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Turning a disadvantage into a resource: Working at the periphery

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I contemplate the unique position of European management scholars in a world dominated by US management practices and theories. A European approach to management scholarship, I argue, is articulated only vis-a-vis its Other, the hegemonic US scientific discourse. While it comes with a price, an academic peripheral subject position creates a space for experimentation and flexibility, which I cherish. Thus, I argue that the disadvantage of academic periphery can and should be turned into valuable resources. I analyze three dimensions of working at the periphery – linguistic, social and cognitive, and try to demonstrate, through my own experience as an Israeli scholar, on the verge of Europe and facing the US, how these aspects can be used creatively to form opportunities for academic mobilization and advancement.

1. "Center," "periphery," and a European management approach

Is there "a European approach to management scholarship"? (Siebert & Haenlein, 2014). There probably is, judging from the previous installments in this series of "reflections on Europe." But a European, or American (US) or Eastern, or any other approach to management scholarship – like any social identity – does not stand in itself, isolated from other approaches. Academic approaches like other social identities are formed within dialogues and relationships – real or imagined – with and against some *Other*. If a European approach is the in-group, there must be an out-group against which such a European approach, or an identity of the European scholar, is defined and formed (Lingard, Reznick, & DeVito, 2002; Somers, 1994). A European approach to management scholarship may well exist as scholars from Europe often describe themselves as having to adopt to, struggle with, negate or be measured against some "Other" approach, highlighting both sameness within their imagined community, and differences from another community (Benhabib, 1996; De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999). Both approaches – European and non-European – are constituted through such interactions.

For me, as a management scholar situated in Israel, issues of in-group and out-group, "us" and "other," are even more complex. Geographically, Israel is in the Middle East. While this location is crucial – religiously, historically, culturally and ideologically – to Israeli identity (Kimmerling, 2005), Israel has not been accepted as a legitimate member of this region. There has been an on-going conflict between Israel and Palestine and most other Arab countries, near and afar from its borders. As a result, Israel occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in the world, as it has been constantly striving to transcend its geographical location. In some formal respects, Israel is considered to some extent as part of Europe, for instance in sports (participating for example in soccer and basketball tournaments as a European country), commerce (Association agreements with the European Union) and international relations (Israel is a major non-NATO ally with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Still, Israel is not "in Europe" so I was actually somewhat surprised when I was approached by Sabina Siebert, who kindly asked me to write a piece for the "Reflections on Europe" series. The invitation brought me to reflect again on my subject position, real and imagined. I am not a European, I thought, and neither am I a "Middle Eastern" nor an American, that was clear to me. So, who am I? – that was less clear. Certainly a good reason to write this piece, and find out, or construct my professional identity anew and work it out.

In the following, I offer then a personal reflection of my experience of the perils and joys of doing research and publishing from the verge of Europe and facing the US. Granted, my experience is shaped by many factors – my gender, age, disciplinary background and many more; my location in the geopolitical periphery of the academic world being only one of them (Johansson & Sliwa, 2014). Still, while acknowledging this intersectionality, I will focus here on issues relating to the center–periphery complex and their relations

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to an elusive "European approach to management."

To begin with, as a management scholar situated in Israel, the Other against which I define myself professionally is the US academia. That is true, especially after World War II and ever since the 1950s, for most disciplines within the social and natural sciences in Israel (some disciplines within the humanities may be oriented towards Europe as well). Yet the US is not only the Other, but the better one. It defines quite thoroughly how the discipline of organization studies should look. It is the center of the global scientific system, and we, in Israel, are at its periphery. There is nothing unique about this position within the center–periphery dynamics characterizing the scientific world (e.g. Cavazos, 2015; Heilbron, 2014; Lillis & Curry, 2010). It was found in various disciplines (Mosbah-Natanson & Gingras, 2014), management among them (Danell, 2000; Grey, 2010; March, 2005; Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas & Davies, 2008; Usdiken, 2014), and it has various implications within the diverse geographies of the periphery, even when one takes into account the espoused multilingualism of the European Union. Similar center–periphery dynamics occur outside of academic life, of course, such as in the business world (e.g. Sliwa & Johansson, 2014) and literary circles (van Es & Heilbron, 2015).[1]

While the simplistic dichotomy between center and periphery is much criticized in recent years – in geography (Potter, 2001), sociology (Keim, 2011) and in relation to the academic world more specifically (e.g. Medina, 2013; Scott, 2015), its hold on our "geopolitical imagination" (Slater, 1993) is still strong and thus serves as my starting point here. In what follows I try to articulate how this position is formed, what does it mean to work academically in a periphery and what are the implications and possibilities opened up from this vantage point of view. I will focus on three dimensions. Working at the periphery has linguistic implications, as I conduct most of my professional life in English, which is not my mother tongue. Being a means of communication and a cultural resource, language use has many effects. Moreover, working at the periphery has social consequences. Fresh out of graduate school I found myself with no relevant lineages in the (academic) community I wanted to be part of, and had to find ways to make connections. Finally, there are also cognitive aspects involved. Working at the periphery means one's taken-for-granted understanding of the rules of the academic game (defined by the Center) is limited. Decoding the norms requires reflection, and that reflection and the insight it provides may turn out to be a real asset.

2. Know thy place: early socialization into a peripheral position

The US orientation of Israeli academia became evident – if sometimes implicitly – in the very first course of my BA studies, majoring in psychology and an interdisciplinary program in humanities. The reading materials were all in English, from Hilgard's *Introduction to Psychology*, and other books published by US publishers, through to numerous articles, most of them published in prestigious US journals. We read in English, while class discussions and written assignments were in Hebrew. Those who encountered difficulties – many of whom were trilingual, native speakers of Arabic, Russian or Amharic – had to take a reading comprehensive course in English (Bensoussan, 2015). As we progressed to the MA and PhD, it became apparent that English is not simply a palisade one needs to pass in order to finish one's studies, but rather the *lingua franca* of academia. English became the language one needs to master in order to be able to bridge one's peripheral location – linguistically, at least.

While English no longer is depicted as a monolithic language, but rather there are many "world Englishes – varieties of English used in diverse sociolinguistic contexts" (Bhatt, 2001, p. 527), I here refer to a specific linguistic voice – that of American English used by the US academia. By linguistic voice I do not just mean the use of the right grammar or even the right American idioms. It is to become knowledgeable about the broader contexts of American English as used in academia; that is, its embeddedness within a wider ideological and cultural world. Indeed, the dominance – in effect, the hegemony – of English as the preferred language of Israeli academia stretches beyond presenting in English in international conferences and publications. It is part of institutionalization processes and the periphery following up on the footsteps of what is perceived as world centers. It is thus part of the internationalization of Israeli academia, itself part of a global trend of the internationalization of academia worldwide (Cohen, Yemini, & Sadeh, 2014; Tietze, 2008; Yemini, Jolzmann, de Wit, Sadeh, Stavans, & Fadila, 2015). In this context, it may not seem surprising that much of e-mail communication within Israeli academia, even if all participants are native Hebrew speakers, is carried out in English. Early on there may have been technical reasons for this, given that computer systems were mostly built for left-to-right languages (like English). Hebrew is written right-to-left, and the right indent used to be a major problem with computers back in the days. And still, even today, many Israeli academics correspond in English. Faculty hiring, promotion and remuneration practices all involve the counting of publications and presentations in English. One is measured by his or her standing in the global (that is, English-speaking) network of scholars. Publications in Hebrew are hardly ever counted and scholars are often quite discouraged from publishing in Hebrew. This is the case in all the natural sciences and in most social science disciplines. Lately, there is also a pressure to teach in English–as part of an effort to boost international standing and meet international accreditation requirements. Israeli business schools work hard to create exchange programs with universities abroad, and Israeli students are encouraged to do their graduate studies abroad, which will help them later on to return and find tenure track positions in Israeli universities. The result is that the academic career for Israeli scholars, like other non-native English scholars, does not rest exclusively on their "individual academic knowledge and expertise", but will be equally "determined by their English language competence and their ability to link into knowledge networks and communities" (Tietze, 2008, p. 385).

Various policies and practices, from national to institutional levels, support the US orientation in Israeli academia. Access to resources, such as research databases, e-journals, and other means of conducting and distributing research, match those of the best American universities. Moreover, Israeli scholars get special financing for "outward relations" – funds to finance trips for conferences and seminars, and for sabbaticals abroad. Israeli academia, in this regard, is an outlier in comparison to other Middle-Eastern and African countries in the region (Lages, Pfajfar, & Shoham, 2015).

Notwithstanding those much needed resources, conducting professional life in one's non-native language carries some difficulties (Hanauer & Englander, 2011). You are always navigating between the languages, always translating, literally and metaphorically. Further, English being the professional language in one's writing and presentations, but also a second language in one's surroundings, creates divides between three language zones: discourse community, community of practice, and speech

[1] See for example the positions of the non-English speaking European countries (Anderson, 2013; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Descarries, 2014; Mur Duenas, 2012; Lopez-Navarro, Moreno, Angel-Quintanilla, & Rey-Rocha, 2015; Olsson & Sheridan, 2012). See also the experience of academic at the Arabian Gulf (Buckingham, 2014), Argentina (Beigel, 2014), Australia (Collyer, 2014), China (Flowerdew & Li, 2009), Jordan (Pedersen, 2010), Mexico: (Englander, 2009), South Korea (Lee & Lee, 2013), Taiwan (Chiu, 2011), and Turkey (Usdiken & Wasti, 2009).