remoteness is a complex notion. A remote place implies a distant site with reference to where the one person positing such a qualification is located. However, it would be difficult to indicate how distant or how far a place would be, in order for it to be labeled as remote. The goal of this article is to contribute to the understanding of two components of remoteness: the absolute and the relative dimensions, and to shed light on the framing of remoteness. The premise is that the very notion of remoteness has not disappeared but is continually receiving new meanings. Remoteness has been redefined, re-signified and *relocated* in our minds and practices.

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1. Introduction

A remote location is defined as being secluded or placed apart, distant, existing far away in space. Antarctica, for instance, is usually described as the most *remote* and *inaccessible* continent on Earth, while Inuit people are depicted as inhabiting a harsh milieu at the *edge* of the world (Tuan, 2013). Distant, far, edge, insular, isolated, all are significant geographic concepts. Remoteness is a complex idea placed at the core of geographic interest. A remote place implies a distant site with reference to where the one person positing such a qualification is located. However, it would be difficult to indicate how distant or how far a place would be, in order to be labeled as remote. How and in what magnitudes would such distances be measured? Where are the boundaries or edges of such places? In other words, where does remoteness occur, if indeed it occurs at all? There is no simple answer to these questions; the answers partly depend on the perspective adopted, that of the insider, i.e., people living in an area, or the outsider to a region (see Buttimer, 2015), because of the regional identity or regional consciousness of the people involved (Paasi, 2002, 2003). To answer such questions, two dimensions of remoteness must be recognized. One is the absolute, geometric dimension, related to distances as measured on parallels, meridians and over altitudes. The other is a relative, geographic dimension, subject to scale, and to connectivity rather than distance.

There has always been a contention between absolute and relative notions of remoteness. The existence of remoteness in absolute terms may be challenged on the grounds that it is always relative to a given culture and time period, and to the space-time compression process (discussed below). Most research on remote

E-mail address: gbocco@ciga.unam.mx

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regions and settlements is not sensitive to the absolute versus the relative dimensions; it rather focuses on land planning and development studies, especially in remote settlements of developed countries, for example, Northern Australia, Arctic Canada, Scandinavia or all three regions (Zhao and Guthridge, 2008; Armitage et al., 2011; Eriksen and Selboe, 2012; Carson et al., 2011). The present article takes instead a rather less studied, more theoretical perspective. The goal is to shed light on the framing of remoteness. The objective is to go beyond the contradiction between absolute and relative dimensions of remoteness, necessarily adopting (critically) the perspective of the outsider. The premise is that the very notion of remoteness encompasses both dimensions, and despite the time-space compression process, it has not disappeared but is continually receiving new meanings.

2. Methodological outline

In this research, Yi-Fu Tuan and humanistic geography posed particular interest to this work. It was speculated that this perspective would help the understanding of the relations between absolute and relative notions of remoteness, i.e., understanding the difference between a remote space and a remote place. It is argued here that these contributions, particularly related to the lived worlds of people in place (Buttimer, 2015), and Tuan's (1979) places as fields of care and topophilia as the merging of feeling and place are still timely and significant to this endeavor (Tuan, 2007).

Remoteness and related terms were used as key words in the search of two large bodies of published research: the conceptual was a major focus, and next applied (land-use planning) was used as ancillary information. First, geographical journals were searched using key words on their search engines; then references quoted therein were compiled. A large collection of papers was scrutinized and the review then focused on theoretical aspects rather than on practical examples of applied research.

3. Framing remoteness

Carson et al. (2011) in a unique book on remote populations present a set of thorough case studies on the effect and influence of remoteness on population in circumpolar regions of North America, Europe, and Northern Australia. The authors inquire whether their 'remoteness' can be considered a factor in their processes of change, while recognizing that the evolution of remote regions is affected by internal and external links (Carson et al., 2011).

The functions of remote populations are defense, resource extraction and cultural survival. Remote regions share with peripheries several characteristics: sparsely populated, with a limited range of economic activity, providing goods to external markets, relying on capital, finance and labor to be granted by urban centers, and losing particular populations, young people, retired workers to those centers (Carson et al., 2011). In general, the population at the edges is vulnerable to several strains, primarily connected to the supply of services and infrastructure. While the quality of those strains may depend on their belonging to develop or to underdevelop countries, they share a vulnerability to extinction.

An inventory of remotely located settlements would be a purely descriptive endeavor. A useful surrogate is a guideline based on absolute distance to classify discontinuities, i.e., those settlements located at the edge, poorly hooked. In this geometric rather than geographic approach, absolute rather than relative values of elevation above sea level, and absolute distances on parallels and meridians, a Euclidian space defined by Cartesian coordinates, frame a typology. Of necessity, arbitrary thresholds or vague magnitudes in distances and altitudes will be used. Thus, settlements would be remote either by latitude, altitude, continentality or insularity; islands and archipelagos deserve a special consideration.

A first category of this typology encompasses places located in extreme latitudes, where longitudes tend to merge. Circumpolar settlements would belong here. The second category includes those settlements located above a given altitude threshold, for example 4000 m above sea level, as are the highest Andean villages and hamlets. The third category includes settlements located inland, at large distances from coasts, such as Inner Mongolia or the heart of the Amazon basin. To the earth sciences, Allaby and Allaby (1999), for instance, continentality describes how the climate of a place is affected by its *remoteness* from the oceans. The fourth category harbors islands, particularly those far offshore, such as the mid Atlantic ones. The NASA Night Lights map is useful to depict the correspondence between the spatial extent of urban land use and lighted areas (http://visibleearth.nasa.gov 3100116, Small et al., 2005), but also to infer the edge of the continuity given by populated, entirely hooked regions.

Islands and the assembly of islands are concepts dear to geography. To Tuan (2007) islands are a source for imagination and fantasy, crucial dimensions of the geographic enterprise. Depending on the distance to a coastline and on its connectivity, i.e., (ferry)-boat or airplane services, islands or archipelagos may be remote in several respects: by being at an edge, being far, being ill-connected or by a combination of those. Mid-Atlantic islands provide emblematic examples, but where changes may be very dynamic, as may be the case for Saint Helena population (currently served by one of the last working Royal Mail Ships) if an airport would connect the archipelago with Cape-Town, South Africa.

Royle (2001) established that insularity, and being remote, small, isolated and peripheral, are common limitations of the hundreds of thousands of islands in oceans and seas. Lately, sea level rises, challenging small island territories and adding pressure to an already vulnerable situation, has attracted research attention and policy concern (Mountz, 2015). According to published estimations (Dasgupta et al., 2009), six out of the ten most vulnerable territories to sealevel rise effects are going to be islands. In addition, many small island-states and territories, for instance the Pacific, will face marine transgressions over the vast majority of their lands.

Peninsulas may also portray insularity. In Mexico, for instance, the small villages in the Baja California peninsula (BCP) are an example of non-island insularity. Most land-use change at the BCP scale follows urban growth of few large towns, and associated impact on surrounding peri-urban areas (Rosete et al., 2014), while dwellers in hundreds of isolated settlements construe their landscapes as small patches on a scarcely populated matrix (Alvarez et al., 2015).

The categories of this typology are not explanatory but indicative of how small settlements cluster or are scattered and isolated on Earth. Despite of its limitations, this typology depicts the edges of the core-populated regions on Earth. Most inhabitants and dwellings in isolated, ill-connected, poorly hooked settlements are located in regions described by this typology. In other words, despite of the time-space compression process, isolated, remote settlements exist, even in absolute terms, regardless geographic scale considerations.

Technological change on the transformation of distance has been gradual throughout history and exponential lately. Humanity has been conceived "... as maker of tools and technology to overcome the barriers of distance..." (Buttimer, 1990, 13); developments in transportation and communication technologies were the major driving forces, particularly after the industrial revolution, when physical changes in networks increased the