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Interactive comment on “Critical geography in Germany: from exclusion to inclusion via internationalisation” by B. Belina et al.

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“Critical Geography in Germany” makes the important point that national disciplinary context is decisive for the “concrete situation of critical geography in any particular country.” It further argues that as national disciplinary power structures are challenged, the hegemony of English-language geography may not only be the drag on the development of critical geography that some critics contend it is, but also (in part because of the “prestige” of Anglophonic critical geography) it can be used against the status quo. (The authors importantly note that such work has prestige “not because [it is] critical, but because [it is] international and internationally successful” [p. 134, lines 6–7]).

Especially for those of us not overly familiar with the history of German geography, and whose German language skills are minimal at best and non-existent more typically,

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this paper provides a very useful and enlightening review of the German discipline's development and the debates that have shaped it. Outsiders, like myself, are able to get a good sense of not only how the discipline has developed, especially since the 1970s, but why – what was at stake in the debates over Theoretische Geographie around 1980 and over "New Cultural Geography," more recently.

I am impressed by the analysis in this paper, and as noted it has been very helpful for me in understanding German-language geography and its particular struggles over "critical" or politically-progressive – "left-wing" – scholarship. (I agree with the authors, who cite Blomley and Markard to make their point, that "critical" is a pretty weak name for what in Anglophonic geography we used to call "radical" or "socialist" geography. "Uncritical geography" is indeed an oxymoron, but the adoption of "critical geography" as a label is a fair barometer of just how impoverished political thinking in academia has become in and after Blair and Clinton's "third way" evacuation of political thinking in politics.)

There are, nonetheless, two aspects of the paper that I think are underdeveloped, the strengthening of which, I think, might strengthen the overall claims of the authors.

The first is that there is little sense, in the paper, of the content of the chapters published in Kulturgeographie. We learn that, especially early on, critics recapitulate standard hierarchies by aiming their strongest criticisms at the most junior, and therefore most institutionally insecure, authors. It is, of course, quite conceivable that this move is precisely designed to reinforce the positions of the powerful by undermining the credibility of junior scholars as they struggle to get footing in the discipline. That kind of "bunker-protecting" is not unusual. But it is also conceivable that it was the very "strangeness" – the radicalness, itself – of the work of these younger scholars that was the target. Is it, or is it not the case, in the view of the authors, that the work most often the object of attack was the most challenging to the status quo? Or was it just that there was a challenge to that status quo, and the content of it didn't matter? It would be helpful to see an exploration of this issue, because the answer to that question would help

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us understand whether what was at stake in these debates merely that there was a challenge to old ideas and old hierarchies, or that there was something crucial in those ideas that challenged the hierarchy.

The second place where I would like to see a bit more development concerns something that is implicit throughout the paper, but never discussed outright; namely: the problem of disciplinary inferiority and weakness – what Carl Sauer long ago called a “pernicious anemia” – that expresses itself as a kind of (ultra-conservative) boundary-keeping. Speaking to the Association of American Geographers in 1940 – perhaps at the nadir of American geography’s power as an intellectual field – he said: When a subject is ruled, not by inquisitiveness but by definitions of its boundaries, it is likely to face extinction. This way lies the death of learning. Such has been the lingering sickness of American academic geography that pedantry, which is logic combined with a lack of curiosity, has tried to read out of the party workers who have not conformed to prevalent definitions. . . . Only if we reach that day when we shall gather to sit far into the night comparing our findings and discussing all their meanings, shall we have recovered from the pernicious anemia of the “but-is-this-geography” state. (Sauer, “Foreword to Historical Geography,” Annals of the AAG 31 (1941) pp. 1-24; in Land and Life: Selected Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer, University of California Press, 1963, p. 355). Anglophonic geography has not really recovered from this anemia, though at times I think it might be on the mend. German geography, by the evidence of this paper, remains gravely ill. There is a massive insecurity, it seems, at the heart of this sickness. The authors quote Ehlers “complaining ‘about a discipline that has lost its classic anchors, so that its outside image seems not clearly contoured, but contradictory and fragmentary’ (p. 132, lines 4-6); they cite Klüter’s complaint that KG is too “journalistic” and that it does not conform to his sense of proper “scientific analysis” (p. 132, line 10). There is no sense that there is a substantive critique of the work in KG, only that it fails to conform to “geography.” As I hope the quotation from Sauer makes clear, this is an old complaint and one not confined to German geography.

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But, and this is crucial, the author themselves recapitulate the complaint – or should I say, there is a danger in their analysis of the double-sidedness of Anglophonic hegemony that they do too little to expose it and therefore to begin to point ways beyond it. They argue that the critics of KG ask the old question (a variation of which is still very au currant in the American university, by the way): “What does this approach do for geography (within the German university)?” The “new question” that critical geographers in Germany are raising, the authors suggest, is “How does this contribute to the standing of German geographers in international debates?” (p. 134, lines 7-9). But this new question, while perhaps strategically valuable in the struggle for power in the German geographical academy (and that should not be discounted), does nothing to address the “anemia” – it merely displaces it to a new scale. I think this is an issue – either here or in another paper – that the authors ought to address head-on, and I bet their analyses and arguments will be truly helpful for not only thinking strategically about the position of left-wing geography in the German academy, but also for turning debates over that position into debates over the content of the work being done.

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