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Centres and peripheries: a critique of the critique as a starting point of a critical geography of (Polish) geography

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In the first issue of *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)*, Zbigniew Rykiel sets out a number of aims for the new journal. First, he places *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)* within the context of the transformation of Polish geography. He characterises it as a discipline in a country of the semi-periphery, and lays out a strategy from this position in the world-system (Rykiel 2011a). Second, in a discussion piece (Rykiel 2011b), he takes up an attempt of a sociology of (Polish) geography combined with a critique of an earlier paper by Jerzy Bański (2010). Both papers are of course closely linked, and they relate to questions that have been at the centre of a wider debate in critical geography in recent years.

These questions are discussed under the rubric of a '(critical) geography of (critical) geography' (Berg 2004, Harvey 2006). In particular, the question of academic centre-periphery relations has come under scrutiny in this debate. In the following, I would like to sketch out a commentary on the starting debate in Polish geography and in this journal specifically.

I am therefore first very briefly summarising some of the key aspects of the English-language debate about centre-periphery relations in geography, and then proceeding to a few remarks about the situation of Polish geography within this, as it

can be gathered from the two papers.¹

The current debates about centre and periphery in academic geography can be traced back to an editorial about unequal power relations within English-language geography; Lawrence Berg and Robin Kearns (1998) reported that a paper submitted to a journal had been returned because it was considered of 'local relevance', being about New Zealand. They took issue with what they identified as a tendency to assume that everything about the USA is universal, and anything from the rest of the world is particular, of case-study character, a tendency they label as 'America Unlimited'. They called for a 'geographically more decentred geography' (Berg, Kearns 1998: 130). In the following years, the issue of unequal international relations within geography has been taken up in contributions from across the globe, including India, Hungary, Ireland, Denmark, Italy, and many others (Minca 2000, 2003; Timar 2004; see also editorials in *Society and Space* 21/2, 2003). In this debate, in particular the issue of language has been raised – that there is an 'Anglo hegemony' of language that privileges knowledge produced or published in English, and that recognises knowledge only through the institutions of this hegemony, generally located in North America and the United Kingdom. Along with this goes a certain perspective on the world, and on problems in the world. This perspective has been criticised as using a very limited definition of the 'international' standing (namely only within the English-speaking world), and excluding other perspectives, positionalities, and ways of writing.

The academic world has its centres and peripheries delineated according to use of the English language, access to publication outlets and recognition as relevant in the 'international' knowledge production. On the other hand, there is an emerging part of the debate that considers the practices of knowledge from the periphery as the source of innovation, creativity, and critical reflection (see Minca 2003, Gregson et al. 2003; for a critique see Best 2009).

In spite of this considerable debate, it has been limited in the sense that it has so far mainly taken place in editorials and shorter commentaries. There have been

¹ It should be noted I am not an expert on Polish academic geography. I am drawing on my experience in German, British and North-American geography and limit my comments to the papers referred to above.

very few detailed attempts of a critical geography of geography, and, in addition, most of the criticism has dealt with the 'international' (English-language) setting, analysing individual examples and personal experiences, or counting the number of 'international' publications from scholars from different countries (for example Rodríguez-Pose 2006). The potential start of a debate about the 'critical condition of Polish geography' (Bański 2010) offers a great opportunity to analyse the geography of geography on the ground – in a setting that Z. Rykiel describes as a semi-periphery, and a discipline that both Z. Rykiel and J. Bański also describe as peripheral in their national academic setting. This is obviously not an analysis that I can attempt. I am, however, involved in a long-term analysis of German geography, in which we are working on a geography (and history) of critical geography in Germany – primarily in order to analyse the conditions that did not allow earlier attempts at radical/critical geography in Germany to take hold (see Belina et al. 2009).

The two papers alone (Bański 2010, and Rykiel 2011b) offer enough material to formulate questions that might be useful in our analysis of German geography, and hopefully some of my remarks will also be useful for the Polish debate. Both J. Bański and Z. Rykiel address the main question that we have also seen to be most relevant in Germany: the rules of the reproduction of the professoriate. They point out that the system in place produces conformity and homogeneity. However, also both in Poland and Germany, there are new factors in the system: new methods of evaluation and ranking, an increased attempt to be visible 'internationally' with publications recognised by the Anglo-core, and an increased openness to the outside of the national discipline. This increased openness is expressed in a variety of aspects. More students and young scholars go abroad for at least parts of their education. This can (but not always does) contribute to the exchange of ideas beyond national disciplines, and contribute new credentials and networks. The openness also includes more interaction with outsiders within the national disciplines, be they researchers from abroad, students, academic visitors or collaboration partners, funding sources, and joint research projects. There is therefore a spatiality linked to these transformations, and an analysis of this spatiality would constitute a critical geography of geography.

The first aspect of this geography is the regional geography that is impressively documented in Jerzy Bański's analysis of grant allocations, rankings, and publication figures. Polish geography, judging from these figures, has clear centres and peripheries. The reproduction of the discipline, as Zbigniew Rykiel points out, is predominantly determined from the centre. But are the peripheries of Polish geography 'critical peripheries', after C. Minca (2003)? Is Z. Rykiel's own position in a department outside of geography at a university in the periphery an indicator of a peripheral voice? What are the conditions of critique in Polish geography?

Another common point of the two papers, and the second aspect of a critical geography of Polish geography, points to the relevance of the (speaking) position and location of critique. The critique of the geographical establishment is voiced from and in specific places. Jerzy Bański and Zbigniew Rykiel both mention the conference at Rydzyna in 1983. Both describe Rydzyna as an important point in Polish geography, but Z. Rykiel considers it an important point for the reconstruction of the established core of Polish geography and the exclusion of radical critics of the status quo.

However, Z. Rykiel also mentions that some of the more critical Polish perspectives from the 1980s were published abroad. The outside of the national discipline served as an outlet, an alternative to its limitations, and this, the relation with the outside, would be a third aspect of a critical geography of geography. Similar in Germany: the national geography convention in Kiel in 1969 is also considered as a turning point, but from a perspective of today one has to wonder what exactly the revolution was. The introduction of quantitative methodology is often referenced back to Kiel, and similar to Rydzyna, but it is easily forgotten that there were numerous more radical voices present (or not present, because they chose not to attend the conference of the establishment) at Kiel and at all of the following conferences, but practically none of them was ever able to join the ranks of the German geography professoriate. Some of the more radical critics went abroad to become professors, some became professors in other disciplines, some were relegated to the very margins of the discipline, some found much better jobs outside the academia (and some worse). There were critical peripheries, indeed, but they did not lead to great change in the centre - they lead only outside of the discipline (Belina et al 2009).

What are these interactions like today? For Germany, we argue that the new relevance assigned to 'international' debates in Germany now in some cases works in favour of the introduction of new, sometimes radical approaches (Belina et al. 2009). There is, however, very little debate about the impact of this on German geography, and the mainstream of German geography is mainly interested in strengthening German geography in global 'competition', making German geography visible. The International Geographical Union meeting in Cologne 2012, for example, is often presented as such an effort to place German geography on the world stage. This might nevertheless be misleading, because what matters in German geography is the internal inequality, not international competition. There is very little consideration of whether German academic geography might be in a position of a periphery². This is because the recognition of individual German geographers globally has little relevance within the national discipline. If anything, then German geography might be described as an island.

In Zbigniew Rykiel's commentary on the Polish situation, however, there are very clear references to a variety of discourses to do with centre and periphery. In the introduction to *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)* (Rykiel 2011a), he takes the position of a moderniser, calling for the application of international rules within the Polish discipline. This is, he writes, because the rules are set by the centre. Poland accordingly is in the periphery, and has to accept these rules if it wants to catch up (Rykiel 2011a: 1). Similarly, Z. Rykiel calls for people to aim at visibility in the core, by submitting to the rules outlined above - publishing in English, first of all. He places his suggestions in the context of domination and structural violence by the core towards the periphery, but makes no suggestions to counter this structural violence.

Doing so, Zbigniew Rykiel chooses an argument different from that taken by those voicing a perspective of the periphery in the 'Anglo-hegemony' debate. There is no mention of productive peripheries, because he equates this (in my interpretation) with recourse to the nation and the national identity of the discipline. Core-periphery relations are not as simple as they seem, and this is maybe implicit in his

² Admittedly this is a strange idea, with the colonial legacy of Germany, its economic and political status, and the very comfortable positions of German professors.

argument. While Poland and Polish geography may be at the periphery of 'international' geography, there is no unitary Polish geography, but within Polish geography again there are centres and peripheries. Zbigniew Rykiel positions himself as speaking out against the centre of Polish geography, and the route he chooses is that of the internationalist, against an insular, static discipline.

There are, however, other discourses that are referenced in Zbigniew Rykiel's commentary (2011b). First and foremost, it is the discourse of the traditionalist, speaking with the voice of the discipline, for the discipline (something we have also observed in the German debate about cultural geography (Belina et al. 2009)). Furthermore, Zbigniew Rykiel also mentions dissidents that were silenced in the memorialisation of the Rydzyna conference, and of the sanctioned modernisers that emerged victorious³. This shows the adaptation of the discourse of modernisation by the centres of Polish geography.

Jerzy Bański's paper is also interesting in this regard for its specific discourse. The introduction of new rankings shows the new weight that is attributed to international visibility also in Poland, but in Jerzy Bański's 2010 paper, there is almost no mention of international power relations, and Poland is not presented as a periphery, nor as somehow dominated by English-language geography or geographers. International (English-language) publication is invariably seen as something positive, as in Z. Rykiel. The perspective is nevertheless almost wholly internal, because the power structures are wholly determined within Polish geography – indeed, as Zbigniew Rykiel points out, Jerzy Bański's demand that the allocation of funding should be administered by geographers themselves again stresses this solely discipline-internal orientation. The power structures of Polish geography are determined by the social structures of its environment, as Zbigniew Rykiel points out, and this environment determines that the discipline is governed as a national discipline. There is therefore no hegemony of English-language geography or geographers in the Polish discipline. Rather, it is the internal management of science that invokes 'international' criteria in order to structure national academia.

Jerzy Bański's paper is also interesting for an omission. In his sole focus on na-

³ In the German context, Dietrich Bartels would be this sanctioned moderniser, credited with introducing the scientific method in German geography and firmly linked with the Kiel conference.

tional research funding, the question automatically arises what the role of international funding is. Some Polish geography departments, for example, have gained considerable European Union's research funding. Does this contribute to the rupturing of an internal hegemony? Or does it reinforce centre-periphery structures within the discipline? And connected to this – are new networks that students can build through exchanges a challenge to the status quo, or are they more evidence of it?

To conclude: I have pointed towards a few indications of a specific geography of Polish geography as it emerges in the papers by Jerzy Bański (2010) and Zbigniew Rykiel (2011a, b). Some aspects of a critical geography of geography can be gathered from the start of a debate in Polish geography, including the sociology and regional geography of Polish geography, speaking positions and the role of locations, and the relations with the outside of Polish geography. My interest in this exercise emerges from just this kind of analysis in Germany. I have tried to point out a set of discourses that relate to a complex situation of core-periphery relations, internationally and on the national scale. One of the early outcomes of our project in Germany is that these relations can also be mapped on the local scale, where there are a variety of mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation at work that would need to be brought in for a complete picture. Further to this (and in contrast to Germany), the explicit placing of Poland in the periphery of international academic discourse deserves attention. It achieves, quite involuntarily I assume, that Polish geography can be analysed much more directly using the concepts from current debates about the international geography of geography. In Germany, in contrast, the imagination of the discipline until very recently has much more resembled that of a centre resting in itself, self-sufficient and enclosed.

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