Reclaiming provincialism

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Abstract

This article argues against the lingering pejorative usage of the term 'provincialism' in public discourse in particular. It engages with transnational debates emerging from Australia and French-speaking settings, where provincialism often denotes backwardness, isolation, and a lack of high culture. Through explorations of (a) the universalizing value of the provincial and (b) the diversifying concept of 'provincializing', the article advocates for a reconceptualization of the term 'provincialism'. This is worthwhile on at least two counts: challenging stale dichotomies such as cosmopolitan/unworldly; acknowledging the agency of so-called 'provincials' and their essential cultural contributions. The article contributes to debates in human geography and related disciplines by unpacking longstanding questions of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, it reclaims the value of provincialism as a term with the capacity to bridge varied areas of scholarship, thereby fostering empowerment and moving beyond deleterious *ideas of geography*.

Keywords

centre/periphery, cosmopolitanism, environmental humanities, literary geographies, local/global, social philosophy, the provinces

Reivindicar el provincialismo

Resumen

Este artículo argumenta en contra del persistente uso peyorativo del término «provincialismo» en el discurso público en particular. Se relaciona con los debates transnacionales que surgen de Australia y los ámbitos francófonos, donde el provincialismo denota frecuentemente el atraso, el aislamiento y una falta de alta cultura. Explorando (a) el valor universalizador de lo provincial y (b) el concepto diversificador de la «provincialización», el artículo aboga por una reconceptualización del término «provincialismo». Esto vale la pena en dos sentidos por lo menos: desafiar unas dicotomías obsoletas como lo cosmopolita/lo cándido; reconocer la agencia de los llamados «provinciales» y sus contribuciones culturales esenciales. El artículo contribuye a los debates geográficos y interdisciplinares mediante el desentrañamiento de preguntas de larga data sobre inclusión y exclusión. A fin de cuentas, es reclamado el valor del provincialismo como término con la capacidad de unir diversas áreas intelectuales, fomentando así el empoderamiento y superando unas nocivas *ideas de la geografía*.

Palabras clave

centro/periferia, cosmopolitismo, humanidades ambientales, geografías literarias, local/global, filosofía social, las provincias

Introduction

The opening song of Disney's multimillion-dollar *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), 'Belle', has the titular protagonist lamenting 'this poor provincial town' and twice emphasizing that 'there must be more than this provincial life!' (Disney, 2016: 0:43–45, 1:23–28, 3:27–30). The community defined by working-class trades like fishmongering comes to epitomize small-mindedness when mobbing The Beast's enchanted castle at the urging of the vainglorious hunter Gaston. A quite different picture is to be found in versions

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of the fairytale by the Parisian novelist Madame de Villeneuve (*The Young American Woman and Seafaring Tales*, 1740), the Rouennais novelist Madame Leprince de Beaumont (*The Young Misses' Magazine*, 1756) and the Scottish anthologist Andrew Lang (*The Blue Fairy Book*, 1889): no instance of *provinc** appears in the texts from 1756 to 1889, and there are only two in Madame de Villeneuve's, neither derisive, concentrated in a section from The Beast's perspective (1765: 57–58).

In a similar vein to Disney's animation, a 'provincialism problem' (Smith, 1974) suffuses the Adelaidean author Murray Bail's fourth novel, *The Pages* (2008), set in Sydney and wider New South Wales during the 1960s. Therein, a lamentation over the paucity of philosophy in the region revolves around a perception of the whole of Australia as a mere *adjunct* to the source of *real* cultural life, ascribed to continental Europe. This is surprising because Sydney in the run-up to the early 1970s was the heart of Australian Materialism, based on the boldanti-Cartesian suggestion that the mind is in fact nothingbut the brain; that is, mental events are really just brain events.

What is at the root of *the provinces* being cast in a negative light in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? The term's development from the 1400s is outlined from the perspective of British Studies in Josephine McDonagh's 'Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction':

> 'Provincial' in […] its primary usage as an adjective […] refers to an ecclesiastical province, or more generally, a 'province of a country, state, or empire' usually 'distinguished from the capital or chief seat of government'. It is sometimes used to evoke the 'local or regional' as opposed to the 'national', and, from the eighteenth century, […] the sense of […] 'parochial or narrow-minded, lacking in education, culture, or sophistication' […]. This last sense of the provincial became dominant in the 1860s. (2013: 401–02)

The following survey of critical engagements with *the provincial* seeks to challenge the sense of provincial life as inferior and the use of 'provincialism' as a pejorative term in public discourse in particular. This undertaking stems from growing up in 'provincial' contexts at a remove from major conurbations, which entailed processing a series of belittling stereotypes associated with a sense of backwardness, as symbolized by Bottom and the other 'rude' Mechanicals in the Stratfordian playwright William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600). By contrast, the present article advocates for a positive provincialism.

Negative views of provincialism are open to critique on grounds that are (i) normative and (ii) methodological. With regard to the normative aspect, agency is frequently denied to provincial cultures, as if individuals and communities possess no inner life. Yet, matters of great profundity have been addressed in isolated locales, often in the face of enormous obstacles. A major issue, in fact, is how

people in the provinces are negatively affected in terms of self-conception and behaviour by *ideas of geography*, more than geography in itself. Methodologically speaking, the caricaturing of provinces as supplicants of an urban centre – evident in a variety of contexts – is an inadequate way of accounting for a sociogeographic phenomenon because it fails to do justice to their creativity and ingenuity.

How should people living far from a putative core regard their lives and work? The examples here – based on authorial familiarity with French-speaking territories and Australia, where much is at stake regarding the worldviews and rights of First Nations – are generalizable in terms of valorizing modes of cultural transmission and agency on the part of the provinces. Without entering at length into the politics of place (Massey, 1994; Claval and Entrikin, 2004), the next section provides a multidisciplinary overview of understandings of how certain areas have been regarded as parasitic in relation to supposed creative centres. Then, two strategies are introduced as thought experiments: (a) appreciating the universal in the provincial; (b) moving beyond dichotomies by provincializing. Ultimately, a case is made for provincialism as an empowering way of being.

Situating *the provinces* between the social sciences and the arts

The notion of 'provincializing' (Chakrabarty, 2000) spans fields of study ranging from urbanization (Sheppard et al., 2013; Lawhon et al., 2014, 2018; Derickson, 2015) to architecture, including the likes of 'militant particularism' and 'critical regionalism' (Harvey, 1996: 306). Cognate ideas of parochialism/ruralization have been interpreted through geographic frameworks (Tomaney 2010, 2012, 2014; Krause, 2013). Agency is a key concern in all such discussions: the capacity to act – or the lack of it – is a highly significant factor in spaces at a remove from sites of intense modernization. Given that 'agency is […] broadly (albeit unevenly) distributed across the social and material world […], marginalized positionalities can exert considerable influence' (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016: 233). On the one hand, some thinkers have encouraged 'tak[ing] seriously […] simple, rough existence' (Heidegger, [1934] 2003: 18), particularly the extent to which 'place-as-dwelling […] makes humans human' (Cresswell, 1996: 59). On the other hand, there have been movements revolving around not remaining in the provinces (Wilding, 2005: 125), in favour of being rescued from what English translations of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* have tended to term 'the idiocy of rural life' (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1888: 18). This infamous phrasing, promoting the idea of provincial backwardness, is re-translated by Hal Draper as 'the privatised isolation of rural life' ([1994] 2004: 122), which in the realm of Marxist thought refers to an apolitical stance obstructing the path to the revolution of the global working class (Attoh, 2017).

Ought urban centres to be considered a sort of panacea? The human geographers Mary Lawhon, Henrik Ernstson and Jonathan Silver – working between South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom – draw attention to 'the social, cultural and political relations through which material and biophysical entities become transformed in the making of often unequal cities' (2014: 500). Indeed, the discipline has dedicated considerable energy to undoing the dichotomy of urban/provincial, along with distinctive concerns such as core/periphery and global/local. What has been happening in related fields of scholarship?

The lingering use of 'provincialism' as a pejorative term is an especially hot topic in the cultural sector. The Australian art historian Terry Smith's 'The Provincialism Problem' has spurred a number of wide-ranging debates: what is at stake in territories like New Zealand and New Caledonia being deemed provincial in comparison with the United Kingdom or France? Smith's problematization of a centre-periphery model hinges on the proposal that provincialism is not 'simply the product of colonial history; nor […] merely a function of geographic location' – it goes as far as 'pervad[ing] New York' and capitals of the sort (1974: 54, 58). Negativity is conspicuous: 'provincialism appears primarily as an attitude of subservience to a hierarchy of externally imposed cultural values' (1974: 54). Response pieces encompass discontent over a degree of narrowness (Van de Bosch, 1985; Murphy, 1988; Sanders, 2011), dissections of what is meant by the provincial in Australian and British art (Butler and Donaldson, 2012, 2017; Juliff, 2018), and attempts at a 'solution' based on appreciating that 'Paris and New York are not *the* centres any more', thus opening the way for circumventing the connotations of provincialism as 'a dirty word' (Allen, 2011). Reflecting at a distance of 40 years, in the wake of wrangling across Oceania in particular (McLean, 2009; Barker and Green, 2010), Smith does not mince words: 'everyone coming to a love of art in a dependent cultural colony – as I did, in Melbourne and Sydney during the 1950s and 1960s – experiences […] in an everyday sense, as a pervasive and deep fact about their world, […] how power arrives from the wider world' (2017: 8). This view perpetuates a model that can be called *adjunct provincialism*, whereby a community is (mistakenly) characterized as waiting for enrichment from the cultural centre. Such supposed dependency denies agency to those in the provinces. Tellingly, Smith comes to wish for a 'displace[ment of] the provincialist bind' by way of 'coeval connectivity […] to face the already urgent challenges of living in the Anthropocene' (2017: 32). Clearly, there is a risk of pejorative connotations and models such as adjunct provincialism becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. The present article argues for a proud reclamation of the term 'provincialism'– especially by those living outside urban centres (Gosetti, 2018) – in the sense of 're-evaluating or reinterpreting (a term, concept, etc., esp. one relating to one's own demographic group) in a more positive or suitable way' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022).

Correspondingly, disparaging usage of 'provincialism' has a long history in France, where Paris has tended to be posited as the 'capital of a huge realm that it wholly absorbs' (Janin, [1840] 2003: 11), and canonical novels have frequently mocked the naive character of *the provincial*. The cultural historian Graham Robb observes that for centuries 'the clearest demographic distinction was […] "Parisian" and "provincial"' (2007: 14). This dichotomy and others like it became mutually reinforcing in a regrettable kind of 'conceptual promiscuity' (Mughan, 1985: 273). There have been attempts to valorize provincialism in relation to dynamics of exoticism (Parakilas, 1998; Segalen, 2002; Forsdick, 2003) and autoexoticism (Schon, 2003; Gosetti, 2017; Li, 2017; Gosetti and Viselli, 2018). Notions of peripheral cultures' submissive attitudes (Leerssen, 1990) have been counterposed by the recognition of tactics to reclaim agency, such as 'writing back' to the centre (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Williams, 2003).

Along similar lines, complex societal relations have become the bread and butter of scholars invested in world-systems analysis, postcolonialism and language (Quayson, 2000; Prendergast, 2004; Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley, 2015; Eggan, 2016; Buchholz, 2018; Forsdick, 2018; Achille et al., 2020). Notoriously, the Czech-French author Milan Kundera defined provincialism as 'the inability (or the refusal) to see one's own culture in the larger context' (2006: 37). Among geographers, these matters have been explored in a political key by Stuart Elden and Adam David Morton, whereas spatiality is a primary concern for Sheila Hones and Robert T. Tally Jr (Elden, 2013, 2018; Morton, 2015; Hones, 2022; Tally, 2017, 2021). At the intersection of linguistics and philosophy, a mode of *parochial provincialism* – an unwillingness to look outside the immediate cultural milieu – is an area of debate in pragmatics, particularly with respect to animal behaviour not being afforded importance as a discrete instance of how meaning is shaped by context (Armstrong, 2018).

Within ecocriticism/geocriticism, much has been made of 'a vast network of agencies […] arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs' (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014: 1), as well as an 'ideal of "eco-cosmopolitanism", or environmental world citizenship, building […]. greater socioenvironmental justice […] in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole' (Heise, 2008: 10). As far as French-speaking scholars are concerned, there has been a decades-long concern with territory/topography (Westphal, 2007; Camus and Bouvet, 2011; Bouvet and Posthumus, 2016; Finch-Race and Gosetti, 2019). Among poetry specialists, John Charles Ryan is notable for taking critical inspiration from the likes of the New England Tableland as a centring marker, a locality which 'provide[s] the physical

and metaphysical groundwork for sustainability and renewal along other scalar lines' (2019: 168). Provincialism is an essential form of *storying* place, and it is appropriate to take a closer look at where that telling of stories can lead in positive terms.

Strategy 1: Appreciating the universal in the provincial

Human geographers have incorporated knowledge about provincialism from the literary sphere to great effect. Works by the Irish poets Patrick Kavanagh (1904–1967) and Seamus Heaney (1913–2013) are the foundation of the insight that 'poetry often achieves what contemporary social science fails to do: […] a validation and affirmation of the local in an era of (post)modernity' (Tomaney, 2010: 313). 'Provincialism' and 'parochialism', frequently given as synonyms in reference volumes including the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Tomaney, 2012: 658), are viewed by Kavanagh as opposites – the former derogatory, the latter positive – in that 'the provincial has no mind of his own' while 'the parochial mentality […] is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his own parish' ([1952] 2003: 237). The present article contends that raising up parochialism does not have to mean condemning provincialism. In Kavanagh's 'Epic', the sweeping grandeur of one of the Western canon's primordial texts is framed in a strikingly localized manner:

I inclined

To lose my faith in [the Inniskeen townlands] Ballyrush and Gortin

Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind.

He said: I made the *Iliad* from such

A local row. Gods make their own importance. ([1934] 1987: 309

[lines 10–14])

It is plain to see that 'the intensity of Kavanagh's […] range of reference and his appeal are universal' (Tomaney, 2010: 313). Indeed, the situatedness of all reflections on the human condition, big or small, would seem to preclude any pejorative connotation for provincialism. There is a wealth of province-based poetry, including writing in minority languages, indicating that 'only when rooted in the unique can the universal be truly genuine' (Gosetti and Howard, 2019: 96). Poetry can be 'at the same time local and universal, provincial and cosmopolitan, contingent and ever present' (Fernández Bravo, 2017: 125). Poetry shows that provincialism can be original and all-encompassing, rather than derivative and blinkered.

A focus on the local can run the risk of contributing to a sort of traditionalist populism, a 'desire for an ethnic purity that we have lost in the city' or even racist tendencies (Dainotto, 1996: 503). However, this premise is based on a deep-rooted prejudice about the provinces being essentially concerned with the past and stasis, in opposition to modernity and change: 'how can our preindustrial bliss of closely knit communal life, annihilated by history, return as geography?' (Dainotto, 1996: 496). This rather inflexible binaristic characterization, which the present article opposes, is haunted by the stark centre/periphery dichotomy that gained traction in nineteenth-century Europe (Shils, 1975), with the provincial – supposedly backwards and narrow-minded – as the opposite of the cosmopolitan, which in fact had negative connotations before taking on the sense of forward-looking and worldly (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Evangelista, 2021).

A distinctive benchmark in this regard is Belgium, where the '"artificial" creation' of a constitutional monarchy following the revolution in 1830 led to a state of affairs that can be deemed 'all periphery and no centre' (Mughan, 1985: 277). Decentredness is reflected in a substantial portion of the country's culture, especially the blossoming of Symbolism during the 1880s–1890s (McGuinness, 2007), constituting a quantum leap in poetic modernity with deep roots in the provincial. In the words of the social historians Daniel Laqua and Christophe Verbruggen, based in north-eastern England and Belgium's Flemish-speaking North, 'cosmopolitanism […] maintain[ed] an ambivalent relationship with concepts of nationhood' (2013: 249). Several disciplines offer empowering views of such provincially oriented interconnectedness: in translation studies, there has been attentiveness to 'micro-cosmopolitan thinking […] which does not involve the opposition of smaller political units to larger political units (national, transnational)' (Cronin, 2006: 15); explorations in architectural history have led to the concept of 'provincial cosmopolitanism' (Chattopadhyay, 2012: 63); sociology has addressed the *glocal* in terms of how 'globalization is currently being reflexively reshaped in […] projects of glocalization' (Robertson, 1995: 41).

In essence, seeing the provincial as either narrow-minded or linked to an idyllic past is a false dichotomy. A full picture of the past, present and future is only achievable through an appreciation of provincialism's various manifestations across the planet. A case in point is France in the wake of the revolution of 1789, which highlights the extent to which it is not a good strategy to underestimate and antagonize the provinces. During the distinctly centralized affair, insurgents in Paris looked with suspicion at the non-urban population, which was assumed to be teeming with counter-revolutionary tendencies, superstitions, ignorance and a propensity for being gulled by local aristocrats and the Catholic Church. The Normandy-born lawyer Jacques-Guillaume Thouret's address to the National Constituent Assembly on 2 November 1789 made plain the purported threat to Revolutionary unity: 'the provincial mindset is an individual mindset, the enemy of the true national spirit' (Deyon, 1992: 45). Not only were provincial languages pegged as 'barbaric idioms' in competition with French as the rightful mode of

expression in the *indivisible* Republic, but also a *Report on the Necessity and the Means to Annihilate Every Dialect and to Universalize the Use of the French Language* was presented in 1794, against the backdrop of the Revolutionary Terror. The French language duly took hold throughout the country, but the same did not prove true for that nationalizing narrative excluding *difference within*. Counter-currents of diversification continued to spring up in forms such as Adolphe van Bever's *Les Poètes du terroir*, a four-volume anthology of 'provincial poets' encompassing a range of tongues (Gosetti, 2019). The South as represented by the likes of Philadelphe de Gerde (1871−1952) and Alexandrine Brémond (1858−98) comes across as the home of 'ancestral French' and medieval itinerant lyric, a fount of patriotic pride (van Bever, 1909−14: 2.337−39, 4.427−28). Thus provincialized, Frenchness emerges as a plurality that collapses the stale linguistic dichotomy of centre versus periphery; that is, a top-down mode of expression being held in opposition to grassroots variants. One important way of reclaiming provincialism is thus recognizing that the particular contains the essence of the universal.

Strategy 2: Moving beyond dichotomies by 'provincializing'

In response to how 'geography has […] built its theoretical edifice along clear distinctions between […] town and country' (Gillen et al., 2022: 189), numerous geographers are turning to empowering forms of *provincializing* to build bridges in an act of 'resist[ance to] binaries including Global North and Global South, modern/not modern, developed/developing, formality/informality' (Derickson, 2015: 653). It is increasingly a question of 'seeking to disrupt the epistemic hierarchy' whereby 'urbanism […] has come to refer to a distinct kind of site (the city), […] taken to be a hallmark of modernism, progress, development, and the metropole − the opposite of provincialism' (Sheppard et al., 2013: 898−99, 893−94). So as 'to develop a way of framing that is more attentive to place and that can question taken-for-granted ideas in order to broaden the scope for theorizing', efforts are being made to turn away from dichotomies like countryside/cityscape (Ghosh, 2017), which form 'part of an ideology that limits critical analysis' (Lawhon et al., 2014: 505, 500).

The California-based urban geographers Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard's 'Provincializing Critical Urban Theory' outlines how mainstream thinking is prey to monism; that is, 'a centrism, with the universalism of the dominant as the implied norm against which to compare all other exemplars' (2016: 231). A firebrand in this regard is the feminist literary critic Susan Stanford Friedman, working in Wisconsin, who notes that: 'comparison on a global landscape runs the risk of ethnocentrism, the presumption of one culture's frame of reference as universal and known, the other's as different, unknown, and thus inferior'

(2011: 754). Indeed, pluralizing and creolizing methods are key to dismantling exclusionary categorizations of a nationalistic or linguistic sort (Moudileno, 2012). In 'Decentering Geographies', the comparatist Kyle Wanberg observes from the standpoint of New York that a provincially minded approach entails 'a different kind of conversation than […] in traditional approaches to area studies. It is […] about decolonizing methods' (2019: 191). Putting ideas of core/periphery to the test is intrinsic to provincializing, which at its best is all about 'attending to the situated knowledges of those most familiar with particular contexts […] − both in fieldwork and in theorizing' (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016: 234). Such a communal approach, in keeping with the present article's endeavour to reclaim the positive value of provincialism, leaves behind siloes to produce substantial fruit.

By the same token, it is worth dwelling on another literary example from Oceania that demonstrates how provincial authors contribute to national and international culture. Quite how are creative writers empowered by their physical locale and its resonances? The southern Australian poet John Shaw Neilson (1872−1942), while working in extremely onerous conditions for little pay as a fruit-picker and fencing contractor following just 2 years of schooling, produced verses of extraordinary sensitivity in candlelit conditions so poor that his eyesight suffered. 'The Poor, Poor Country' is a manifesto-esque reclamation of provincial agency:

Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found little there.
Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two foot high,
But down in the poor country no pauper was I.

My wealth it was the glow that lives forever in the young,
'Twas on the brown water, in the green leaves it hung.
The blue cranes fed their young all day − how far in a tall tree!
And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me. ([1934] 2013: 162 [lines 1−8])

Any derogatory idea of provincialism associated with isolation or marginality is rebutted here by the decentring outlook that is imbued with the empowerment of an interconnected way of being with far-reaching relevance. In the words of Doreen Massey's *For Space*, 'the entanglements and configurations of multiple trajectories, multiple histories […] require a different geography […] which reflects […] negotiations within place, […] the challenge of linking local struggles, […] the possibility of an outward-looking local politics' (2005: 148).

Conclusion

This survey set out to synthesize findings from a variety of disciplines and contexts to make an argument for taking

forward a strategic framework in which provincialism is reclaimed as a positive term. Besides the *methodological* value of overcoming divides in the popular imagination as much as scholarly circles, there is the *normative* value of reconfiguring unfortunate characterizations of provincial life. After all, province-based cultures should not be regarded as inert or shorn of agency, especially because such views can be internalized by these communities to the point of negatively affecting self-worth, thereby setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy that is detrimental to social and political cohesiveness. Ultimately, when it comes to refining the coarse-grained perceptions at the heart of the great sociogeographic divide to do with *the provinces*, there are still miles to go before a consensus can be reached, but recognizing the empowering value of provincialism is a step in the right direction.

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