



# Anthropological takes on the 'return of remoteness' - Introduction

Ruben Andersson  
November, 2016



For a long time, the direction seemed to be clear: the days of remote areas were numbered and it was only a question of time before they would all become developed, governed, and firmly integrated into the global ethico-politics of development, governance, heritage-making and tourism. As roads and railways, airports and mobile phones penetrated ever more distant places, 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, the world map now looks more rugged and uneven than it has in a long time. While some areas are smoothly connected to global capital and cultural flows, others are becoming more marginalised and ‘distant’, at least from the viewpoint of global centres of power.

*Today, a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War - with more than half of this period under the ‘war on terror’ - we find ourselves in an era in which remoteness is returning in ways we have yet to fully understand.*

In this week of blog posts, we offer different anthropological takes on the ‘return of remoteness’ on a global scale. The starting point, much as for other [recent writers](#) on this theme, is that remoteness is not a vestige of an earlier, presumably less ‘connected’ era. Rather, remoteness is actively made and remade. And rather than 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. Anthropologists have in recent years shown how trade, mobility and exchange have long tied ‘distant’ regions into larger orders in ways that the rhetoric of development and modernisation rarely takes into account. As we consider how scholars trace trade and transport routes in [the Sahara](#) or across [the Himalayas](#) and unearth violent resource extraction in the Amazon or [Indonesia’s rainforests](#), it becomes clear that a more sensible starting point is to understand remoteness not as a primordial condition but always as a relative - and in many places a relatively recent - one.

Consider, for example, the demarcation of state borders between China and its neighbours in the early 1960s: it cut off established routes of exchange and turned busy Himalayan entrepôts into peripheries at the edge of nation states. Or consider the frontier economies based on mining, logging or a particular commodity boom, such as in Manaus in the Amazon or in the Zambian copperbelt: when a boom busts or resources deplete, remoteness may return with a



vengeance. This happened, too, in places such as the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when a carefully curated border world generously provisioned by Moscow suddenly found itself struggling with remoteness and isolation. In all these examples, remoteness was made (and unmade) at particular historical junctures.

*Seen from the vantage point of global centres of power, one driver for renewed remoteness in today's world is insecurity.*

The Sahel-Sahara region; the highlands of Asia from the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands to Xinjiang, Tibet, and northern Burma; and the Horn of Africa are zones where powerful states' concerns over insecurity and danger are fuelling armed intervention and political marginalisation of a peculiar kind.

To take a striking example, the West African country of Mali – once a western 'aid darling' and (briefly) a tourist magnet of desert festivals and exotic Dogon huts – has in the past decade become incorporated into what some strategists refer to as the global 'arc of instability' stretching across the Saharan belt towards Somalia and onwards all the way to the 'AfPak' borderlands. Mali's northern desert town of Timbuktu now symbolises absolute remoteness once more, as the tourism and development worlds of a decade ago have dwindled amid security fears and combined counterterror and peacekeeping campaigns. Yet northern Mali remains *connected*, too – only in more disturbing ways than before. The drug trade across the Sahara has flourished, locking security forces, jihadist factions and government officials into an uneasy embrace, while violent attacks on peacekeepers or kidnappings of stray foreign travellers can be instantly beamed into living rooms the world over.

*In this shift from (positive) economic connections to the more sinister connective tissue of danger and risk, colonial fantasies of the remote, strange and wild frontier are being reactivated – with large sociopolitical consequences for global 'centres' and 'margins' alike.*



As the drug trade example indicates, markets are another key driver of renewed remoteness. Consider, for instance, the growing concerns over the loss of biodiversity and the rules and regulations regarding global conservation. [The Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna \(CITES\)](#) has led to stricter controls at official border posts - but not to a decline in market demand for endangered wildlife parts and rare medicinal herbs. As a result, transnational trade in these outlawed commodities moved to less policed border crossings where it produced new frontier economies. Here (as in northern Mali's drug trade), remoteness becomes an asset that guarantees a degree of illegibility and invisibility in relation to the state, giving a competitive advantage to marginal areas incorporated into supply chains feeding global consumer demands. Consequently, places such as [Mongla on the China-Myanmar border](#) are portrayed in the international press as remote, wild and lawless, when in fact they are intimately tied into both state projects and global economies.

Looking at remoteness from on high, then, it becomes clear that powerful actors of many different kinds are actively forging connections with - and in the process help defining - the distant and the wild. These connections are often shallow and brutal, as seen especially in the fields of security and war. Consider the remote-controlled drone attacks in the 'AfPak' borderlands; the use of mercenaries and fighting middlemen in Iraq or Somalia; or the extension of western-funded border controls into faraway frontier zones.

The Sahel-Sahara belt is characteristic of this trend. Colonial-era [understandings](#) of the region as a 'blank space', as dangerous and wild, and as a simple conduit between North and South are now being revived via the overlapping deployments of western counterterror operations, advanced border surveillance and 'outsourced' migration controls. Dealing with distinct 'dangers' - terror, migration, drugs - such interventions tend to [reinforce distance](#) to local society while consolidating simplistic ideas of the Sahel and the Sahara as remote 'danger zones' and supposed havens for drug lords, smugglers and terrorists. Meanwhile, rebels, border traders and smugglers can at times choose to make remote danger temporarily visible for their own purposes - as can aid



organisations, militaries and other groups that depend in different ways upon the cycle of distance and danger.

*In all these cases, remoteness is productive.*

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. Remote areas of these kinds can be seen as laboratories of frontier capitalism and global (in)security, as well as key sites of grassroots resistance and collusion; and anthropologists are perfectly placed to explore these tensions and trends, given both our methods and our heritage of studying marginalised groups. However, we need to remind ourselves that our discipline itself has from the beginning been tied into the very relation between global 'centres' and 'margins' that is now put so painfully in relief on the edges of our political maps, where 'no-go zones' flourish and research access dwindles.

How to understand this return of remoteness - remotely made and remotely controlled - in the early 21st century? What stakes are involved as parts of the world are selectively distanced from and unevenly re-connected to global centers of power, and who wins and who loses out in this process? Finally, how to practically study these shifts, given our increased access problems as researchers, combined with rampant risk aversion within our institutions?

The thematic thread on #remoteness here at Allegra takes some steps towards addressing the return of remoteness from a variety of angles.

\*\*\*\*\*

For more on Martin Saxer's work on remoteness, see his new article "Pathways: A concept, field site and methodological approach to study remoteness and connectivity" to be online soon at [Himalaya](#).



For more on Ruben Andersson's work on this topic, see his new piece [“Here be dragons: Mapping an ethnography of global danger”](#) in *Current Anthropology*.