From Sheep to Shop: The Wool Assemblage

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Introduction

It is often possible to trace the origin and destination of wool from the sheep in a farm through its supply chain involving many rural locations into the global commodity chain and back to the shop shelf. However this can prove tricky in the midst of connections and processes wool passes.

We use the Assemblage Framework as constituted by DeLanda to breakdown these chains and unravel connections in the wool assemblage.

We present efforts using GIS to explore, unravel, visualise and communicate complexities and connections in the wool assemblage as a global commodity interacting through, yet not bounded in rural spaces.

Data and Methods

Data

• Interviews
• Field visits
• Trade Data
• Agriculture Industry data
• Online data

Methods

• Flow Mapping
• Network Analysis
• Web-Story mapping

Output Medium

• GIS

Assemblage Framework

Assemblage is a way of looking at relationships, associations, breaking down complexity and unravelling connections. Six key attributes of this framework has been identified.

Online data
Trade Data
Field visits
Interviews

UK as a Top Wool Producer and Exporter

From greasy wool to wool that has passed some stages of degreasing, UK ranks as one of the top 10 exporters. In 2013, 85% of greasy wool went into China where it is used mainly for carpets and textiles. 92% of UK’s degreased wool remained in Europe, with only 3% going to China. There is an obvious preference for China, given lower costs of production that have expanded the territoriality of textile companies, introducing new visible and invisible connections linking human and non-human components.

Map of UK Wool Assemblage

Here, we translate territoriality by mapping the geographic position of the material (being sheep, farms, buildings – depots, auction houses, wool) in while representing deterritoriality as extension of territories as shepherds have to travel to farms to derive wool fleece from sheep. Wool exchanges hands when it moves through depots of different functionalities to be reconfigured and reconstituted in order to put value to it and exchange ownership to eventually find itself in a household. In all these, relations are built, disconnected and remade between places, humans, commodities, money and infrastructure locked to multiple administrative units. The assemblage and connections though happening at multiple scales and across boundaries does not make one scale less or more important as is reflected in the Wales map and case study.

Intermediate Depots Wool Movement Grading Depot to Scouring Depot

Information: A top-down perspective on movement of wool through the different stages of the wool assemblage. Wool movement is recorded at the different stages as an input and output, therefore creating a flow mapping tool that can be extended to other regions in the wool assemblage.

Wales as a Rural Case Study: Steve the Farmer

Steve, residing 12 miles from Newtown, Wales, purchased Texel sheep from Netherlands to cope with Welsh topographic limitations. Sheep are sheared by personnel coming from Eng., Wales and even as far as Aus. and NZ. Steve delivers his fleeces to a Newtown depot. Here it is matted and blended with wool of similar types and quality sourced from over 66 breeds. A sample of this blend is sent for testing North Wales. Medium length wool blends, for example, are useful for making carpets. However, we cannot trace Steve’s medium wool back, so we loose this provenance.

Back home, Back to the Shop

3% of carpet produced in China arrives in the UK and so there is a chance that Steve’s fleece finds its way back onto floors in Newton. There is also a chance that this carpet is laid in the US or the Kremlin now as part of the global carpet assemblage. Proving this provenance is, therefore, somewhat difficult. The Cambrian wool initiative tries to address this by buying back all Cambrian wool at auction.

References