

Interactive comment on “The invented periphery: constructing Europe in debates about “Anglo hegemony” in geography” by U. Best

Anonymous Referee #1

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General comments Over the course of the past decade, a lively debate has unfolded on the question of Anglo-American hegemony in human geography, firstly in relation to journal publishing and secondly to the closely related issue of language and the dominance of English. Arguably, however, the debate on Anglo hegemony still deserves greater prominence and critical attention than it has so far received. The writing of a critical summary and review of this debate by Best is, therefore, a timely and necessary move, not least as a way of generating further discussion and of opening up new avenues of inquiry. Overall, Best’s paper is effective in achieving its stated aims of summarising the principal strands of the debate, critically analysing the ways in which the idea of hegemony is deployed by contributors to discussions of Anglo-American dominance, and demonstrating how postcolonial theory is not only used by contributors but how it may also help to shed critical light on their interventions.

In surveying contributions to the debate, Best persuasively argues that the relationship between the Anglo-American sphere of human geography and other disciplinary settings is conceptualised in three distinct ways: i), as a core-periphery relationship in which the dominance of the core over the periphery is criticised and rejected; ii) it is interpreted by means of modernisation theory, whereby the periphery is viewed not as a victim of the centre and its dominance, but of its own failure to adequately emulate the centre; and iii) as a relationship that is characterised by hybridity and complex interlinkages rather than by clearly defined binaries. In deploying the concept of hybridity in order to understand the qualities of the periphery and its relationship with the Anglo-American centre, the third approach draws on postcolonial theory.

A postcolonial approach to the debate on Anglo-American dominance, Best contends, has the clear advantage of disrupting the binaries of the core-periphery model which projects a vision of discrete and homogeneous entities that are either dominant or subjugated. At the same time, he contends, the adoption of a postcolonial stance cannot be accepted uncritically, for it is founded on a problematic (and seemingly unproblematised) concept of 'Europe'. Firstly, scholars such as Rossi and Aalbers, in 'speaking for' a marginalised yet diverse European community of academic geographers, are arguably adopting an identity comparable to that of 'native intellectuals' in postcolonial situations. In other words, they belong to an emerging elite that seeks to defend the marginalised traditions it claims to represent but that is also entangled with and shaped by the knowledges and traditions of the centre. At the same time, Best suggests, their interventions are based on a problematic and unproblematised concept of 'Europe' that needs to be critically interrogated.

The principal strengths of this paper may, I suggest, be summarised as follows. Without dismissing the validity and importance of ongoing concerns about Anglo-American hegemony in human geography, it foregrounds the need for careful and critical thought about the ways in which 'Europe' is conceptualised within the framework of this debate. As the article points out, the exclusionary practices of past and present European

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governments make it difficult to envisage ‘Europe’ as a model of inclusiveness and diversity, despite the fact that multiple languages and cultures may be found within its increasingly fortified borders. Secondly, and related to this, Europe’s current position of relative affluence and privilege in global terms, not to mention its long history of involvement in imperial and colonial ventures, renders problematic the notion of Europe as a periphery. The paper makes clear that contributors to the debate on Anglo-American hegemony who position themselves as representatives of a European ‘periphery’ must seek to theorise the relationship between ‘European’ and ‘Anglo-American’ geography – and the very notion of ‘Europe’ – in a way that explicitly addresses these issues.

In my opinion, the strengths of this paper significantly outweigh its weaknesses, and I suggest that it warrants publication without major changes, although some careful revision of the manuscript for grammatical and typographical errors is required. Below, however, I would like to outline some points and suggestions relating to the content of the paper that the author may wish to take into consideration.

Specific comments i) This paper focuses specifically on Europe and on the notion of ‘European geography’ in the context of the debate on Anglo hegemony. It is clear, however, that the Anglo hegemony is considered to extend far beyond the confines of mainland Europe to other non-anglophone parts of the world where human geography is practised. Although the paper clearly acknowledges this, I suggest that a more explicit engagement with this broader scenario might help to strengthen the critique of the notion of ‘Europe as periphery.’

Although it might be reasonable to argue that human geographers and other scholars in (for example) both Spain and Bolivia experience marginalisation as a result of Anglo-American dominance, the nature and extent of that marginalisation is by no means comparable, given the differences between the two nations in terms of their economic and political status in a global context. Indeed, given that Bolivia is a former colony of Spain, some Bolivian academics arguably find themselves doubly marginalised. Although Spanish is a second language for many Bolivians, it is the language in which

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scholarship is conducted within the country. Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, the position of mainland European countries within the Anglo hegemony debate is complicated by the fact that, although they experience the effects of Anglo dominance in the present, they (alongside Britain) have also played a highly active role in the creation of a wider global periphery.

The author might therefore consider giving some thought, if only briefly, to: i) the nature of the relationship between academic practice in the European ‘periphery’ and in Europe’s own peripheries, that is, in the ‘developing world’ as a whole and perhaps especially in the former colonies of European nations. (In particular, are former colonial relationships still apparent today in academic hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination between mainland European nations and their former colonies, and how do European geographers engage practically and intellectually with their non-Anglo colleagues outside Europe? Moreover, how and to what extent do those geographers who position themselves as ‘European’ within the Anglo hegemony debate engage with discussions on this subject that have been conducted by geographers and other academics in other parts of the non-anglophone world?)

ii) In connection with the issues outlined above, the author may find it useful to have a look at the work of Walter Mignolo and his understanding of ‘external borders’ and ‘internal borders’ within the context of his ideas about the emergence of a modern/colonial world system that was centred on Europe. (See in particular his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, and also chapter 1 of *The Idea of Latin America*). In tracing the emergence of the modern/colonial world system, he charts the northward shift of power within Europe that commenced at the end of the seventeenth century, and that resulted in the growing marginalisation of Spain and Portugal – along with these countries’ languages – as dominant agents within this system. Thus, although they continued to enjoy a close relationship with the ‘core’, these southern European nations became subordinated to the knowledges, languages and economies of countries such as France and Britain,

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and hence, from about 1800 onwards, may be thought of as the ‘internal borders’ of the West. Although the specific focus of Mignolo’s discussion differs from the concerns of Best’s paper, the concept of ‘internal borders’ may nevertheless prove to be of some use in thinking through the complexities of mainland Europe’s contemporary relationship with the Anglo-American sphere on the one hand and, on the other, the peripheries that are constituted by the formerly colonised world.

ii) An in-depth discussion of the future pathways that the debate on Anglo-American hegemony should take, in theoretical as well as practical terms, is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. However, while the case is well made by Best that Europe “is part of the problem,” it is unclear whether Best is suggesting that the notion of ‘Europe’ as an inclusive and heterogeneous alternative to Anglo dominance is best abandoned altogether (perhaps in favour of something more global that creates linkages with related struggles in other parts of the world?) or whether a vision of anti-hegemonic practice that is centred on a less problematic idea of ‘Europe’ can be developed and deployed by contributors to the debate. At least some brief comments on future directions would, I suggest, strengthen the paper and help to set a clearer agenda for moving the debate forward. Again, this relates to what I see as a need for the author to place the debate more clearly within the context of debates about Anglo hegemony at the global scale.

iii) The paper is clearly structured, adequately referenced and generally well written, but some careful editing is required before it is ready for publication. Below is a (non-exhaustive) list of some specific sentences and phrases that require revision or clarification.

Technical corrections Page 99, lines 14-15: “has come under challenge” would be better rendered as “has been challenged.”

Page 100, line 24: “case studies and contributions. . .”: The word ‘in’ should be inserted before “contributions.”

Page 101, line 2: “One important term in the Anglo hegemony debate has been periph-

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ery”: I suggest that this would be rendered more idiomatically as: “An important term that has been used in the Anglo hegemony debate is “periphery”.”

Page 102, lines 2-3: “but suggests different explanation. . .” The word ‘a’ needs to be inserted before ‘different’.

Page 102, line 10: “a direct challenge of the two first models” should be: “a direct challenge to the first two models”.

Page 102, final paragraph: the last two sentences could do with clarification. What is meant, precisely, by “internal institutional settings”? I would also suggest that the final sentence should indicate more precisely which “power relations” are being referred to, rather than leaving this implicit by using “these”.

Page 104, line 29: the word ‘in’ is missing from the phrase “and doing so.”

Page 106, lines 18-19: “Even Rodríguez-Pose, in most of his paper firmly positioned as. . .” I suggest moving “firmly positioned” so that it precedes “in most of his paper.”

Page 108, line 3: Instead of “In the following” I suggest “In the following section” or “In what follows.” I would also suggest using the present tense (“I analyse”) instead of the future.

Page 110, line 19: there is a redundant “of” in this sentence.

Page 112, line 15: “The point of view Aalbers and Rossi take here. . .” I suggest that the word “that” should be inserted after “view.”

Page 112, lines 25-28. This sentence is quite unwieldy and not very clear. I suggest that it be substantially revised.

Page 113, line 10. “My particular interest was. . .” I would suggest “has been” instead of “was”, and also the insertion of “interrogating” or “exploring” (or something similar) before “the idea of Europe.” In the same sentence, “underlay” should be in the present tense.

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Page 113, line 21. “In a third perspective” should be “From a third perspective.”

Page 114, lines 3-4. The sentence beginning “This discourse” requires clarification.

Page 114, lines 9-11. The sentence beginning “Third, European geographers. . .” also needs revision. Perhaps “a community which speaks to the centre and for which demands may be formulated. . .”?

Page 114, line 12: “thus being disruptive”: this should be “and thus disrupting.”

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