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On geography's skewed transnationalization, anglophone hegemony, and qualified optimism toward an engaged pluralist future; A reply to Hassink, Gong and Marques

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Abstract

This reply to Hassink, Gong and Marques' 'Moving beyond Anglo-American economic geography' raises several issues relevant to formulating a unified paradigm that escapes Anglo-American bias. First, the reply identifies different meanings of Anglo-American dominance that do not necessarily align. Remedying concerns that engage with the problems of anglophone hegemony do not necessarily solve institutional issues of Anglo-American dominance, exclusions of contributors, places and viewpoints, or postcolonial critiques. Second, the essay investigates the origins of anglophone dominance, how the skewed transnationalization of geographical practice came about, to excavate solutions from geography's past. Based on these assessments, several epistemological issues are brought up that might hamper development of a unified paradigm. The reply concludes with encouragement to engage in the Sisyphian labour associated with the quest toward a unified paradigm for economic geography.

Keywords: Anglo-American hegemony; engaged pluralism; history of geography; language; choreographic awareness

Introduction

After becoming immersed in the dialogue about moving beyond Anglo-American economic geography, my instinctive response was a profound ‘why are we still having this discussion?’ Nearly two decades have passed since a series of prominent interventions (Berg & Kearns, 1998; Gutiérrez & López-Nieva, 2001; Minca, 2000; Short, Boniche, Kim, & Li, 2001) jumpstarted geography’s ‘Anglo-American hegemony debate’. These interventions developed into an exhaustive discussion, clearly visible in Hassink, Gong and Marques’ scientometric graphs, of every aspect of the problem.

My belittling instinctive response is not unique. One of the debate’s instigators, Minca (2013, p. 11) sighed a while ago that the debate has been ‘losing steam’ and ‘seems to be running somewhat in circles’. Nevertheless, as Hassink, Gong and Marques rightfully accentuate, there is a whole new generation of geographers from the Global South knocking on the door of the global geographical academy who face the very exclusions articulated in the Anglo-American hegemony debate. Despite exhaustive analysis, the problems remain. In the face of these continuing exclusions, the ‘been there, done that’ attitude of my primal reaction is somewhat complacent. Why is it so difficult to solve this problem? Reflecting on Hassink, Gong and Marques’ call, I intend to juxtapose the debates’ arguments in a different manner, striving to develop some ideas on why we seem unable to remedy the situation. My argument is structured along four questions about Anglo-American hegemony in (economic) geography: (1) What exactly is meant with the Anglo-American adjective? (2) What are the origins of the issue? (3) What are the foundational political-epistemological issues at stake? and (4) What strategies could be adopted to support Hassink, Gong and Marques’ plea to ‘move beyond’ Anglo-American economic geography?

What do we mean with ‘Anglo-American’ in geography?

The Anglo-American adjective, with its vague geographical connotation, establishes a fuzziness in debates on disciplinary exclusion and agenda-setting, where ‘everybody’ seems to have an intuitive grasp of what the problem is. However, fuzzy conceptualizations make researchers ‘believe they are addressing the same phenomena but may actually be targeting quite different ones’ (Markusen, 1999, p. 702). In the Anglo-American hegemony discussion, I discern four interwoven debates that might require different remedies: the first on language; the second on inclusion; the third on research topic; and the fourth relating to postcolonial concerns.

The first debate concerns the emergence of English as the scientific lingua franca in a globalizing world (Kitchin, 2005; Short et al., 2001). The emergence of a lingua franca is not necessarily bad as it facilitates communication and prevents parochialism (Helms, Lossau, & Oslender, 2005; Rodriguez-Pose, 2006). However, solely relying on a lingua franca makes translation to English a prerequisite for inclusion in global debate (Aalbers, 2004; Fall & Minca, 2013). Moreover,

English native speakers have an unfair advantage in getting heard (Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Hassink, 2007). Fregonese (2017) recently made a forceful plea that English in geography is in fact not functioning as a lingua franca, which entails that people simplify their language in order to facilitate communication across cultures. Instead, English is used in a vernacular sense, where eloquence is a prime determinant of getting people's ear. Resultantly, there seems little incentive for native Anglophone geographers to adapt their English to facilitate communication with non-Anglophones (see also Garcia-Ramon, 2003).

The exclusionary effects of language spill over in the argument that the international disciplinary debate is dominated by 'Anglo-American institutions'. Scientific disciplines are academic tribes that require social reproduction, and this reproduction is largely structured through national institutions and funding bodies (Johnston, 1996). The key argument, supported empirically (Banski & Ferenc, 2013; Foster, Muellerleile, Olds, & Peck, 2007; Gutiérrez & López-Nieva, 2001; Kong & Qian, 2017), is that the American and British tribes have come to dominate editorial boards, the highest ranking international journals, and the most prestigious appearances in international geographic fora (see Derudder, 2011; Foster et al., 2007 for counterpoint). Nevertheless, there are a couple of caveats. First, as Johnston and Sidaway (2004) argue in their re-evaluation of the Anglo-American adjective, there are significant differences between American and British geography and there are many Anglophone authors participating outside those two national traditions (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004; Rodriguez-Pose, 2006; Samers & Sidaway, 2000). Moreover, the Anglo-American system tends to function as a nursery or aspiring young geographers from all over the world. Having been immersed in the Anglo-American system increases the labour market value of early career scholars (Aalbers & Rossi, 2007; Derudder & Liu, 2016; Minca, 2013), something quite valuable in austerity contexts where permanent jobs are a severely endangered species. Resultantly, this makes the physical exclusion of outsiders mentioned by Timár (2004) all the more painful. Those who lack the resources to embed themselves in the Anglo-American context are more likely to be outcompeted at home by those who do.

A third dimension of Anglo-American hegemony is that places located in the putative location of Anglo-America are somehow more important than those located outside of it (Berg & Kearns, 1998). Many non-Anglo-American geographers argue that their own context is relegated to a case study area useful for theories that are composed in the (Anglo-American) core of the system (Gregson, Simonsen, & Vaiou, 2003; Timár, 2004). The outsiders are more 'map takers than map makers' (Chaturvedi, 2003), although they do sometimes feel that their Anglo-American kindred produce worryingly few maps (Yiftachel, 2003). It is the Anglo-American system that sets the agenda, perhaps based on something as parochial as the funding priorities of the British government, and hence influences which places and topics are studied most. The result is, unsurprisingly, an over-representation of places of interest to British and American society with a drastic under-representation of the rest of the world, particularly in Asia (Kanai, Grant, & Jianu, 2017). And even when Asia is the site of analysis, it might still be the questions

permeating from the Anglo-American academy that frame the debate (Van Meeteren, 2018; Van Meeteren, Derudder, & Bassens, 2016).

This issue of Anglo-America defining what is important culminates in discussions on postcolonialism (Best, 2009). Geography has a long history of being implicated in colonial projects and colonial subjects have long been intimidated with presumably universal theories that were primarily in the interest of colonializing powers (Godlewska & Smith, 1994). Hence, it is justified to treat any universalizing theory originating in the former colonial metropolises as suspect (see also Jazeel, 2016). Postcolonial concerns only underline Hassink, Gong and Marques' call for inclusionary efforts in theory formation. But it might not be an easy ride, as will be elaborated below.

Origins: A process of skewed transnationalization

Short et al. (2001) explicitly relate Anglophone hegemony to globalization. As interdependencies between national geographical communities increased, a need arose for a lingua franca, which became English. I consider this development a process of 'skewed transnationalization', where globalization resulted in English-speaking national institutions, particularly the American Association of Geographers (AAG) and the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG), inadvertently becoming the dominant fora for International debate (Simonsen, 2002). One would have expected the international institutions of geography, notably the International Geographical Union (IGU) to have thrived due to globalization. However, the IGU appears less important today than it was in the twentieth century, especially for the Anglophone geographic world. Intuitively, I surmise that it is less likely to run into the most-cited geographers on the quadrennial IGU conference than it is on the annual AAG conference. The IGU is a different type of organization than the AAG or the RGS-IBG, a difference analogous to that between the United Nations and a national government. The IGU has systems in place to ensure the representativeness of geographical communities and a complicated political and funding structure in order to facilitate cross-cultural politics and policy. Resultantly, the IGU might feel more sluggish and less dynamic, with more presentations in poor English or French, than the AAG or RGS-IBG conferences.

The IGU had its heyday halfway the twentieth century, when national geographic schools were the dominant model. Back in the day, the French and German geographical traditions were theoretical guideposts everywhere (Claval, 2009; Harris, 2001). Anglo- phone dominance started creeping in during the 1950s (Whitehand & Edmondson, 1977), fitting a more general pattern of United States hegemony (Paasi, 2015). However, I would add that during the spatial science era starting in the 1950s, with its cavalier confidence in abstract formulations with a supposed high cross-cultural validity (Bunge, 1962), the appeal toward being sensitive to local particularity was less strong (Hooson, 1987).

Before we start yearning for practices of yesteryear, it is interesting to consider how international communication occurred when national geographic schools dominated. Harris (2001) account is insightful in this respect. He narrates how the decision of the IGU to reduce the institution's *linguae francae* from six to two – French and English – in 1960 was the result of pragmatic efficiency. Boundary spanners (Jöns & Freytag, 2016) who mastered multiple languages, such as Harris himself (Mikesell, 2004), were indispensable on conferences to translate simultaneously. Linguistic skills provided these actors with significant power to set the conditions and priorities in international debates (Van Meeteren, forthcoming).

Harris (2001), nicknamed 'the ambassador', was very influential in the international disciplinary politics of the mid twentieth century (Mikesell, 2004). The fact that he (Harris, 2001, p. 675) explicitly regards English as a 'language of wider communication', rather than a colloquial language says much about the common sense of that era. In his generation, 'speaking your languages' was considered a badge of honour and something joyful to aspire to as it would make one write better geography (Harris, 2001, p. 685; see also Buttimer, 1983). To overcome linguistic barriers, special English-language publications for an international audience, aimed at promoting local geographical work, were a popular practice (Harris, 2001, p. 681). The tradition to promote local work at IGU conferences still exists, but as co-editor of one such, rarely-consulted, book (Mamadouh, de Jong, Thissen, Van der Schee, & Van Meeteren, 2008), I must admit that there is little consumer interest for this kind of time-consuming, albeit interesting, geographical praxis.

Political and epistemological issues

In their introduction, Hassink, Gong and Marques lament the tendency of influential critical Anglophone geographers such as Barnes, Johnston, Sheppard, Sidaway, and Peck to restrict their domain to Anglophone/Anglo-American geography. However, it is fair to note that this restriction is not a claim to hegemony per se. Ron Johnston, for instance, has stressed from the very first edition of his book *Geography and Geographers* (in 1979; see Van Meeteren, in press), that the Anglo-American adjective was a disclaimer. He simply did not consider himself knowledgeable enough to cast a wider net (compare Livingstone, 1993, pp. 30–31). Moreover, the Anglo-American adjective also has other epistemological connotations, especially to allay the postcolonial critique of universalism. Therefore, it needs to be considered that the Anglo-American adjective simply denotes a desire not wanting to speak for contexts one knows insufficiently about (see, for instance, Leitner & Sheppard, 2016). Meanwhile, in my view, the evolutionary economic geography that Hassink, Gong and Marques offer as a counterexample does have the aspiration to formulate theories with universal validity, albeit formulated on such an abstract level as to account for place-specific outcomes (Boschma & Frenken, 2006). In other words, evolutionary economic geography, despite its strong Dutch signature, is more optimistic about the possibilities of formulating a unified paradigm for economic geography (Hassink & Gong, 2017) than aforementioned 'Anglo-American theories'. Thus, an issue with in Hassink,

Gong and Marques' argument is that the discussion of Anglophone dominance might veil a genuine Methodenstreit in economic geography that has little to do with language.

As Hassink, Gong and Marques correctly stress the importance of inclusion of diverse voices in paradigm formation, it is important to dwell on the epistemological difficulties one encounters when trying to formulate unified paradigms. On the level of theory, Livingstone (1993) argues that all theories are bound to their time–space context. The questions we ask about reality are constrained and guided by locally-specific concerns (Bosman & de Pater, 1998). The context – and language – in which your daily life is embedded generates a particular 'choreographic awareness' that frames the individual's practice of geography (Buttimer, 1983), the questions asked and the theories formulated. Resultantly, there are different local economic-geographic knowledges (Barnes, 1996; Liu, 2009). The thorny question is: to what extent can these embedded knowledges travel? How can a geographer based in the Global North, for instance, formulate meaningful theories about the Global South? My own position (elaborated in Krijnen, Bassens, & Van Meeteren, 2017; Van Meeteren, Bassens, & Derudder, 2016; Van Meeteren, Derudder, et al., 2016) is affirmative, but claims in this direction have to be formulated in very cautious terms, with a strong empirical desire to prove ourselves wrong. Doing so requires a predisposition to 'learn from other regions' (Slater, 1992) rather than to teach and preach to other regions. Such practice is against the grain of academic capitalism (Paasi, 2015) where knowledge is something to be sold rather than to be bought. We are speaking and writing while we should be reading and listening.

All things considered, Anglo-American dominance remains in part a self-inflicted wound: It is sustained by subjugation to a system elsewhere that is regarded as superior to one's own (Paasi, 2015). It is not the Anglophone geographers that force outsiders to write in their language, visit their conferences, or use their theories. Outsiders initiate it themselves, incentivized by local funding agencies, universities and science systems that are enchanted about the Anglophone higher-education landscape. Hassink, Gong and Marques note that this is also the case in emerging geographical communities, particularly in China. Similar remarks have been made about Korea, where traditional Korean geography was neglected in favour for a more modern American one (Park, 2004). On the other hand, staunch rejection of Anglo-American geography can indeed lead to a degree of inward-looking parochialism, as Hancock (2016) argues about the French situation. These examples show that there is no clear-cut solution and an optimal situation will likely be somewhere in-between (Aalbers, 2013). Moreover, there is an additional political dimension to these epistemological debates: who do we write for? Do our own higher education institutions want us to do research that is relevant to the communities in which we live and work? Or, alternatively, do they want us to formulate theories on a high level of abstraction that provide prestige in international journals and make our universities go up in the global rankings (Paasi, 2015; Schuermans, Meeus, & De Maesschalck, 2010)?

Tentative roads ahead

If there existed a silver bullet to resolve these conundrums, we would not have been pressing the issue so fruitlessly over 20 years. Nevertheless, it is irresponsible to therefore just let it slide, especially at the moment when the discipline is growing globally at breakneck pace. Thus, formulating some tentative solutions that help ‘move in the right direction’ is paramount.

Hassink, Gong and Marques’ goal is to ‘derive from [...] non-English voices insightful contributions to an integrative paradigm of a truly international economic geography’. This goal is laudable and fascinating, and I champion engaging with it. Nevertheless, I am skeptical of the chances that it will result in something that clears the Anglo-American hegemony debate once and for all. The problem is: what to include and will the resulting paradigm have the pretense of universality? Barnes and Sheppard (2010) open their engaged pluralism paper with the statement that ‘nothing includes everything’. Hence, every inclusion in a paradigm implies exclusion of other viewpoints. Who, and based on what standards, will adjudicate what is included? For instance, Hassink and Gong’s (2017) proposal for an integrated paradigm seems very critical of quantitative ‘spatial/regional science’ type geography in because it is ‘economics not geography’ (pp. 4–5). Not only would many mid-twentieth century economic geographers strongly disagree (Van Meeteren, 2016), it also seems premature to decide on those directions. Ironically, both in my own and in Hassink, Gong and Marques’ observations, East Asian scholars tend to excel at quantitative spatial science approaches to economic geography. Therefore, an integrated paradigm could end up being more rather than less supportive to the spatial science tradition.

Despite being skeptical of the possibility to arrive at a consensus economic geography, I nevertheless applaud the initiative to seek dialogue and resolve difference. Writing about the same theoretical phenomenon from different places results in different emphases and framings. For instance, reading the recently translated works of Milton Santos (Santos, 2017 [2000]; Melgaço & Prouse, 2017) made me realize how important agriculture is for globalization theory when viewed from the perspective of Brazil. Coming from a tradition that highlights the role of service economies (Van Meeteren, Derudder, et al., 2016) in globalization, Santos’ work indeed ‘provincialized’ my convictions of what is important for globalization theory. Resultantly, it made me a better geographer.

To me, generating such cross-cultural epiphanies lie at the heart of Hassink, Gong and Marques’ efforts. Several participants in the debate have emphasized the importance of ‘working in-between’ (Aalbers, 2013); ‘liminal spaces’ (Minca, 2000); or the ‘trading zones’ of engaged pluralism (Barnes & Sheppard, 2010; Hassink & Gong, 2017; Hassink, Klaerding, & Marques, 2014; Liu, 2009; Van Meeteren, Bassens, et al., 2016; Van Meeteren, Derudder, et al., 2016). However, we should expect to continuously encounter difference, disagreement, and debate over theory, method, validity and demarcation (Van Meeteren, Bassens, et al., 2016; Van

Meeteren, Derudder, et al., 2016) when wandering in these liminal spaces. The integrated paradigm will be a paradigm that is ever emergent and ever controversial, as geography paradigms arguably have always been (Johnston & Sidaway, 2016, pp. 349–355). Nevertheless, that continuous theoretical struggle has been the engine of an ever-richer economic-geographical praxis (Scott, 2000) and the increasing number of practitioners from different contexts can only further deepen the geographical tradition. Continuously striving to include hitherto underrepresented geographical practices in the neverending Sisyphean labour of creating an integrated paradigm is key to that enrichment.

Part of such inclusion is a conscientious politics of citation (Mott & Cockayne, 2017): use your citation power to amplify the voice of the excluded, rather than only further spiking the H-index of those who are heard anyhow. Another part is multilingualism and translation, although we must admit that even a polymath can only learn so many languages. Moreover, translations also have their cognitive limits (Hancock, 2016; Müller, 2007), implying that some things simply cannot be expressed in English, particularly not in lingua franca English. Despite all these caveats and the full reflexive awareness that we will not be able to find the silver bullet this time around either, let me side with Hassink, Gong, and Marques' integrative ambition. As Buttimer (1983, p. 16) taught us, cross-cultural disciplinary 'dialogue can indeed lead to greater self-awareness, mutual understanding, and the dawning of a more emancipated attitude toward geography as a vocation to life.

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