The Return of Remoteness

Insecurity, Isolation and Connectivity in the New World Disorder

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At the end of the Cold War, it briefly seemed as if the days of remote areas were numbered and it was only a question of when they would all become governed, developed, and firmly integrated into the global family of nation-states. As roads and railways, airports and mobile phones penetrated ever more distant places – or so the narrative went – remoteness would surely disappear for good.

This did not come to pass. Instead of the “flat world” once proclaimed by leading liberal voices (e.g. Friedman 2006) the world map now looks more rugged and uneven than it has in a long time. While some continue to see connectivity as the ultimate destiny of mankind, as Parag Khanna argues in his recent book *Connectography* (2016), the vision of smooth flows of global capital, labor and culture is clearly showing cracks. While some regions continue to be tied closely into the global connectography, political voices in those very regions are pushing for a retrenchment of borders and nationalism; meanwhile, other, poorer parts of the world are becoming more “distant,” at least from the viewpoint of global centers of power.

In this moment of geopolitical shifts, remoteness is roaring back with a vengeance into our politics. Of course, anthropologists never bought into breathless proclamations of a smooth new world map of globalisation, seeing these as ignorant of longer histories of global and local differentiation. Indeed, we may say that remoteness never went away, as we will see in cases throughout this special issue. Yet today, in a multitude of sites, as our contributors show, we find spatial difference remobilized in peculiar ways for an unevenly connected era, alluring and threatening by turns. In the “deep Amazon,” indigenous Sanema and Polish explorers alike forge paths through treacherous terrain to wildcat gold mines in the spirit-haunted “center” of the forest. In Southeast Asia’s “Golden Triangle,” anything goes in the special economic zone and pseudo-statelet set up by a Chinese entrepreneur—casinos and drugs, prostitution and tourism. In highland Madagascar, bandits roam the “red zones” of the hinterland, colluding with officials in the export of precious commodities for global markets. In the sub-Saharan Sahel region, from Mali to Chad, foreign soldiers congregate while locals eke out an existence from contraband and the desert’s peculiar connectivity. And in the rugged Pamirs of Tajikistan, newly

disconnected communities tend to the scraps left behind by the Soviet regime, while China's new Silk Road is roaring past only miles away.

In all these sites, in their different ways, remoteness has become a particular kind of resource that stands, we may even suggest, at the centre of a scrunched-up "shadow map" of the world, forged amid post-Cold War struggles over economic and political dominance.

To be clear, we are thus not making an epochal claim about the return of a presumably abolished geographical difference. Rather, we will delve into the peculiar material geographies and relations of power attending to this particular world-historical moment, with all its deep historical resonances. Today, a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War—with more than half this period under the "war on terror"—we find ourselves in an era in which remoteness is returning in specific ways we have yet to fully understand. In shining a light on this political return, we do not only offer an anthropological take on how the remote areas of today carry echoes of earlier eras (see Saxer, this volume), but above all explore the current re-emergence and mobilization around remoteness as a structuring device, as political idiom, as resource and as a form of practice at a time of intense yet imperiled "globalisation." In this vein, we train our collective anthropological gaze on the intersection of remoteness and power as we ask how certain parts of the world are being reimagined—once more—as remote; how they are intervened upon; how power is ascribed and relocated in such interventions; and what the legacies of anthropology and a contemporary ethnographic theorisation can teach us about these dynamics.

Remaking Remoteness

In his expansive (and entertainingly idiosyncratic) argument on remoteness, Edwin Ardener (2012) provides a beguiling account of how remote areas tend to be full of strangers and innovators, ruins and rubbish, seemingly isolated from the outside but open from within—a phenomenological diagnosis that resonates with many of the contributions in this special issue. Roaming freely from the Scottish to the Cameroonian highlands, Ardener argues that remoteness is less a function of "topographical" than of "topological" space—that is, a structural relationship of social distancing, in which those inhabiting remote areas may come to identify with their home's peculiar "far-flungness" and its vulnerability to external forces.

In a productive response to Ardener's original idea, Harms et al. (2014) argue that "remoteness is not a static condition", that is, it is "always being made, unmade and transformed," and so is part of a "field of power" (Harms et al. 2014: 362, 365). While this special issue is inspired by these theoretical reflections, we push further the debate by considering in ethnographic detail how remoteness is made and unmade in the current "world disorder" of shifting

geopolitical and economic realignments. Ardener makes his case in a distinct ahistorical fashion built around a collage of ethnographic presents, which carries a risk of essentializing remoteness as a timeless condition. Our starting point, rather, is fundamentally historical, to the point where several of our contributions actively embark on embedded histories – rather than present-day ethnographies – of the remote. Following up on Ardener’s insight that remoteness is intrinsically relational, we seek to explore the very making of this relationality by explicit reference to the wider political economies of spatial difference at a time of a deep (yet paradoxically fragile) global connectivity.

In historicising remoteness, we also must consider anthropologists’ role in the making and remaking of the remote. In his meditations, Ardener (2012: 519) notes how distance lends “enhancement, if not enchantment, to the anthropological vision.” Indeed, anthropology has long been the go-to discipline for a better understanding of remote and marginal societies, given its peculiar role in the family of postwar social sciences as the idiographic discipline of the “irrational” and unfamiliar (Pletsch 1981). Going further back, the history of anthropology’s peculiar role during colonial times, and its particular configuration of a distant “field” since this time, is all too well known to bear repeating here (Gupta and Ferguson 1997): instead, it will form a mostly silent backdrop to our reflections. We must note, however, how the “remote field” as trope and space of inquiry has been through various iterations and reinventions, from the colonial and early postcolonial reflections of Lévi-Strauss (1965) on the “deep Amazon”, Griaule (1965) on Mali’s Dogon country or Evans-Pritchard (1940) on the Nuer, who all in their varied ways sought to build a science of man from minute, presumably homogenous fragments of the “human family,” a tradition harking back to Frazer and still present in Ardener (2012) some years later.

In the post-Orientalist, poststructuralist and feminist remakings of our discipline, such societies have seen a rather different lens cast on them by anthropologists showing how complex mobilities, uneven exchanges and multi-pronged forms of domination have long tied supposedly “distant” regions into larger orders (e.g. Piot 1999). Hutchinson’s *Nuer Dilemmas* historicised and de-homogenized “the Nuer” of Evans-Pritchard by recourse to a political reading of this south Sudanese people’s predicament since colonial times, amid British “pacification” and civil war, the circulation of money and guns, and more. Similarly, Tsing’s (1993: 32) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* interrogated the “colonial panopticism” of white male ethnographers and the masculine adventurism besetting studies of Kalimantan, and instead resurrected her field as a site of political contestation: for her, “an out-of-the way place is, by definition, a place where the instability of political meanings is easy to see” (Tsing 1993: 27). In this sideways anthropological gaze on (or rather *through*) a remote area, she argued that “[t]he connections formed between remote rural areas and cosmopolitan centres involve impositions of meaning, as well as political and economic expansions” (Tsing 1993:287). Similar entanglements on

political, economic and symbolic levels are similarly present in some shape or form in more recent studies of out-of-the-way places, including ethnographies set along trade and transport routes through the Sahara (Scheele 2012) or across the Himalayas (Saxer 2016), or in texts considering the multiple linkages enabling predatory resource extraction, including Tsing's own *Friction* (Tsing 2005). Taken together, such studies have helped redraw the anthropological "jigsaw" by shuffling around the pieces of a supposedly timeless cultural mosaic, revealing in the process not just the relative and relational nature of remoteness, but crucially also the workings of power in the relationships of exchange, extraction, meaning-making and knowledge-gathering over time, including as regards the shifting nature of the anthropological project itself.

Besides historicising remoteness, our second move is to bring geography back in. We thereby depart from the line of argument suggested by Harms and his coauthors, who sought to detach the remote "from its geographical moorings" in order to understand it as a sociological rather than simply a spatial concept. Remoteness, they argue, "is not so much a place as a way of being." Building on Ardener's theorisation, the authors suggest pairing it with the notion of "edginess." As they argue, "Calling remoteness edgy means thinking of remoteness as an active process" rather than a geographical condition, "inserting a sense of the ways human beings negotiate and wield remoteness" in their daily lives (ibid.: 364). The authors productively play with the notion of "edginess" and the marginal in a set of far-reaching case studies from Amazonian shamans to central Abidjan, extending the notion of remoteness to places not commonly conceived of as remote. While this is an important step in understanding remoteness as process rather than as a timeless condition "fixed in place," we here wish to avoid emptying the notion of the remote of spatial content and equating it with marginality. In historicising, politicising and crucially *mapping* the remote in geographic terms we thus explore the repeating re-emergence of forms of remoteness as a dynamic historical and geographic process.

In this move, we are indebted to wider trends in the study of political space, reaching from the work of Ferguson (2006) and Scott (2009) to the productive recent intersection of political anthropology and political geography (see e.g. Billé 2017). Indeed, anthropology's contribution to conversations on power and territory (Elden 2009) may, as we will see, most fruitfully be deployed to explore spatial relationality in a way that cuts across epochs and scales, from the local to the "global".

In short, rather than taking remoteness as a way of being and describing it phenomenologically, we direct our gaze to the ways in which it is actively made and remade across political, material and historical scales. Our starting point is twofold: first, we see remoteness not a vestige of an earlier, presumably less "connected" era, but as an ongoing process that involves distancing as well as the selective forging of new ties. Rather than simply being disconnected, seemingly remote areas are usually shot through with uneven forms of

connectivity, wiring them to the world economy and into global politics and mediascapes. And second, we contend that the active process of making remoteness remains entangled with substantial geopolitical and often cartographic anxieties (Billé 2016) that directly affect both outside perceptions and experiences on the ground.

As we revisit Ardener and the debates his paper has triggered, we set out to understand remoteness by giving attention to what Appadurai terms “process geographies” (2000) in his call for a new architecture of area studies. Process geographies understand the large regions that dominate our current cartographic understanding of the world not as permanent geographical facts, but as “themes that generate variable geographies” (ibid. 7). These themes are, at once, “problematic heuristic devices” and “real” as that they are producing realities on the ground. Indeed, remoteness is one such theme. In this sense, the histories and politics surrounding the “return of remoteness” we trace are perhaps better framed as a broader “return of geography” to both global and subnational politics in many parts of the world. At a time that some voices may characterise as a global “interregnum” in which spheres of influence and domination are being reshaped in unpredictable ways, as old geopolitical and economic fixities are becoming unmoored, a geographical rift seems to be opening up across our contemporary *mappamundi*. While some seemingly remote areas are being wired into this global cartography at lightning speed through infrastructures of transport and telecommunication, these distance-demolishing technologies (Scott 2009: 11) remain fragile, and the time-space compression once heralded as the hallmark of our times (Harvey 1989) creates an ever more complex patchwork of distance and proximity. Seemingly remote areas, then, become connected through “wormholes” that escape the Cartesian endeavors of mapmaking (Sheppard 2002). Against this background, remoteness, indeed, is better understood as a topological phenomenon than as a purely topographical one. At the same time, however, the cartographic anxieties (Sankaran 1994; Painter 2008; Billé 2016; Saxer 2016) that develop around the topography of competing *mappaemundi*—the new “Silk Roads,” the no-go zones of the “war on terror”—have a profound and lasting effect on the topology of remoteness. It is this rift, and the frays and fragments it reveals to the anthropologist, which we collectively seek to investigate.

As we do so, we return to the verbal roots of remote—*removere*, or to remove. This helps us see remoteness as a transitive action set within the domains of terrain and power: “lifting,” dis-placing and perhaps mis-placing an inhabited area and reshaping the social space around it, in Ardener’s sense. Focusing on this active process of “removal” that implicates insiders, outsiders and various kinds of go-betweens, we wish to highlight three aspects in particular: the remaking of remoteness in relation to connectivity; the economic returns this process yields; and the politics of how remote areas thus mapped and defined may end up “remotely controlled” by outside powers. We will now discuss these three aspects in turn.

Remoteness, shot through with connections

To understand the connectivities and economics of remote areas on a broader scale, we first need to historicize their (partial) disconnections. Consider, for example, frontier economies based on mining, logging or a particular commodity boom, such as rubber in Manaus (Brazil) or copper in the Zambian Copperbelt (Ferguson 2005): when resources deplete and boom busts remoteness may return with a vengeance. Or consider the demarcation of state borders between China and its neighbors in the early 1960s and the ensuing Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian border conflicts: established routes of exchange fell in decline and busy entrepôts in the Himalayas or Central Asia turned into peripheries at the edge of nation states (see Gohain and Saxer, this issue, as well as Zhang and Saxer 2017).

The return of remoteness through partial disconnection can be related to several waves of geopolitical shifts. In the aftermath of colonialism and, later, at the end of the Cold War, new hinterlands emerged either as a result of the proliferation of new borders, the retreat of former powers, or a combination of both. Take, for example, the Pamir region of present-day Tajikistan discussed by Martin Saxer in this issue. Once generously supplied from the outside through a system of direct provisioning from Moscow, the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a sudden return of remoteness that almost led to a famine and continues to haunt the region. People find themselves struggling both with the effect of state retreat and a tightening customs regime at the border between independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Another example of remoteness-inducing abandonment and state retreat, explored by Peter Schweitzer and Olga Povoroznyuk in this special issue, is provided by towns and hamlets along the Baikal-Amur Mainline. The railway, one of the most ambitious Soviet infrastructure projects, was built to tie the vast expanse of Eastern Siberia into the Soviet economy. After the collapse, it faced a sudden decline, which radically reshaped socio-spatial relations. Erstwhile boomtowns along the railway turned into deserted ghost cities.

Such global reorderings produce not only new “centres” but also new “margins”, in Ferguson’s (2005) terms. However, while the broader geopolitical shifts echoing around the globe induce a return of remoteness to some areas, they are—more often than not—also embedded in particular visions of development *through* connectivity. Take, for example, China’s current quest to hardwire a state-sponsored “connectography” through Central and Southeast Asia as well as sub-Saharan Africa (Clark 2008; Small 2015; Callahan 2016; Rippa 2017; Monson and Rupp 2013). This connectography manifests in colorful border-crossing arrows on world maps, which van Schendel once aptly called an “arrow disease” (2005: 43). Similar arrows are used to depict the anxieties that often travel alongside such dominant visions: the fears of refugees flowing in from the margins and the trafficking routes for drugs and wildlife.

These arrows typically cross through areas considered remote. Both state-sponsored schemes to build infrastructures in the name of connectivity (from the Baikal-Amur Mainline to China's current Belt and Road initiative) as well as border regimes and international treaties meant to counter unwanted flows of goods and people are directly entwined with the making of remoteness. To understand their effects on the ground, we must steer clear of an account that simply maps the remaking of remoteness from on high. In ethnographic fashion, rather, we strive to understand the interactions among various political and geographical scales in terms of distancing and connectivity. Indeed, here we may inquire into (as one reviewer of this issue aptly put it) how power is located, ascribed to and displaced from relationships and territories in ways that produce remote configurations across scales bisecting the local, national and global.

Consider the case of the Malagasy “red zones” Marco Gardini explores in this special issue. Here, resurgent remoteness stems from complex interaction across global, national and local scales, amid a combination of (partial) state retreat and global market demand for precious resources. In the highlands of Madagascar, Gardini finds *dahalo* bandits roaming, stealing cattle and offering themselves up at private militias for foreign and national businessmen plying an illegal trade in rosewood, vanilla and precious stones. The Malagasy government has designated their fiefs as “red zones,” conjuring up the archetypal image of remoteness. In these wild places, locals allege, bandits collude with state officials to exploit resources at a time when state control of these zones is weak at best. In this context, the highlands are incorporated into global markets *through* their politically engineered remoteness in which various local actors, brokers and go-betweens—including low and not-so-low-level state officials—hold a stake. State actors have actively mapped and displaced power via the red zones, turning them into scalar pivots connecting the local site of extraction to state-sanctioned and international profiteering.

Switching continents, Amy Penfield's careful ethnography focuses more directly on the “stuff” of remote areas as she shows how in the Venezuelan Amazon, petrol, cash and minerals act as gelling agents fusing distant sites with larger markets. Poor wildcat miners, among them indigenous Sanema fearing the deep “center” of the forest, reach far-flung gold mining sites by navigating distant waterways through unruly forests. Trade networks assure the petrol required to run the machinery (outboard motors, water cannons and generators), while mafia-like structures help ferry out the commodities. The waterways, the petrol driving the canoes, and the makeshift social relations surrounding them make for a “fluid infrastructure” quite different from the roads and railways of large state-sponsored schemes, yet it is directly linked to a global market for gold. Wildcat mining fluctuates along with peaks and troughs in gold prices, leaving the trade rhythms of world financial markets inscribed as scars in the landscape.

In both of these examples, and indeed in most cases explored in this volume, the making of remoteness is shot through with connections, a notion that provides us with methodological and analytical inroads into the relations of power of fundamental concern to us. These connections, however, are not the ones depicted by the arrows on the *mappamundi* of global connectography. Such arrows, varying in color and size to render visible the flows of goods or people, typically gloss over the terrain they cross. Ground, as Tim Ingold (2019) notes, has volume. As a voluminous surface, it can neither be easily subjected to the territorial logic of the state nor the kind of connectography that finds representation in arrows on a map. Lines and arrows are “willfully ignorant” of volume, Brady (2019) observes—which is precisely why they are confronted with terrain at every turn. While the connections we are concerned with typically do adhere to certain lines, these lines are often embedded in a particular landscape: they follow certain “pathways” (Saxer 2016), such as rivers in Amazonia, or hidden trails from Malagasy forests to coastal ports, railways through Siberia or roads through the highlands of Asia. In some contexts, and especially in rugged terrain, pathways continue to be conditioned by topography—the gentle valley, the snow-free pass, the river. In the case of roads and railways, they may be cut through terrain with sheer will and the dedicated goal to replace erstwhile routes of exchange. However, such infrastructures carving out man-made pathways are typically fragile; they require steady maintenance in order not to be swallowed by forests, sand storms, or landslides.

An ethnographic approach to such pathways of exchange carries several benefits. First, it allows us to consider the material geographies through which remoteness is produced, maintained and put to work. Second, it reveals how remote places are not necessarily “out-of-the-way”; the positionality of a particular place in relation to a pathway of movement and exchange can be more important than its physical distance from an urban centre. Third, when connections are bundled along certain lines, the remoteness of an area does not necessarily decrease with more connectivity. And fourth, pathways structure socio-spatial relations and lend texture to seemingly remote areas: by channeling mobility and exchange, they produce their own hinterlands and frequently stand in competition with each other, the rise of one triggering the decline of another. Pathways, then, “jump scale” (van Schendel 2002), cutting across both spatial (local, national, global) and temporal scales. They often emerge as crucial sites in the making and unmaking of remoteness, as sites where disconnections are particularly palpable, where ambitions coalesce and visions for future connectivity gel.

Areas that undergo a process of removal shot through with partial connections often appear as “sensitive spaces” (Dunn and Cons 2014). In such spaces, wedged between overlapping projects of control, regulation and power, sovereignty appears as “aleatory” – as a form of rule by chance (ibid.: 95, 106). Take, for instance, the story of Monyul in the state of Arunachal Pradesh (India) that Swargajyoti Gohain tells in this issue. Paying taxes to Tibet while being part

of the British Empire's largely ungoverned frontier, the area has long been a crossroads in trans-Himalayan trade and pilgrimage circuits. After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, however, it suddenly became a sensitive border zone. The deployment of Indian security forces was accompanied by road infrastructures catering to the military personnel. At the same time, regular civilian forms of infrastructure, including rural all-weather roads, education and healthcare facilities, were notable by their absence. In this context, carried over to a present characterised by deep Indian "cartographic anxiety" over China's growing role in the borderlands, the military infrastructure is replacing former trans-Himalayan pathways, while providing only selective access and so further bolstering the feeling among local inhabitants of being "left behind."

Another example where this dynamic plays out is the Pamir Highway from Osh (Kyrgyzstan) to Khorog and Dushanbe (Tajikistan), which forms the backdrop of Martin Saxon's contribution. Built in the 1930s as a road to supply this strategic margin of the Soviet Union bordering China, the Pamir Highway, together with the border it helped secure, served a dual purpose: it actively undid former connections with Kashgar (Xinjiang, China) while facilitating the comprehensive provisioning of the region from the outside, bringing in not just supplies but ideas and institutions in the name of Soviet modernity, tying the area ever more closely into the fold of the Soviet world. Thus, the road-border complex induced remoteness by cutting former cross-border relations while, at the same time, it actively unmade remoteness by fostering new connections. These connections, in turn, remained morally undergirded by the image of continuing remoteness.

Remoteness and connectivity, then, are not opposites; one is not unmade by the other. Forms of remoteness can emerge as a result of privileging certain connections and the other way round. In other words, remoteness and connectivity condition each other and result in shifting socio-spatial constellations.

Economic returns of remoteness

To understand the role of mobility, exchange and connections in the making of remoteness, we need to turn to the promise of economic yields that remoteness holds at particular historical junctures. Consider, for example, the highlands at the interface of southwestern China, South and Southeast Asia. These highlands, named "Zomia" by Willem van Schendel (2002) and further taken up by James Scott in his sweeping analysis of the "art of not being governed" (2009), have recently become the focus of an ongoing debate about remoteness. In this debate, the issue of seeking refuge from the state has so far taken precedence over the question of fortune. Employing the lens of remoteness as produced in conjunction with certain forms of connectivity, we seek to give this debate a new twist.

Scott's argument, in brief, is that these upland areas long served as a zone of escape for those seeking refuge from taxes, labor exploitation and diseases of rice-growing valley states. Rather than primordially remote, the uplands, then, are better understood as a "state effect" embedded in the history of state-making in the region. By the in the mid 20th century, according to Scott, Zomia was eventually brought under some form of state control through the "distance-demolishing technologies" of railways, roads, and telephone wires (Scott 2009: xxi). Yet today, as Alessandro Rippa shows in his contribution, remoteness continues to play a crucial role in the region, taking the form of a peculiar transnational or trans-statal *asset*. The Golden Triangle, in the forested hills where Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and China meet, may no longer be the epicenter of opium production is once was; yet in international narratives, the area continues to be depicted as a site of lawlessness, danger, and perversion. Casino towns such as Mong La (Myanmar) and the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (Laos) have added to the lure, playing host to a rampant wildlife trade, prostitution, gambling, drug and human trafficking, and more. Media have variously labeled them as "sin cities," the "wild east," or the "Tijuana of China" (Rippa and Saxer 2016). In Rippa's ethnography of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, however, a more intricate story emerges. Here, in "Zomia 2.0," as he calls it, entrepreneurs collude with the Chinese state to exploit the remote borderlands, while Chinese gamblers and tourists feed off a Renmimbi-based economy wired to the world through Chinese telecom connections.

The story of the casino towns is one of remoteness remade and maintained through politics and business, where the Chinese party state helps facilitate—*through* distance—a particular kind of "neoliberal connectivity based on global investments, [...] online gambling, and Russian croupiers" (Rippa, this issue). Like in its original incarnation, Zomia 2.0 emerges again as a "state effect" (Mitchell 2006), providing a peculiar kind of partial refuge from the reach of the state through the designation of the casino towns as Special Economic Zones exempt from certain laws and rules. However, rather than serving as home for subaltern anarchists fleeing state repercussions and seeking refuge in the remote highlands, the Special Economic Zone that Rippa explores rather functions as a pseudo-state in its own right, run by a well-connected entrepreneur with the aim of attracting elites in search of fortunes.

Remoteness, in other words, may serve to keep transnational economies partly hidden in the shadow, acting as conduits for clandestine trades. Such economic circuits that cannot be easily visualised on the global connectography (Khanna 2016) come at a premium: these are marginal, hidden-away lands where fortunes can be made—Shangri-Las reinvented for an age of disorganised capitalism.

The economic dimensions of contemporary imaginaries of remoteness are also at the core of the contribution by Yu Lou, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein. Theirs, however, is less a story of fortunes made in clandestine ventures. In their ethnographic study of Guizhou, a southwestern Chinese province that for

centuries has been iconically “remote” and is very much part of what van Schendel and Scott call Zomia, they interrogate the shifting meanings of remoteness since Mao. Guizhou is largely populated by minorities and has long been constructed as inaccessible and “raw”, lacking “civilization”, and seen as nearly immune to outside control. The authors show how Guizhou’s remoteness is on the one hand being partially unmade through high-speed railway lines and new roads, while on the other hand it is simultaneously re-emerging in communities left disconnected from the “passageways”, where it is turning into a key asset for a burgeoning cultural economy based on tourism, museums and “ethnic” products. Simultaneously derogated as still lacking “development” and celebrated as a realm of cultural heritage to be safeguarded and put to use, Guizhou’s remoteness continues to yield economic returns. At the same time, however, remoteness is also being reconfigured according to what the authors call a “post-alteric” imaginary, in which remoteness works through new connectivities and the “exotic other” is superseded by a visually beautified “new countryside”.

As anthropologists studying such areas and their intersections with power, we may well wish to inquire further into the local, *emic* understanding of ordinary people’s place in the world. While in Guizhou, remoteness feeds into local strategies of self-fashioning, branding and public image-making, in the piece by Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk from Siberia we find another form of local deployment of remoteness. The villagers living along the Baikal-Amur Mainline, they find, have consciously opted out of having a bridge built to their village to avoid unwanted connections and outsiders flowing in. They claimed their “right to remoteness,” the authors argue—revealing the large political stakes in the reimagining of spatial difference for “outsiders”, “insiders” and in-between brokers alike.

We must in other words be wary of any attempt at imposing a unitary story—or a particular way of being—on the disparate sites we are bringing together here. The spatial organisation of difference is always a fraught business ripe with contestation and vested interests. Further, as any anthropologist knows, the cultural and political world in which a Venezuelan miner may grab his tools and head into the rainforest on a quest for gold is quite different from that of a Malagasy bandit bartering over rosewood in a “red zone” or a Guizhou tourism entrepreneur. Yet our attunement to the particular in anthropology should not make us lose sight of the similarities once we travel, alongside political geographers, “up the scale” of the *geo*. Indeed, our varied sites all have some basic things in common: in and around them, remoteness is being actively unmade and remade by both the poor and the powerful, in interaction with the demands of capital and national capitals. And in all these cases, remoteness actively fostered for economic gain is entangled with particular forms of connectivity—some conjured up far away in government ministries or the back offices of global NGOs, some actively sought from within. Being, at least to a

certain extent, in control of remoteness-making through selective connection is key to understanding how the actors involved react to these processes.

The conduits for connectivity discussed so far concern economic dimensions of the remote either as asset for the global heritage industry or in the guise of a capitalist frontier (Tsing 2005), attracting new frontiersmen and frontierswomen while framing distance by turns as a lure and as lurid. Yet another such conduit is worth dwelling further on in this introduction. Owing to perceived security risks, marginal parts of the world economy that were a few years ago quite accessible to international visitors, tourists and indeed anthropologists have been rendered more distant since the onset of the “war on terror.” Yet, as we shall see, this “removal” from the global connectography is equally shot through with connections. Here we see how remote places, besides serving economic functions for disorganised capitalism or re-fashioned heritage, may also be useful symbolically and politically for conjuring of danger and risk in ways that reinforce their difference, their “strangeness” and their exposure to external powers, in Ardener’s sense.

Remoteness, remotely controlled

One important driver for renewed political remoteness in today’s world is insecurity or, to use a more visceral term, *danger*. The Sahel-Sahara region, and the Asian highlands ranging from the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands to Xinjiang, Tibet, and northern Burma are zones where powerful states’ concerns over insecurity or danger are fueling armed intervention and political “distancing” of a peculiar kind (Andersson 2019). As remoteness is being remapped across the world, distant and marginal regions are becoming central to globalised imaginaries and economies of danger and potency: areas that are once more pictured as *terrae nullius* or as “blank spaces” yet again emerge as harbingers of illicit gains and inchoate fears, in an echo of the colonial encounter.

We see this shift in Mali and the wider Sahel belt of sub-Saharan Africa discussed by Ruben Andersson in this issue. Timbuktu in Mali—once the treasured prize of the desert for precolonial and colonial explorers, haunted by tales both of existential danger and of streets paved with gold—is yet again facing “removal” by outside powers as French counterterror forces, EU border security operatives and UN peacekeepers have replaced the European tourists of a few years ago, the sounds of the desert blues festivals replaced by the buzz of surveillance drones overhead. Indeed, conflict-hit Mali, with its lingering jihadist threat and fears over “uncontrolled migration” and contraband, is exemplary of the partial withdrawal staged by especially Western states as relations are reframed in terms of danger, rather than opportunity. Across Africa and beyond, these former colonising powers have taken to painting a swathe of (mainly Muslim) countries in menacing shades of red on the no-travel advisories issued by their foreign ministries. In this world of red and green zones, the trend is

clear: US no-go advice covered 12 African countries in 1996; by 2013, that figure was 18. The UK Foreign Office had 13 countries or parts of countries on its global no-go list in 1997; in 2012, that figure was 40, again with many new entries for Africa. Meanwhile, the number of Western victims of terror attacks in regions such as Africa in fact remains very low: only 15 of the 1,005 Americans killed in terrorist acts worldwide between 2004 and 2013 were killed in acts that took place on the continent, for instance.¹ Yet the media impact of any attack far surpasses the actual numbers, triggering swift changes in official travel advice and usually the exit of Westerners and bunkering of field staff. In this politicised landscape of risk assessment, large areas are being evacuated of particular international forms of connection, to instead be painted in deep shades of red. They have become zones that rich outsiders enter, if at all, at their own risk and peril.

Anthropologists are implicated in this reframing of relationships in terms of danger, stalwart scholars of worlds marginal and distant as we are. When large parts of the world are distanced and “removed” in a back-and-forth between targeted terror attacks on foreigners, risk aversion in (academic) institutions and foreign ministries, and more violent forms of external intervention, this role of conduit to remote societies – however critical and reflective we may wish it to be – is being imperiled on practical and political levels. This ongoing shift towards danger-induced distancing across many formerly well-trodden parts of the anthropological *mappamundi* should make us interrogate not just the out-of-the-way-ness of the society we may study, as discussed in our first section above; it should also help unsettle assumptions about access to communities less powerful than ourselves inherited from the colonial heyday of our discipline. Some years ago, in a critical historical note on security in fieldwork, Kovats-Bernat (2002: 211) pointed out how the “stability in the ethnographic field” once guaranteed by colonial power no longer holds. In an era of rampant insecurity and fragile postcolonial states, our quest for knowledge of the insecure Other is becoming intimately tied up with the insecurity of the anthropological Self (Andersson 2016).

Ignacio Fradejas-García’s compelling account of the immense security challenges faced by humanitarian organizations in Syria presents a stark case of remoteness remade through insecurity and danger. In doing so, he confronts head-on the dilemmas of partial withdrawal, “remote control,” and remote knowledge-production for humanitarians and researchers alike. Unable to directly access beneficiaries inside Syria, international relief organizations resort to a form of humanitarian remote control from Turkey, working with local

¹ These figures are referenced and sourced in Andersson (2019).

partners. This, Fradejas-García shows, allows proxy actors to gain greater leverage on aid operations, while international distance to the red and “black zones” of Syria keeps growing. Something very similar is occurring in Mali’s conflict, where African peacekeepers and aid workers face militant attacks while Western-funded surveillance planes, satellites and drones hover overhead, offering but a bird’s-eye view of the complex social relations and factions on the ground. In Syria and Mali alike, connectivity is increasingly mediated *through* distant danger, replacing or transforming other linkages to outside worlds through tourism, trade and global mediascapes. As a result, here we may see colonial fantasies of the remote, strange and wild frontier reactivated, in an echo of the reinvention of the “Golden Triangle” discussed above—with serious sociopolitical consequences for global “centres” and “margins” alike.

This is the outside view: however, shifting our gaze, an area that looks inaccessible and isolated from the outside may be experienced as open and vulnerable from within (Ardener 2012), as Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele show in the case of Faya in northern Chad, a place further east in the Sahel-Sahara belt described by outsiders as full of unruly raiders and predators. In Faya, the twist is that such ascriptions are locally endorsed—creating an echo-chamber of danger and aggression in which, Brachet and Scheele argue, remoteness *becomes* power.

These brief examples (on which much more in the individual articles) hint at how we may start putting the *geo* back into geopolitics: they reveal some ways in which rugged landscapes on the “margins” of our connected world are being transformed or reactivated as sites of potential power and promise in particular ways, implicating locals as much as national, regional and global powers, and drawing on the affordances of infrastructure and landscape in a multi-faceted process of uncertain consequences.

As anthropologists investigate these terrains of removal and risky reconnection, we inevitably tread along the well-worn pathways of our predecessors. Yet as we do so, danger itself presents us with an opportunity for rethinking how we engage with distanced worlds “out there” at a time that seems to resurrect certain tropes of spatialised, dangerous Otherness from the colonial era in which our discipline, as we know it today, was forged. Remoteness may here still prove tantalisingly “enchanted” to the anthropological vision, in Ardener’s sense, if seen through the prisms of its reemergence in conjunction with selective connections, including as regards its envisioned economic returns and its role as a project of knowledge; as well as in relation to the vicissitudes of danger and power that situate it firmly within the current “world disorder.”

Conclusion: the productivity of distance

Building on Ardener's (2012) insight that remoteness is a relational category and Harms et al.'s (2014) observation that remoteness is thus not a static condition but something actively made and remade, we ask *how* this process of remoteness-making (or removal) plays out around the world through the affordances offered by particular topographies, histories, and relations of power. Rather than describing remoteness as a state of being, we are thus concerned with the histories and politics that have led to its repeated emergence, and we investigate the devices employed in this process. While not returning to a purely spatial understanding of remoteness, this move does require us to return to the politics of geography, as already noted. The heterogeneity of historical junctures in which remoteness returns, and the gamut of cases on which our collective investigation of remoteness is based, defies a simple and all-embracing theory. Nevertheless, in all the cases of our proposed special issue—from the depths of the no-go areas of the Sahara desert to the rugged hills of Madagascar, from the “Zomia 2.0” of southeast Asia to the exoticized othering at work Guizhou—remoteness is productive in manifold ways: economically, culturally, politically. To security professionals, loggers and smugglers alike, being “out of reach” is itself a key asset in that it allows for forging frontier economies and security apparatuses intrinsically tied to global capitalism yet kept away from the public eye. To tourism entrepreneurs and development professionals, the wild and backward carries promissory notes; it allows such actors to conjure a place as an exotic destination, or as a target for an aid project according to a global template. Remote areas of these kinds become laboratories of frontier capitalism, global (in)security and heritage-making, as well as key sites of grassroots resistance and collusion.

Remote areas, then, are neither simply vestiges of a former, less connected era, nor are they the simply side-effects of uneven globalisation that could be taken care of by reinforcing development efforts. The political return of remoteness with its manifold faces, its active production in the name of development, conservation, heritage and security, is rather an inherent aspect of the reorganization of the world economy and of geopolitics—a type of partially disorganized economic connectivity that radiates not just from the centers towards the peripheries, but equally originates in and leaks out from the margins. As our contributions show, the “removal” from wider connectographies of globalisation is always a partial and contested process, in which local, national, regional and global scales interact in ways that carry unpredictable consequences for the world at large. As we traverse scales and sites to explore these interactions, we may thus well wish to inquire not just into the local realities ensuing from partial “removal,” but equally seek to interrogate how centres of power may be rethought if we analytically situate the remote as in some ways *central* to our “new world disorder.”

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