



Where is the Future? Vision 2020 and a Human Geography of Worlds in the Making

Speaker: Professor Tim Bunnell
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Chair: Assoc Professor Tracey Skelton
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Date/Time: Friday, 15 November 2019, 3.30pm

Place: AS2 #02-03 Earth Lab

Abstract

Some places are imagined as being “ahead” of others. Often, such imaginings express variegated positioning in shared worlds of transition (particular places connoting either a developmental leading edge or dystopian nadir). In other cases, a place may be cast as diagnostic of wider emergent conditions, or as a prototypical harbinger of the yet to come. I take such imaginings as the starting point for human geographical examination of the future. Answering my framing question – where is the future? – is partly a matter of considering where place-based imaginings of futurity come from; it also entails analysis of which places are depicted as ahead, how and why. But above all, I deploy “where is the future?” as a means of directing attention to the active role that places, sites and (what Thomas Gieryn terms) “truth spots” play in the imagining and active (re)making of possible worlds. I intend to pursue that line of thinking as a book project that intertwines several strands of my past and ongoing empirical research at NUS. In this seminar, however, I focus mainly on cultural geography work carried out in Malaysia from the 1990s – a time when national political horizons of the future were centred upon Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s Vision 2020. Where was the future when an aspirational “fully developed” Malaysia of 2020 was still many decades away? What did Vision 2020 (un)do, both politically and through the everyday lives and spatial practices of ordinary Malaysians? I engage those contextually specific issues as a way into wider geographical conceptualization of worlds in the making.

About the Speaker



Tim Bunnell is professor in the Department of Geography and Director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at NUS. He first joined NUS Geography as a postdoctoral fellow in 1999. Tim’s research concerns human geographies of urban and regional change. That includes examination of the transformation of urban regions (cities and wider urban territories), the lives and aspirations of people in those territories, and constitutive connections between them. Tim has focused empirically on Southeast Asia (mostly working on cities in Malaysia and Indonesia) and on interurban connections between that region and elsewhere.

His latest books are *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool through Malay Lives* (Wiley, 2016) and *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Jovis, 2018; co-edited with Daniel P.S. Goh).

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