



Internationally mobile academics: Hierarchies, hegemony, and the geo-scientific imagination

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Academic mobility
Geo-scientific imagination
Hegemony
Gramsci
International hierarchy

ABSTRACT

The global migration of academic researchers and staff tends to follow a geographical hierarchy that has the USA at its centre. In this paper, we apply Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explore the way in which the geo-scientific imagination of mobile researchers endorses hierarchies and asymmetries of the international academic system. While academic institutions and practices can be considered instruments for the organization and reproduction of hegemonic relations in civil society, this paper addresses hegemonic relations within the international academic system itself. An analysis of 42 interviews with mobile academics based in Canada and Germany affirms how mobile academics consent to the reproduction of a hegemonic academic hierarchy of countries. At the same time, however, the analysis reveals differentiated views that nest individual universities, departments, and disciplines in the context of national academic systems. The analysis also uncovers interesting shifts in the geo-scientific imagination of global academic hierarchies.

1. Introduction

The international mobility of academics has been of great interest to a range of stakeholders, including educational and labour policy makers, university administrators, and economic development experts. Academics' mobility, for example, fosters the intensification of international collaborations (Scellato et al., 2012) that in turn increases research productivity (Kwiek, 2015). The international migration flows of academics, however, are geographically uneven. Some countries, notably the USA, have benefited from a net-gain of academics, while other areas produce, and then lose, academic labour. Some countries may thus profit from a brain gain, some suffer a brain drain, and some experience brain circulation (Ackers, 2005; Blachford and Zhang, 2014; Jöns, 2009; Musselin, 2004).

In this paper, we examine geographical asymmetries and hierarchical patterns among the international mobility of academics. We define "academics" as mostly university-based researchers, often with teaching responsibilities. We are especially concerned with the relationship between these asymmetries and hierarchies, and structural hegemony. By "hegemony" we mean the organization of consent through language, authority, and a "common sense" idea about the world. We derive this definition from Antonio Gramsci's (1971) view of social hegemony, which we extend to an academic setting (Lears, 1985). In particular, we investigate the role of mobile academics' geo-scientific imagination – that is, their perception of the geography of

academic opportunity – in reflecting hegemonic relations. Thus, our paper extends Gramsci's insights on language and the work of professional intellectuals in organizing and maintaining hegemony to the analysis of the mobility of academics and of sustaining a hierarchical international academic system.

The main contribution of this research lies in its Gramscian perspective that links the geo-scientific imagination with academic hegemony. This perspective is important because academics often adopt a "common-sense" view of academic hierarchies and the geography of academic opportunity that shape their mobility motivations and decisions. We find that mobile academics, on the one hand, embrace a hierarchy that has the USA and the English language at its centre, countries like Canada and Germany in intermediate positions, and countries like India at the geographical periphery. However, mobile academics also harbour differentiated views of the structure of the international academic system that consider not only the national scale but also take into account individual universities, departments, and disciplines. Moreover, the data show that mobile academics are well aware of ongoing geographical shifts of the global academic system and modify their geo-scientific imagination correspondingly. While the geo-scientific imagination can be compliant (i.e. affirming and reproducing existing hegemonic structures) or defiant (i.e. challenging conventional hegemonic relations) (Kenway and Fahey, 2009: 18–20), our research does not uncover blatantly defiant geo-scientific imaginations. Rather, it rather reveals more nuanced perceptions of the geography of

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academic opportunity that challenges the national as the taken-for-granted scale at which academic hierarchies are imagined. Thus, the geo-scientific imagination challenges the “methodological nationalism” that over-emphasizes the national scale in the way in which researchers often frame migration and society (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Overall, our paper expands the work by geographers at the intersections of academic practice, labour mobility, and hegemony (e.g. Bauder, 2015; Ekers et al., 2009, Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003).

In the next section, we contextualize the study with respect to the national asymmetries, and review the literatures related to explaining these asymmetries and hegemony. Then, we introduce the method, involving qualitative interviews with mobile academics based in Canada and Germany. Thereafter, we discuss the results of the study, focussing on the perception of hierarchies from different vantage points. Finally, we discuss these results in light of the literature.

2. Background

2.1. Asymmetry of academic mobility

International academic mobility has a complex and dynamic geography (Taylor et al., 2008). Although there is no universal migration experience of mobile scientists, academic mobility tends to follow established regional institutional configurations, global patterns of uneven development, and international geopolitical relations that frame the context of this paper. For example, *Universities UK* (2007: 2) identifies three general migration systems: “from the developing countries to developed countries, within Western Europe and between major English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the UK”. Michael Finn (2010: 111) observes a high degree of mobility among doctorate recipients between the USA, Canada, and “countries to the south of the United States”, hinting towards a migration system within the Western Hemisphere. Europe is among the most well-researched regional academic mobility systems (e.g. Ackers, 2005; Enders and de Weert (2004); Gabaldón et al., 2005; Marimon et al. (2009): the frequency of international academic mobility tends to be higher within Europe than within other world regions (Kim, 2009), and most internationally-mobile European early-career researchers go to other European countries (Barjak and Robinson, 2008: 29). Within Europe, the UK is “a major hub for transnational academic mobility” (Kim, 2009: 369), attracting large flows of early-career academics (Balter, 1999; Hoyler and Jöns, 2008; Universities, 2007), Germany has disproportionate shares of researchers from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Jöns, 2007), and universities in smaller European countries, such as Norway, are experiencing the internationalization of their academic staff (Nerdrum and Sarpebakken, 2006), with Switzerland possessing the highest share of foreign researchers (Von Noorden, 2012).

Globally, the main destination of mobile academics is the USA (Auriol, 2010: 20). Terri Kim (2009: 394) writes: “the United States continued to be the main pole of attraction for highly skilled scientists and engineers from the rest of the world.” A recent study of the changes in national affiliation among scientists revealed that the top nine ranks of international bilateral flows of scientists involves the USA (OECD, 2013: 132). The three dominant source countries of international scholars in the USA are China, India, and South Korea, followed by several highly-developed countries including Japan, Canada, and several European countries (Institute of International Education, 2010). Among the international academics who study and work in the USA, notable differences exist: foreign doctoral graduates from China and India possess the highest stay rates; graduates from the UK have higher stay rates than graduates from Canada, Germany, or France, while graduates from Thailand and Saudi Arabia are least likely to stay in the USA (Finn, 2010). Seventy-five percent of graduating German nationals in the USA return to Germany, while only 30 percent of graduating UK nationals return to the UK (Bosch, 2003; also Diehl and Dixon, 2005).

German doctorates tend to be oriented towards the USA and the UK, rather than Eastern Europe or Asia (Auriol, 2010; Jöns, 2005, 2007). Migration flows in the reverse direction, from the USA and the UK to Germany, are small in proportion (Föbker et al., 2010). If academics from the USA go to Germany, they tend to be established academics on sabbatical leave and overrepresented in the Arts and Humanities, where research is often Germany-centred. Conversely, scholars from countries other than the USA find Germany especially attractive for its natural sciences and engineering (Jöns, 2007). In 2014, 61 percent of all foreign academic staff at German institutions of higher education were non-German European nationals (35 percent Western-European; 26 percent Eastern-European) (DAAD, 2016: 118–122), illustrating the effectiveness of the European Research Area’s mobility infrastructure (Barjak and Robinson, 2008; Bauder, 2015). The second largest origin region was Asia, with China being the largest country of origin, followed by India and Iran (DAAD, 2016: 118–122; also Auriol, 2010). However, only 10.6 percent of academic staff in Germany are foreigners. Among the top tier of academic position – professorships – foreigners were particularly asymmetrically represented, with 80 percent of all foreign professors coming from other European countries (64 percent from Western Europe; 16 percent from Eastern Europe) (DAAD, 2016: 118–122). Despite their underrepresentation among foreign academic staff, scholars from Asian countries have a “huge interest” (Jöns, 2005: 8) in German universities and represent a large portion of temporary postdoctoral and research fellowship applications. Yet, among applications for Humboldt fellowships in Germany, the success rate was higher for applicants from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, the UK, and the USA than from developing countries, “reflecting and reproducing the asymmetrical power geometries of global higher education and research” (Jöns, 2009: 325). The UK university system exhibits similar asymmetries. Foreign scientists are highly-unevenly distributed into high and low-status positions: of the 2380 US nationals who worked at universities in the UK in 2005/2006, 350 were professors, 720 lecturers, and 510 researchers. In comparison, of the 2280 Chinese nationals, only 40 were professors, 410 lectures, and 1450 researchers (Universities UK, 2007: 8–9). In Norway, foreign researchers from developing countries are leaving at a higher rate than foreign researchers from OECD countries, whose “mobility patterns are more akin to those of Norwegians” (Nerdrum and Sarpebakken, 2006: 227).

Asymmetries also exist *within* Europe. Southern European countries tend to invest relatively small proportions of GDP in research. As a result, these countries attract fewer foreign scientists and many domestic researchers who cannot secure academic positions move abroad (Morano-Foadi, 2005: 146–148). Conversely, the UK has a greater rate of investment in science and benefits from the attraction of the English language (Morano-Foadi, 2005: 151). As a result, the UK is “postdoc paradise” (Balter, 1999: 1525). In 2005/2006, 19.1 percent of positions at institutions of higher education in the UK were filled with non-UK nationals, with Germany, the Republic of Ireland, the USA, and China being the leading source countries (Universities, 2007: 7–9).

Countries of the global scientific periphery tend to experience a net-loss of mobile academics, although most scientists in countries, such as India and China, never leave the country for extended periods (EFI, 2014: 87). A study of mobility among researchers in four natural-science fields noted “the virtual absence of foreign scientists studying or working in India” (Franzoni et al., 2012: 5). The same study found that three in four scientists leaving India migrated to the USA (Franzoni et al., 2012: 6).

2.2. Explanations of asymmetries

The leading position of the USA as a major destination of mobile academics may indicate a superior academic environment. Compared to many other countries, the USA spends a high share of GDP on research, scores high on global university rankings and citation indices, offers

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