

Editorial

Building a bridge between scientific “traditions”

Introducing a new journal is an exciting, challenging and sometimes intricate task. From the initial idea to set up a new electronic journal in the field of Social Geography to publishing the first issue already two years have passed. Within these two years – together with some of our committed editors – we had various discussions about the aims and scope as well as the profile of our forthcoming journal. Finally we agreed that the focus should mainly be laid on social theory explicitly addressing the relation of space and society. A second aim we decided upon was to encourage young scientists especially from outside the Anglo-American and European discourse to submit manuscripts presenting their research efforts in a language of their choice. However, after finishing the first round of peer reviewing major problems concerning the second aim became evident. Firstly, we did not receive any manuscripts that could be said to stand outside our well-known lines of scientific knowledge production. All the same the exercise revealed that we are facing even more exigent problems of articulation “between” the Anglo-American and the continental European discourse. Establishing a smooth and informed English-German scientific dialogue hence became the most prominent task of the project with several problems to be solved. These revolve around the issues of language, style and citation.

Concerning the issue of language, the journal offers multilingual possibilities, if only we can draw upon editors who are able to review the submitted paper in a thorough and constructive way. However, since the bulk of the communication must happen in English, most authors wish to have their manuscripts published in English as well, even if English is not their mother tongue. Thus the problem of translation and altered “meanings of meanings” in the process of translation arises. For the non-native English authors this is often frustrating for they have to meet both substantial and formal standards when trying to transmit their arguments. For our editors and reviewers, on the other hand, it has sometimes proven difficult to decide why a paper did not appear to reach these standards, whether due to a weak argument or weak language skills – form and content are not easily separable in this respect. Moreover there are considerable differences in the self-understanding of the two (or even more) scientific communities. In an editorial process the application of standards from one tradition in the context of another may lead

to biased judgements. Given a general constructivist understanding of social facts this scarcely seems avoidable. However, this creates an unbalanced situation, since the relevant benchmark is English, not German (or Spanish or Russian or whatever). English speaking scholars have no incentive to publish in German and thus to be confronted with German scientific standards and thought traditions. The problematic discursive politics that result from this situation have recently been addressed in worries about a growing hegemony of ‘Anglo-American’ geography/ies [...] in particular in terms of setting the discursive agenda” (Simonsen, 2002:391f.)¹.

Concerning the issue of style there are similar differences deeply institutionalized in scientific practice. As one editor and native English speaker noted, “there is a tendency in the German-speaking papers I have seen to proceed in a classically deductive fashion, whereas much critical human geography in English employs more of a narrative or even associative style”. A non-native author’s thoughtful response elucidates what seems to be a core problem of adapting to demands of a different scientific culture: “I have no problems to accept issues of comprehensibility and obviously wrong argumentation. But I ask myself, where unintended hegemony begins: What would be the fair standard in a global scientific community, who would have to refer to whom in order to be allowed to present her case?”

Finally, concerning the issue of citation, there are problems to be addressed that stem from differences in the institutional sphere of scientific research in continental European and Anglo-American systems. In Germany, for instance, human geographers have thus far paid far less attention to citation indexes and membership in citation circles. For good or ill, this surely affects the way manuscripts are reviewed. Against this background of experiences in launching the journal, we need to revise our vision of how its aims are to be achieved. We initially expected that the enhancement of scientific dialogue and the deepening of theoretical negotiation between German, other European and Anglo-American human geographic discourses would be a matter of bringing different substantive approaches into contact, and that “formal” issues of translation could be

¹ Simonsen, K.: Global-local ambivalence, Editorial, in: Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series, Vol. 27, 4, 391–394, 2002.

dealt with as essentially “technical” problems. We now see more clearly that the two kinds of issues are not so easily kept separate. On the one hand, this makes things more difficult: considerable commitment is required from all who are or want to be part of this project: the authors, who need to be willing to prepare high quality manuscripts that meet a number of different rules and standards and to invest in the idea of publishing in an open access format; the editors and reviewers, who need to be flexible and culturally sensitive regarding the different contexts of scientific practice in which the manuscripts are produced; and last but not least we, the technical editors, who need to meet the challenges of being intermediators between all expectations and exigencies. But on the other hand, we now recognize that explicitly incorporating the hitherto “technical” problem of

translating traditions into our understanding of the substantive work of authors, reviewers and editors actually deepens the encounter. Accordingly, we have come to view the entanglements that initially seemed like editorial headaches as an opportunity to shape a virtual academic public space adequate to the cross-cultural demands of the twenty-first century. We invite readers to become a part of this difficult but promising project of building a bridge between scientific traditions!

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