

# The contested and negotiated dominance of Anglophone geography in Greece

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Received 4 December 2002; received in revised form 25 November 2003

## Abstract

In this comment, I discuss the dominance of Anglophone geographical literature in Greece, arguing that it is a recent and still contested phenomenon, to do with broader historical/political circumstances, as well as with the development of geographical studies at university level. In the context of the power-knowledge system, in which Anglophone debates, theory production and spaces of academic communication and exchange dominate, radical academics in Greece are caught in a complex web of contradictions, have to negotiate their/our paths across languages, plural voices, local and international communities.

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**Keywords:** Anglophone dominance; Contradictions; Translation; Re-writing

Discussing, in the ICCG and other fora, the dominance of Anglophone geography is not meant as a commentary on intentional domination of debates, including critical ones, by English and North American scholars. It is not a kind of theory of conspiracy, as Kirsten Simonsen in this collection reminds us, nor yet another homogenizing reference to a vast and varied disciplinary community. It is rather an exploration of the power geometries, which contribute to construct relations of norm/other between geographical traditions, milieu of academic production and individual scholars as bearers of such traditions. For, even the most self-reflexive and well-intentioned radical Anglophone scholars are, in a way, privileged by such power geometries constructed through language, institutional settings and spaces of communication and academic exchange. In this comment I draw a lot from work I have done together with Simonsen and Gregson on European writing spaces (Gregson et al., 2003), but my focus is mainly on Greece. I argue that, in Greece, the dominance of Anglophone geographical literature and spaces of communication is a rather recent phenomenon—and, to my view, a still contested one, having to do with broader historical/political circumstances, as

well as with the development of geographical studies at university level.

An introductory comment is necessary here, in order to situate my point. Geography departments in Greek universities have a very short history: The first was established in 1989, in the University of the Aegean, and the second 10 years later, in Harokopio University of Athens. As a matter of fact, Greek universities started to “produce” geographers when the so-called Anglophone hegemony in the discipline was already well established. In the “pre-geographical” era parts of geographical studies were also included in Faculties of geology and economics, while a strong radical tradition in urban and regional studies originated in Faculties of architecture and of applied geography and cartography in Departments of Surveying (Geographies, 2001). Scholars in these fields hold second degrees in geography from elsewhere in Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America. The particular “elsewhere/s” have important implications for the kinds of geographical debates as well as for the profiles of staff members in the two new geography departments.

During the US supported dictatorship (1967–1974) in Greece, many radical young scholars fled the country for political reasons and an important number of them pursued post-graduate studies (including geography) in the political and academic climate of *Mai 1968* in France and of the *autunno caldo* of 1969 in Italy. These

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scholars formed the first post-dictatorial generation of university teachers, now in senior positions. Their academic formation bears the influence of French urban sociologists and geographers and Italian urbanists, under whose supervision a lot of theses were written. It also bears the influence of general political radicalism, which extended to approaches to space and urban and regional development. With the laurels of anti-dictatorial resistance and of French and Italian radicalism and in line with the anti-American feeling of the period, the teaching, research and political activism of this generation of teachers changed the face of Greek higher education. In this context radical debate/s have been, per force, cross-disciplinary, linked to political agendas and remote from Anglophone pursuits. They contributed to the formation of a nucleus of radical scholars with distinctly spatial/geographical interests and research agendas, expressed in a number of regular conferences and journals, some of which are still “alive” (for a review, see Vaiou and Mantouvalou, 2001).

Since the early 1980s, contacts with the Anglophone academy, primarily British, started to intensify, as a result of a number of developments, of which here I single out three: First, English replaced French as the second language taught in secondary schools and contributed to a turn of orientation of many school graduates towards the UK, at all levels of higher education. But a major boost came through European Community (EEC) funding for research and teacher and student exchanges. So, second, an increasing number of academics and students started participating in “Erasmus”, the EEC funded inter-university cooperation schemes, later incorporated in “Socrates”, a broader program for the development of cooperation among higher education institutions. In this context relations were established with British universities, which soon became attractive destinations for Greek students, primarily for reasons of language. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Greece attracted the attention of scholars from the UK, including some radical geographers, as part of the Southern European “less developed” new part of the EEC, which had to be included in any project opting for EEC funding throughout the 1980s.

In the post-1989 geographical imaginary of Europe, Southern European countries, and Greece in particular, are no longer a “required partner” for EU funded projects. East and Central Europe are now given the relevant role, as Timar underlines in her contribution to this collection. But in the 1980s, the South was “discovered” by British geographers and other scholars (see, for example Williams, 1984), and became for a while an interesting/fashionable place to do field work, a space to be written on. In this process, local experiences of urban and regional development came to be constructed as different in negative terms: deviant, backward, non-conforming to dominant conceptualizations and theo-

retical formulations. Such formulations, although constructed on the basis of very local (British) experiences, were already posited as general/universal and international. Greek scholars, on the other hand, came to be shaped as expert/authentic knowledge-providers about the Greek other, as facilitators of fieldwork and, sometimes, as producers of case studies. The geographical representations which were formed in the context of such a power geometry started going into Anglophone writing and communication spaces (radical or otherwise) and determined how Greece was (re)presented, as well as from where and how “others” might speak in these spaces, as marginal, less important voices.

However, viewed from “inside”, this power geometry has not (yet?) assumed such dramatic dimensions as these developments might indicate. I would argue that Anglophone dominance remains negotiated and contested, at least among radical scholars. For one, throughout the 1990s, international geopolitics and US aggression in the Balkans and the Middle East have offered ample opportunities for political anti-americanism to be revived, thereby giving a different twist to radical debate, in which Anglophone dominance becomes contested, if not actively resisted. Many of the old radicals, however settled and softened, now hold senior positions in the academy and still keep their contacts with other countries/academic communities, with those elsewhere/s in which they have pursued graduate studies and/or established research contacts. Therefore, international debates, in which geographers opt to participate, are not defined as exclusively Anglophone, nor are Anglophone writing spaces and conferences valued more than others, for older as well as younger academics.

Having said this, it is also true that a new generation of geographers (and other scholars working in urban and regional studies) is more familiar with and, to some extent, less critical of, Anglophone literatures and debates, more eager to accept these as the norm and local knowledge/s as other, more comfortable with English than with other languages. At the same time, and from various disciplines (most forcefully from historians trained in the *Annales* School in France), there are conscious and systematic efforts for what I would call “re-writing Greece”, at least at two levels: First, internally, by bringing to light histories, geographies, social relations, modes of life which were silenced/repressed by the post-Civil War rightist state. Second, externally, by challenging widespread representations of Greece as an exception or diversion from the norm in various fields and disciplines. This second re-writing rests on the one hand on detailed studies which started to dig beyond official statistics and reports and on the other, on numerous general and field-specific re-examinations of the relevance of concepts and categories imported from other contexts, including Anglophone ones, where the-

ory is purportedly developed. These efforts cannot be attributed to any organized formal structure, nor are they continuously active and uninterrupted. But they have by now produced important work, which has given rise to an on-going, cross-disciplinary radical debate of which geography or, more accurately, urban and regional studies are part. Language barriers keep the multiple and varied spaces of communication formed on a regular or ad hoc basis internal to this community.

In the context of the power–knowledge system in which Anglophone debates, theory production and spaces of academic communication and exchange dominate, we as radical geographers/academics in Greece are caught in complex web of contradictions—with which, I believe, we have to live, negotiating our paths. In the dominant Anglophone scene we are constructed as inappropriate subjects of theory-making and we have no place from which to speak theoretically, unless we adjust to Anglophone discourses. We therefore have to struggle with the need to keep in touch with international debates—and with by now long-standing contacts and friendships—while at the same time keeping up the effort to develop, for both academic and political reasons, theoretical approaches originating in our “local” knowledge/s. Such approaches cannot be communicated beyond our own academic community, unless translated, usually into English.

And this brings me to my concluding point, to do with the power of language and the problem of translation. Coming from a marginal linguistic and a small academic community we are always faced with translation, in linguistic terms, but also, and most importantly, in terms of conveying meaning, ways of seeing, clarifying the content of concepts and categories. In order to participate in the developments in our discipline and communicate our own work beyond our own academic/linguistic community we have to translate this work into English. This is not just a linguistic exercise, although this already constitutes a huge effort and a form of disempowerment (see, for example, Garcia-Ramon, 2003). Most importantly it is a transposition into a different (Anglophone) framework of values, priorities and theoretical preferences. Because of its own undisputed hegemony, this different framework posits itself as

international and sets the rules and guidelines for debate, in which our “local” knowledge/s do not necessarily fit. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary and politically relevant for us to produce such “local” knowledge/s and keep up debate within our own linguistic and (multidisciplinary) intellectual community, which has its own traditions, ways of approaching the subject, theoretical formulations and empirical interests.

These two frameworks of thinking, communicating, producing knowledge only partially overlap and efforts for dialogue are usually one-directional. In this situation, we, as academics in/from the margins, have no other way but to speak across worlds, participate in a plurality of communities, to communicate in more than one language, to speak in a plurality of voices (Staeheli and Nagar, 2002)—and try to retain our (personal) sanity and our (collective) radicalism. This is a knife-edge positionality built upon in-between-ness: in-between local and international, outside and within, isolation and contact, east and west, female and male, interest and indifference. For, Anglophone dominance is perhaps real, but it is not what it posits itself to be, i.e. the only reality. It is almighty *and inexistent*, “virtual” but with very “real” consequences, only as hegemonic as radical scholars allow it to be. Therefore, its power to define, control and regulate radical geographical debate/s is, or has to be, continuously contested and negotiated.

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