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Scaling knowledge: towards a *critical geography* of critical geographies

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the scale politics involved in the production of social-scientific geographic knowledge. I argue that critical Geographers need to acknowledge that ideas do not circulate unfettered or limited solely by their intellectual value. Instead, we must understand that some ideas are 'attached' intimately to the places in which they originate while others circulate freely without attachment to specific places. Through such simple (dis)locations, geographic ideas get inserted into spaces of academic knowledge production that are shot through with scale politics. Ironically, such scalar processes produce a simple, transparent, abstract and hierarchical space of knowledge production that elides the complex spatial relations that we as *geographers* are supposed to be so interested in understanding.
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1. Introduction

In this paper, I outline a brief discussion of the scaling of knowledge that literally and metaphorically *takes place* through hegemonic Anglo-Americanism working in and through critical geography. This paper has been difficult to write, but not because there is too little to say about the issues I want to canvass. Rather, my difficulties arise partly because there is *so much to say* about Anglo-American hegemony and how this serves to scale places and knowledge, and thereby effect hierarchical spaces in critical geography. It was difficult to choose only those few issues that I would be able to discuss in the space I have available to me in this brief essay. For those of us who live and work in academic settings outside the UK or USA (or those who have done so in the past), Anglo-American hegemony is an all-too-real and often *obvious* phenomenon that we must work with—or more properly, *around*—on a daily basis. Of course, even though it is obvious to many of us who often must push against its invisible boundaries, it has a normative character for many critical geographers. It is that taken-for-grantedness that makes it even more difficult to contest. My difficulties in writing this paper also arise because of my own complex and contradictory positioning in the Academy. I am, for example, the only white male of this group of authors whose works make up this special issue to discuss and analyse some of the issues arising in the spaces of critical geography. One does not need to draw on an essentialist understanding of 'race' or gender in order to acknowledge the problematic spaces of whiteness and masculinism that thus compr(om)ise my writing. Geography is perhaps one of the whitest (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Gilmore, 2002) and most masculinist of all social sciences (Rose, 1993; Berg, 2002). Likewise, while I used to live and write in the Southern Hemisphere, I now live in Canada. While Canada is certainly not the same as the US or UK, it is certainly less 'marginal' than other locations. While I must be careful here to not map simple geographies of centres and margins onto very general academic spaces, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the very significant geographies of power that constitute academic knowledge production. As a product of the often taken-for-granted social relations that I inhabit, my own work is sometimes riddled with the contradictions of my relatively privileged position in academe and my inability to

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fully understand and acknowledge such privilege (Butz and Berg, 2002). Indeed, as one of the referees for this manuscript observed, this paper has a very different tone and structure than many of the other papers in this special collection. That tone and structure, in part, reconstitute the very relationships that I am trying to critique.

I want to be clear that my criticisms in this paper arise as part of an immanent critique. I am writing from within the multiple folds of critical geography, and I am therefore critical of problematic spaces arising from hegemonic relations of knowledge production, not any individual critical geographers (especially those whose work might be mentioned in my discussion).

My objectives in this short paper are rather modest. I begin my discussion with a brief review of what I will refer to as the *ironic* character of the spatial turn in (critical) geography. I want to argue that the spatial turn is ironic because, at the very moment that our theoretical understanding of spatial relations is ostensibly at its most complex and sophisticated, we continue to scale places—and the geographical ideas constituted within particular places. In this sense, I am arguing that ideas (and the places in which they are produced) do not circulate unfettered or limited solely by their intellectual value. Instead, I am arguing that ideas get inserted into spaces of academic knowledge production that are shot through with scale politics. These scale politics, often invisible to many of us (and certainly to most of us who are privileged by them), define how ideas circulate within academia, and in particular, how some ideas come to be seen as having international import, while others simply provide a better understanding of local spaces. Through such scalar processes, geographers produce a very simple, transparent, abstract and hierarchical space that elides the complex spatial relations that we as *geographers* are supposed to be so interested in understanding.

I believe that we should understand the process of scaling knowledge as part of hegemonic socio-spatial relations in Geography—in particular the political economy *and* cultural politics of academic accumulation strategies. Thinking of these phenomena as part of the process of "scaling places", or more specifically, *scaling knowledge* that is produced in specific places provides a fruitful way of theorising these hegemonic relationships. Accordingly, I will place the discussion within the context of our increasingly sophisticated understanding(s) of geographical scale. This will allow us to see how hegemonic social relations of geography work to scale specific places in such a way as to make the UK and USA 'unlimited' (read as 'global', universal, etc.), while almost all other places in the world (and their attendant ways of thinking and doing Geography) are seen as 'limited' (read as local, parochial, case study, etc.).

In summary, I want to suggest that critical geographers need to take geography seriously, by using their own critical geographical theories to better understand the socio-spatial relations within which they are important players, namely the relations of academic knowledge production. In other words, critical geographers need to attend to a *Critical Geography* of their Critical Geographies.

2. Ironic geographies

As a colleague and I have argued previously (Berg and Kearns, 1998), the idea that 'Geography Matters' (Massey, 1984) has for some time been mainstream thinking in human geography. Almost two decades ago, social geographers began to conceptualise space not merely as a container in or through which humans move—what Le Febvre (1991) terms 'abstract space'—but instead as a material, concrete and constitutive element of social life (Gregory and Urry, 1985). For critical geographers more specifically, space has therefore become a category for analysis that allows us to understand the multiple, and often contradictory ways in which it is recursively constitutive of power relations of domination and subordination, and in turn the ways that such relations (re)constitute human experience of and in place. There has also eventuated a 'spatial turn' in the human sciences generally, and cultural studies more specifically. Social theorists from outside geography began to use spatial metaphors to great effect. Such spatial metaphors have, for example, helped us understand the 'politics of location' (Anzaldúa, 1987; Frankenberg and Mani, 1993), 'cartographies of struggle' (Mohanty, 1991), and the 'power-geometries' (Massey, 1993) of social life.

But these are more than just metaphors, for they also employ spatial concepts to understand material geographies. There are thus two *ironic geographies* at work here. First, the spatial turn is rarely reflected in geographers' thinking about their own disciplinary practices. While feminist geographers have consistently turned their attention to the 'internal' practices of academic knowledge production in Geography (see e.g., Rose, 1993; Domosh, 1997), only a few others have done so (see e.g., Livingstone, 1995; Slater, 1992). Until relatively recently, however, feminist geography was often marginalised in larger academic debates in Geography. Moreover, one still finds critical geography written as if feminist critiques of similar issues did not already exist (see e.g., Castree, 1999, 2002). Second, and closely related, is that the spatial metaphors that geographers and others have begun to draw on for better understandings of space draw on concepts of transparent space—the very way of thinking about space as an empty container that geographers have already developed trenchant critiques against (Smith, 1992).

Let me give a few concrete examples of how critical geographers fail to turn their critical eye on their own spatial practices.

A colleague working in Europe (but outside the UK) recently received as part of a referee's report on an article that she had submitted to an Anglo-American journal (which shall remain nameless) the comment that her paper "was obviously written by someone whose first language was not English". While this is true—English is one of the five or six languages this person speaks and reads but is not 'Native' to—there is something hidden in this referee's comment. For the referee, there was something *inherently* important about the fact that English was not the first language of my European colleague. For those of us who work in places outside the Anglo-American Centre, this was clearly a border-marking exercise. Implicit in the statement was a larger set of un-stated but hegemonic ideologies about the fact that because this person was not from the Centre, she was, in fact not familiar with the appropriate (read: Anglo-American) theoretical debates circulating around the issue at hand (for a wider discussion of issues related to peer review, see Berg, 2001).

Gregson et al. (2003) suggest that this kind of boundary-marking exercise has much wider implications for the ways in which geographical knowledge gets 'placed' in the wider scheme of geographic knowledge production. In their study of writings about Europe in putatively 'international' journals (Gregson et al., 2003), they found that Europe was constructed as a field for limited 'case studies', while the UK and USA were constituted as 'representative' of a much larger (universal) set of 'Western' geographies. Similar arguments are also being made by a number of other authors. In a recent bibliometric analysis of 'international journals', for example, Gutiérez and López-Nieva (2001) found that authorship of articles in such journals still tends to be concentrated among geographers working in Anglo-American universities. They conclude that putatively 'international' journals are not really as international as they would like to be perceived. Minca (2000, 287) argues that "the boundaries as well as the rules/coordinates of what passes for 'international' debate within our discipline are determined from within the Anglo-American universe". What we see emerging among published works by scholars writing from outside the UK or USA, then, is a general consensus about the existence of an Anglo-American hegemony in geography (also see Berg, 2001; Berg and Kearns, 1998; Minca, 2002; Slater, 1992). I wish to discuss below the more general implications of this Anglo-American hegemony in critical geography.

More than a decade ago, David Slater (1992) provided a cogent analysis of the ethno-centrism—or what he termed 'Euro-Americanism'—of theorising by critical geographers. His work focused on the problematic spatialities arising from the production of theory in Anglo-American geography. More recently, a number of geographers have begun to pay attention to the ways that 'we' as geographers discursively constitute the 'conceptual space' (Livingstone, 1995) of geography through more *banal* disciplinary practices (see Berg, 2001; Berg and Kearns, 1998; Minca, 2000; Gregson et al., 2003).

Taken in sum, these works point to an idea that Gayatri Spivak (1988) also developed more than a decade ago, namely that the *subject* of theory is Europe. In part she meant that the 'West' is the constitutive referent for philosophical and theoretical reflection. An important, but unspoken corollary to Spivak's argument is that the *agent* of theory formation is the *European subject*, and by extension, the agent of geographic theorising is also European. In this sense, we can see that Spivak's work suggests that we might see the unmarked subjectivity of *the Geographer* as European. Yet, any critical geographer worth their salt should be quick to point out some of the problems with accepting Spivak's arguments uncritically. Surely, her work effaces the very uneven geographies of Europe, and more importantly the way that 'Europe' is just as much an *imagined geography* (Said, 1978) as many locales encompassed by the suggestive naming of the 'third world'. Work by Gregson et al. (2003) illustrates this process in action in the production of particular kinds of 'writing spaces' in Geography. Their work shows that while geographers from the 'peripheries' (namely outside UK and USA) are allowed to participate in geographical debates about Europe, they are rarely able to set the agenda or frame the epistemological boundaries of disciplinary practices. Accordingly, we need to understand that what we are really talking about when we speak of hegemonic knowledge production is that such knowledge comes from two specific places: Britain (especially England, Wales and Scotland) and the United States.

Geography's 'conceptual space' is thus constituted in limited terms that—through hegemonic norms—are perceived as unlimited. The Australian cultural theorist Meaghan Morris (1992, p. 471) has a wry observation about this type of ethnocentrism. She suggests that American and British scholars "often assume that [the rest of us] are abstracted like a footnote from their history and devoid of any complicating specificity in intellectual and cultural history". In these kinds of discursive frames, geographies of the United Kingdom and America are unmarked by limits—they constitute the field of geography. Geographies of other people and places become marked as Other—exotic, transgressive, extraordinary, and unrepresentative.

3. Scaling places: the hierarchical spaces of critical geography

With the above in mind, we can see that Anglo-American hegemony in Critical Geography is implicated in a process of *scaling places* (Smith, 1992, 1993)—one that constitutes UK and US geographies as the

dominant spaces for the production of a hierarchically organised set of geographical theories and ideas. Thinking about Anglo-American hegemony as a scalar politics provides us with a way of understanding how knowledge production can be implicated in scalar politics and therefore in the production of space. Neil Smith (1992, 62) provides some useful cues to understanding the relationship between scale, politics and the production of space:

> First, the construction of geographical scale is a primary means through which spatial differentiation 'takes place'; second, an understanding of geographical scale might provide us with a more plausible language of spatial difference; third, the construction of scale is a social process, i.e., scale is produced in and through societal activity which in turn produces and is produced by geographical structures of social interaction; and fourth, the production of scale is the site of potentially intense political struggle.

With these scalar geographical relationships in mind, we can see that the unlimited and unmarked geographies of the Anglo-American Same mark out, constitute, and limit the geographies of the Other in a process that—drawing on Neil Brenner (2001, 593)—can aptly be referred to as "the hierarchical differentiation and (re)ordering of geographical scales". But this scaling is more than just a process of placing a hierarchy over pre-existing spaces. As Marston and Smith (2001, 616) note: "the production of scale is integral to the production of space, all the way down. Scaled social processes pupate specific productions of space while the production of space generates distinct structures of geographical scale" (also see Howitt, 1998, 2002). Scaling processes are thus key to the production of hierarchical space. Guyatri Spivak has a nice geographical turn of phrase to describe this process. She calls it "Worlding the Third World". This is a process whereby the Third World is always located, embodied, and rooted in place. In contrast, the First World in general, and Anglo-America in particular is unlocated (and unlocatable), disembodied, universal, and mobile. In these kinds of scalar politics, places outside the UK and USA are dramatically reduced in geographical scale and intellectual importance. Their scalar reach is constituted as something on the order of the regional or local. These scales sit in marked contrast to the international or global scales that the UK and US enjoy.

The scaled hierarchical spaces of Critical Geography can be seen as the product of both a political economy and a cultural politics of knowledge production. Thus, for example, there are important parallels between the political economy of capitalist production and a similar political economy of academic knowledge production. Whilst I realise it is conceptually problematic to make a distinction between capitalist and academic accumulation strategies (surely academic publishing in commercial journals is *part of* capitalist production processes), there is an important parallel to be made here—especially for those of us who are committed to contesting capitalist exploitation. Accordingly, both capitalist production (along with social reproduction and consumption; see Marston, 2000) and academic knowledge production are implicated in the hierarchical scaling of places. Just as capitalists engage in specific accumulation strategies in particular places, so do Critical Geographers: publishing in the 'right' journals, getting 'noticed', being cited, obtaining research grants, going to conferences, among other things. These accumulation strategies are not innocent, as they implicate Critical Geographers in the (re)production of particular kinds of scaled spatial practices. Indeed, scale-making is a "process undertaken by social agents themselves shaped by gender, race, class and geography operating within particular historical contexts" (Marston and Smith, 2001, 617). Thus it is no surprise to find that as academics we are all well aware of the academic class system—one made quite explicit in some academic spaces such as the Research Assessment Exercise in Britain—that many of us operate within.

Ambitious anglophone geographers *know*, for example, that there are certain 'international' journals that one must publish in to get noticed, to get that promotion, to get hired by the right (in the UK: Five-star RAE ranked) department (see Castree, 1999). However, the decision about what constitutes an appropriately international journal is certainly not arbitrary, but rather it articulates an identifiable political economy of publishing and cultural politics of identity. Let me focus on the latter process for a moment. Ambitious Anglophone geographers know that we must publish in the 'international' literature as part of our own individual (and collective) accumulation strategies. Indeed, critical geographers have been very successful at this strategy, with Critical Geography arguably now the dominant form of publishing in some aspects of our discipline. Yet, as both Gregson et al. (2003), and Gutiérez and López-Nieva (2001) have shown, the putative 'international' journals are rarely that. Instead, they are usually nothing more than British and American journals that—because of their vast internal (and smaller external) markets and because of an ethnocentric cultural politics of Anglo-Americanism—have come to be considered international.

4. Being 'better' geographers

So, what is to be done if critical geographers are to address some of the problems arising from Anglo-American hegemony in Critical Geography?

David Livingstone's (1995) call for an 'historical geography of geography' provides a cue for me to suggest that Critical Geographers need to become 'better geographers'. That is, I think we need to be more sensitive to the spatialities of geographic knowledge production and the scaling of spaces that inhere in our work. As Elspeth Probyn (1990, 176) remarks, "we tend to forget that our own centers displace others into the peripheries of our making". In short, the unlimited and unmarked geographies of the Anglo-American Same mark out, constitute, and limit the geographies of the Other. Feminist and postcolonial geographers have long been calling for more attention to the ways that our own spatial practices constitute and exclude Others from the Geographical canon. If we wish to be really critical geographers, it is time for the rest of us to take such calls seriously. This, it seems to me, will involve much greater attention to the *geographies* of critical geography. It will involve a vigilance on the part of those of us who are able to take Anglo-American hegemony for granted—or more properly, who benefit from the privileges it conveys on us—in the sense that it is time that we recognise the limits to our own theoretical and empirical work and acknowledge both the difference and the potential power of different works produced outside Anglo-America. That, I would like to suggest, would make us all *better critical geographers*.

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