



Internationalism, Hegemony, Community, and the Megaconference: a Response to Lawrence Berg

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In the March 2009 issue of *ACME*, Lawrence Berg (2009) critiques the performative space of the “international” geography conference. Expanding on previous interventions by himself and others on the spaces of “international” geography publishing (e.g. ACME Editorial Collective, 2007; Berg, 2004, 2006; Chauncy, 2001; Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001; Paasi, 2005; Sidaway et al., 2004), Berg argues that the motivation for university administrators privileging the anonymous, international megaconference over the intimate but productive small conference can be traced back to neoliberalism and the corporatization of academia, particularly as manifested in quantitative performance metrics.

I generally support Berg’s central point. After all, who could disagree that a 50-person, 5-day seminar that seamlessly moves between meeting rooms and cafes in an Aegean village is more intellectually and personally satisfying than a 7000-person, 59-concurrent-session meeting held in a warren of windowless rooms at a seemingly placeless convention hotel? From my perspective as a geographer who frequently publishes and presents in interdisciplinary venues, I have always found it odd that my university’s travel grant program is largely restricted to attendance at regularly occurring conferences of professional societies (which, almost by definition, are unidisciplinary). Thus, I can access these funds to attend a



megaconference like the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers—which, in addition, to not being very rewarding intellectually, requires no special qualifications for attendance—but not a small, interdisciplinary one-off conference that revolves around a specific theme, to which I may have had the honor of being invited as the sole geographer, and which is much more likely to improve my intellectual development and status in the academic community. Berg convincingly traces the reasons for this anomaly in the academic reward system—and the wastes of time, money, intellectual effort, and carbon emissions that result—to the structural priorities of neoliberal academia.

At the center of the process described by Berg is a neoliberal fetishization of the “international” scale. According to globalization discourse, the “international” is the scale of the new economy; it is the scale of the 21st century; it is the scale of *power*. The “international” (or the “global”) always lies just beyond reach. However, it must continually be pursued, and it is this pursuit that drives the unbridled competition that is the lifeblood of neoliberal capitalism (see, for example, Friedman, 2007). Of course, geographers have long critiqued this view of the world with its simplistic assumptions about scale as a static, ontological given wherein the global scale is “naturally” the one at which one can have the greatest impact on the lives of others (Brenner, 2005; Cox, 1997; Marston, Jones, and Woodward, 2005; Massey, 1994; Smith, 2008). However, it is not at all evident that the critiques made by geographers have been heard by university administrators, who communicate their “internationalized” definition of academic success by rewarding publications in some journals and not in others, and by selectively allocating travel funds.

Given Berg’s analysis (and my agreement with it), I was surprised when, immediately after reading Berg’s essay, I attended a department faculty meeting where I was informed that the dean of my academic division had asked department chairs to stop approving funds for international travel. In response to budget cuts that had reduced the overall funding pool, the dean was proposing that departmental travel allocations be restricted to conferences within the United States, where, presumably, travel costs would be cheaper and the university would receive more “bang” for its ever-shrinking “buck.”² Faculty members quickly internalized this message about the university’s funding priorities. For instance, as I went about making my travel plans for the remainder of 2009, I concluded that my safest bet for receiving funding would be to use university and departmental travel funds to attend the annual meeting of the AAG, a conference that any university

² To clarify, this is a different funding stream than the one referred to earlier in this essay. The funds referred to earlier are administered through a central travel grant program, and the application rules specifically require that travel be to a regularly occurring meeting of a national or international-scale professional organization. By contrast, the funds referred to in this paragraph are drawn from each department’s general budget and historically have been unrestricted (unless an individual department seeks to impose rules).

administrator would recognize as a normal part of professional disciplinary participation. For more “exotic” international travel—in my case, the meetings of two non-U.S. geography associations that were likely to be much more productive, both because of their smaller size and because of their fit with my specific research interests—I decided to rely on funds from research grants.

That leads me to ask: why has the valorization of the big international conference not been internalized by my university’s academic administrators? Has my university’s administration gotten off the neoliberalism bandwagon and joined the forefront of critical scholars trying to redefine quality in academia? Probably not.

More likely, the directive from the administration derived from the way in which it was attempting to negotiate a contradiction in the mission of universities (and, in particular, U.S., state-funded, research universities). On the one hand, a university strives to achieve academic excellence and prestige. This is typically obtained through advances in “pure research,” and success in this area is measured through publications and citations in refereed journals, grants obtained from major research councils and foundations, and participation at measurably “international” conferences. This is the mission responsible for the phenomenon of internationalization critiqued by Berg. However, the university also has a second mission: to serve the needs of “the community,” whether through training the next generation of workers or through performing applied, contracted research. In the case of the U.S. research university, the “community” to be served typically is defined as one of the fifty states, namely the one whose taxpayers are covering a portion of that university’s operating costs.

Neither “academic excellence” nor “community service” is inherently progressive or regressive; either can be pursued with elitist or liberatory agendas. Nor are they completely incompatible. There is, however, an inherent tension between the two missions. Berg demonstrates how the dynamics of the first of these two missions is leading to the “internationalization” (and concurrently the intellectual downgrading) of the academic conference. However, this drive toward “internationalization” is complicated by the second mission, which, in contradiction to the first, promotes itself by reifying the scale of the “local.”

At times of budgetary crisis, resources to meet the dual missions of “academic excellence” and “community service” become scarce. In this situation, state legislators, with some justification, argue that it is more important to train the next generation of workers (so that the state can have a competitive economy when it emerges from recession) than it is to maintain high levels of prestige or be leaders in innovation (whether in marketable inventions or in critical theoretical perspectives) (Lewin, 2009). In this context, in which the two aspects of the university’s mission become associated with specific scales—the goal of “academic excellence” being associated with the “international” or “global” scale

and the goal of “community service” being associated with the “state” or “local” scale—those who favor the “community service” mission become suspicious of faculty travel, and especially international travel. University administrators worry that they will have to justify to state legislators why their faculty are jetting around the world when they should be at home serving the needs of the “local” community. Thus, mobility becomes not simply a byproduct of social organization that is necessitated by geographic distancing. Rather, like scale, mobility (and immobility) become tropes that signify one set of social priorities over another (Cresswell, 2006).

In my state, higher education is especially vulnerable to economic downturn, for a complex set of reasons including the state’s revenue structure, historic underfunding of higher education, and the interests of the economic elite (who, because of the state’s economic base, have less of a vested interest in higher education than is the case for elites in many other states). And yet I don’t think that budgetary constraints, on their own, can fully explain why administrators at my university and those discussed by Berg have such differing attitudes toward “international” scholarship.

Part of the answer lies in the ways in which administrators of different universities, in different specific contexts, mediate the contradictory imperatives toward pursuing “international” prestige and providing “local” community service. The other part of the answer likely lies in the specific meaning of the “international,” especially in the U.S. The intersection between “internationalism” and hegemony is explored by Berg in his writings on the pressure to publish in “international” journals, but it is oddly absent from his discussion of the pressure to attend “international” conferences. Put simply, “international” means something rather different in the U.S. than it does elsewhere in the world. As Taylor (1996) notes, one key feature of hegemony is that the hegemon’s nationality gets defined as an “internationality.” This cuts in two ways. First, “American” gets defined as putatively international. Hence, the AAG is seen by university administrators in the U.S. as the functional equivalent of an international conference. Secondly, internationalism gets defined by its most stellar example: Americanism. Hence, university administrators outside the U.S. view the AAG as the paradigmatic example of an international conference. When Britons and Canadians (and, increasingly, Germans, Dutch, and Scandinavians) are pressured to prove their

“international” stature, they come to the U.S. When Americans feel this pressure, they stay home.³

Of course, the irony of the situation is that the AAG *is* increasingly an international conference, as non-Americans flock to its hallowed (or musty) halls. This is hegemony at work: the hegemon is able to define the international and, in the process, crowd out (or co-opt) alternative perspectives. Included in these alternate perspectives are those that ultimately might assist the university in meeting its other mission: that of community service. I assume that most geographers—and certainly most readers of *ACME*—still hope to find a way of combining these two missions. A starting point should involve resisting scalar shorthand that associates one mission with the global scale and the other with the local. As Massey has long advocated, the “community” is not purely local, nor is “academic excellence” achieved solely at the global scale. Thus, rethinking these scalar definitions and their associated meanings is a necessary first step toward developing new modes of scholarship—and new forms of conferences—that seek “academic excellence” while benefitting the “community.”

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³ The British case is a bit more complicated. Berg equates the academic hegemony of the U.K. with that of the U.S., but—at the risk of expressing my own hegemonic position—I doubt that most Americans (or most American academics) view the two countries as co-hegemons. While the U.K. (and, more specifically, British academia) has a special place in the U.S. imagination, I would argue that from the U.S. perspective the British academic community is at one and the same time marginal and central: a condition that frequently is associated with former centers that retain an iconic role as a cultural heartland to which one perpetually seeks to return (Boym, 2002; Ramaswamy, 2004; Shields, 1991). The ambiguous position of Britain in the academic geography constellation is demonstrated by an example discussed by Berg: the redesignation of the annual meeting of the RGS/IBG as the *International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers*. At Taylor (1996) notes, when one has hegemony one’s power to define and delimit the scope of the “international” (or, more broadly, the global) normative is *presumed*. Only a would-be hegemon (or, in this case, a has-been hegemon) would feel the need to publicly proclaim its internationality.

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