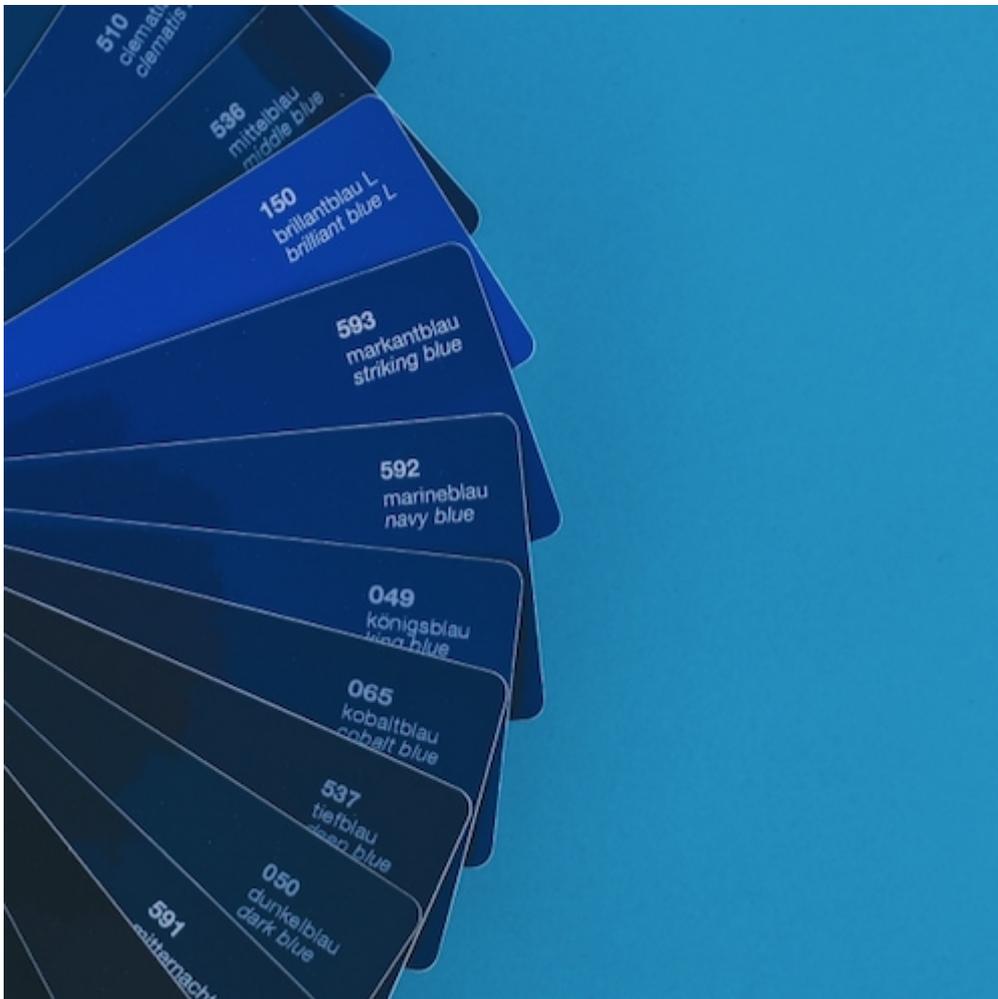




# Anglo-American hegemony in contemporary anthropology: Some personal dilemmas

David Berliner

April, 2021



Disclaimer: Over the last few days, I have had a writing episode. Nothing had come out of my brain for months. I was teaching online and worrying about students and family. All of a sudden, I felt the urge to scribble something. Then I hesitated to share it. Who will be interested? Who cares about this now when we are in the middle of a pandemic, eyes tired from too much time spent in front of



screens, filled with uncertainty and helplessness? I am unable to pretend. I'm not sure I'd have the energy to discuss ideas. Don't we need to rest and preserve some strength for the months to come? Well, I couldn't stop it. This is also part of the pandemic experience. I've heard so many colleagues sharing their desire to build something new out of this terrible situation that affects us all. Me too, I dream of another world afterwards. I hope that we can think together to create better academic communities, and not rush on with business as usual.

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Since modern man experiences himself both as the seller and as the commodity to be sold on the market, his self-esteem depends on conditions beyond his control. If he is ‘successful,’ he is valuable; if he is not, he is worthless. The degree of insecurity which results from this orientation can hardly be overestimated. If one feels that one’s own value is not constituted primarily by the human qualities one possesses, but by one’s success on a competitive market with ever-changing conditions, one’s self-esteem is bound to be shaky and in constant need of confirmation by others. Hence, one is driven to drive relentlessly for success, and any setback is a severe threat to one’s self-esteem; helplessness, insecurity, and inferiority feelings are the result.”*

[Erich Fromm, *Man for himself*, 1947]

The issue of privilege is widely discussed in anthropological circles these days. Who represents whom? Who has access to what? These are very healthy questions that, from a French-speaking Belgian perspective, often still seem light years away (as talks about diversity within academia and decolonised curricula are still scarce, unfortunately). However, one aspect of these questions is [almost unanimously](#) disregarded: that of the current Anglo-American hegemony in the production of anthropological knowledge. I say “Anglo-American” because the English language has become dominant in our discipline. But this specificity also has to do with the visibility and attractiveness of academic infrastructures—i.e. universities, scientific associations, journals and university presses, publishers, networks of diffusion, etc.—mainly based in the United States and, to a lesser



extent, the United Kingdom. And let me be clear: I know that I am part of the problem, something I discuss below. I have dear friends and caring colleagues with whom I enjoy exchanging, learning and collaborating who work in these environments. I am equally aware that this text will be read differently depending on the academic bubbles. This short opinion paper (I am not a specialist of Higher Education globalised power relations, nor of Gramsci) doesn't concern individuals. It is about a system of privileges that doesn't tell its name.

*I don't think that what is produced in these sites of knowledge and written in these venues is intrinsically superior to any others in the world.*

It is a truism to say that anthropology is dominated by scholars educated and knowledge produced in American and British Universities. These institutions are, however, plural and unequal to each other. Some few are part of an elite; many others are peripheral. My colleagues working in these academic worlds repeatedly drew my attention to the fact that just a few Anglo-American campuses are at the peak of the pyramid (and that the rest is struggling), whilst it is sometimes easier to affiliate to the "summit" coming from highly considered European or Asian research centres—easier than from peripheral Anglo-American universities. I am very aware of such complex national diversity and [internal inequalities](#). Still, seen from abroad, some facts are inescapable. Most "top-ranked" anthropology journals are either edited in the US or in the UK; according to google scholar metrics, the first 20 are published in the US and the UK, with the exception of Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale and Ethnos. The same can be said for the "best" schools (LSE, Harvard, Cambridge, Chicago, UCL, and so on), whilst important anthropological associations are based there. These institutions and organisations are eminently respectable with a long history and famous ancestors. Journals have very high-quality boards and the review process has always struck me as rigorous and remarkably well managed. Beyond doubt, their recognition is fully deserved. However, personally, I don't think that what is produced in these sites of knowledge and written in these venues is intrinsically superior to any others in the world. I find stimulating papers to read and cite from



widely acclaimed as much as from some more (unfortunately) obscure regional publications. What the first have that the latter do not is an outstanding visibility and attractiveness to the extent that Anglo-American journals have growingly become representative of “the” discipline.



This brings me to the central issue in my questioning. In the US and UK, this system is imposed on academics who have little choice but to follow it to satisfy their passion for research. *American Ethnologist* and *JRAI*, among many others, are their local journals. And I feel for them as they have to maneuver in such an alienating field of rankings and evaluations, where access to the most prestigious venues is the essential criterion for obtaining the best jobs in the best universities.

*A toxic cocktail which affects especially the most vulnerable (doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, adjuncts, this “cannon fodder” of the institution).*



[More](#) and [more](#) anthropologists have become critical of the neoliberal values of academic competition embodied in the diktat of evaluations, the temporality of urgency, the use of metrics, the quest for funding, the precariousness of positions as well as the various loads once one is “inside” university. These aggregate with the inherent pathogenic conditions to the practice of research—the need for recognition, the existence of castes and inequalities, loneliness. A toxic cocktail which affects especially the most vulnerable (doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, adjuncts, this “cannon fodder” of the institution). An [open-access book](#) by Robert Borofksy (brought to my attention by Doug Falen) about the professional quest for individual status within American anthropology is extremely valuable, and it certainly can be extrapolated outside this context.



It is equally sad to think that some ideas are considered “interesting” and attract attention because of their site of publication, international circulation and sacrosanct citationality. What I find more worrying is that these same academic



infrastructures have become holy grails for so many anthropologists around the world. There is a globalised mimetic desire at stake to gain recognition. And I am talking about my own case, that of a privileged tenured professor in a European university. That is the way the tale goes: First, one has to (try to) be published in the Anglo-American journals—American Anthropologist, Current Anthropology, JRAI and so forth—where the “important disciplinary debates” are taking place. As if these venues were neutral when they, in fact, embody local-but-globalised research traditions and emanate from centres of power. Only then should you send your articles to their Belgian, Italian or South Korean cousins (who also have serious editorial committees). Why so? I think we all know the answer. This is the manner to secure a job and to be part of ongoing anthropological discussions today. There is no explicit rule on this. Rather, it is becoming a shared habitus that does not even need to be said.

*There is a globalised mimetic desire at stake to gain recognition.*

In the same vein, scholars are strongly encouraged to do a post-doctorate in one of these Anglo-American institutions. When I started my PhD in Brussels, I promptly understood the conduct necessary for survival. From the onset, my low self-esteem and the fear of “not finding a permanent position” were unhealthy triggers.

Such habitus is learned very early on by many doctoral students and young researchers. By observing and participating, without a clear pedagogy, the novices internalize the implicit rules of their professional environment: a competitive ethos emphasizing exploits (i.e. publish in the best journals, have read everything, go international, market yourself, and so forth), glorifying the absence of boundaries between scientific and private life and maintaining silence about negative emotions as well as mental health issues. Unfortunately, most academic ecosystems do not have the dimension of “holding” so dear to Winnicott, this capacity to welcome researchers’ anxieties and to nurture their creativity. Immersed in this gray area that is called “intellectual passion,” most of



them accept the potential toxicity of the environment that holds them, as a toddler would adapt to a depressed mother. Soon, they will flagellate themselves to comply with the ecosystem demands, both their protector and their torturer. The institution will survive. No doubt many of us find in there the perfume of the failing environments that we have already known before.



When you are not part of the legitimised archipelagos of knowledge production (and while I see Francophone Belgium as a privileged academic environment, it remains peripheral to the Anglo-American realm), you have to go international. Anglo-American scholarly infrastructures constituted social affordances for me as a young researcher who was trying to escape the local nepotism that was rampant at the time. These infrastructures mainly promised an openness and gave me access to new and large anthropological continents. After a few years spent in the



UK, I received a postdoctoral grant in the US at a major institution. Clearly to impress my father—that didn't come out as a great success—, and to collect the famous “postdoc in the US” visa. There, I learned even more about competition and felt extremely lonely, yet I worked like a fool to acquire another grail: an article in *American Ethnologist*. This publication, which required an enormous amount of linguistic energy and a certain degree of paradigmatic plasticity, earned me many “with that piece, you'll get a position!” remarks, and I indeed eventually obtained a job. Years of performance anxiety finally rewarded.

*By observing and participating, without a clear pedagogy, the novices internalize the implicit rules of their professional environment.*

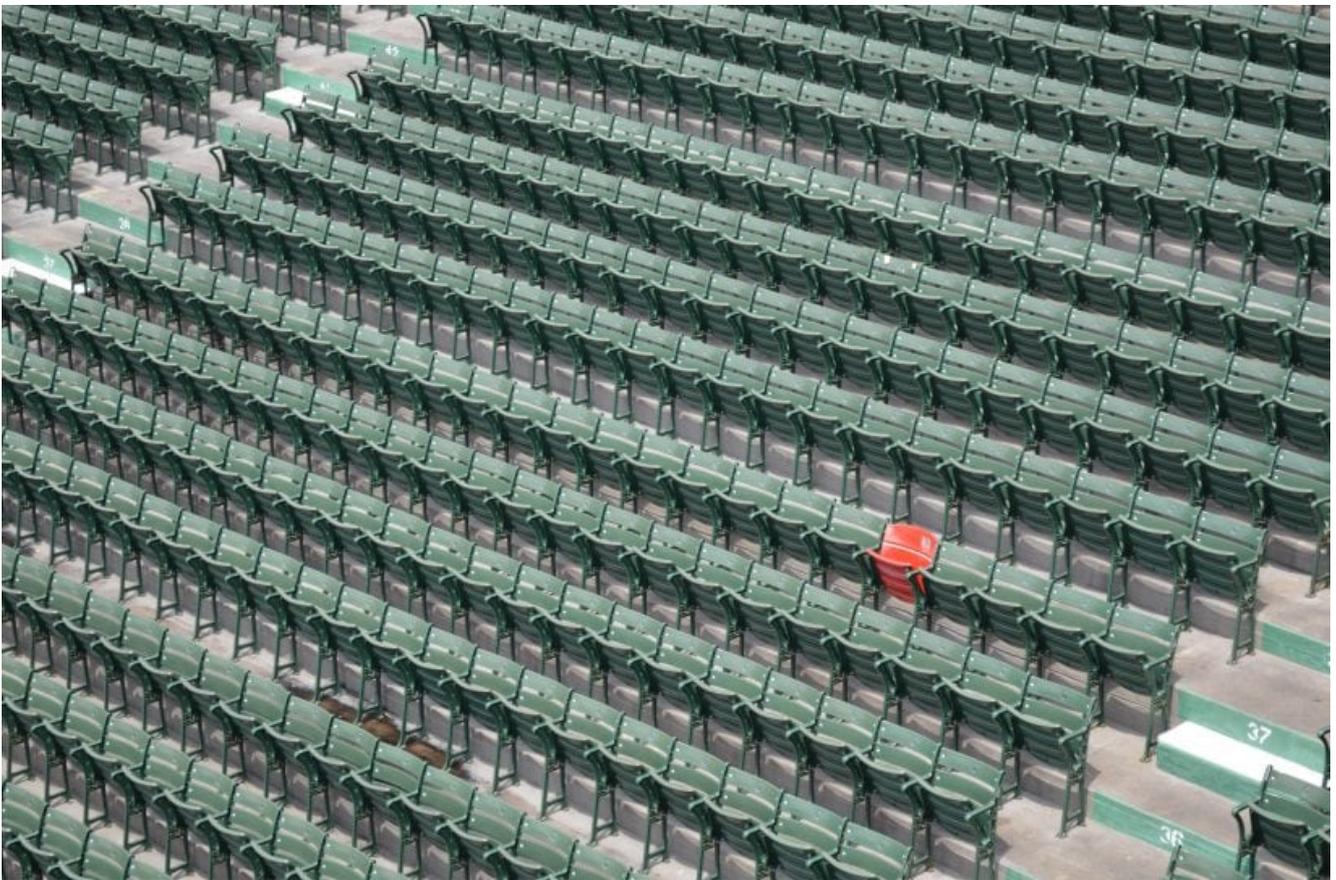
Now that it is my turn to be seated in selection committees sometimes, I am struck by the extent to which Anglo-American journals and scholarly experiences constitute almost unavoidable assets in the hiring and grant-awarding process in Belgium. Again, there is no explicitly formulated rule here. This is a recent phenomenon, mainly from those who have studied abroad in the Anglo-American world. I myself had this reflex of “ticking the Anglo-American box” when evaluating applications, as if having these trophies is an indisputable sign of quality. Certainly, publications in “local” venues are still essential to get a job in many universities, as they are in the US and the UK. However, it is as if Anglo-American references and fellowships—that are, of course, extremely relevant to assess research creativity and capacity—have become indispensable in a great deal of other academic cultures. Is this a new standard? I think so but, dear reader, do not hesitate to tell your experiences.

These examples raise questions. Firstly, about the diversity of anthropological traditions. American and British schools and journals have their own theoretical inclinations. To be one of them, the aspirant may be tempted to adopt their paradigmatic codes. I recall an article submitted to an American venue whose editor insisted that I come up with a title that sounded terribly postmodern to my ears but was in line with what they were publishing. The globalised “writing



culture” is undoubtedly an example of the attractiveness of Anglo-American paradigms, although a great plurality persists, I observe.

What are the multiple impacts of such dominant models on other scientific communities? Are anthropologists more concerned with cultural heterogeneity than with scientific diversity? Even more importantly, how does such a scholarly hegemony contribute to the universalisation of a neoliberal agenda of knowledge production and evaluation?



Yet, as I mentioned earlier in this post, I myself used Anglo-American resources to escape local forms of nepotism. At the same time, I see now how such resources are being globalised to the extent that it is difficult to exist academically *outside* of them.

*Are anthropologists more concerned with cultural heterogeneity than with scientific diversity?*



Obviously, there is a balance to be found. It is all but simple, and I am trying to paint a nuanced picture of the situation. Yet, let us fantasise for a second. In the cosmopolitan world of anthropology I dream of, US and UK-based PhD students might do a postdoctorate in Belgian, Italian and South Korean universities. They as well as more established scholars would primarily publish in these local non-Anglo-American venues, while everybody would get access to Anglo-American hubs of excellence. Are these not the virtues of *décentrement* of which anthropologists are the greatest defenders? On my dreamed planet, where all scientific journals would be open access and where there would be no PhDs, postdocs, researchers and adjuncts in situations of precarity, academics would substitute an ethics of care for our politics of competition, by always having a big critical laugh at metrics and other tricks of neoliberal evaluations. In a moving reflection on what was significant in his scientific life, the late Jan Blommaert, whom I sadly never got to meet, [wrote](#):

“What was not important was competition and its attributes of behavioral and relational competitiveness, the desire or urge to be the best, to win contests, to be seen as the champ, to proceed tactically, to forge strategic alliances and what not.”

*Academic capitalism is structural and it knows how to play with our narcissistic wounds and need for recognition.*

In such a world, ideas would be attractive not by where they are developed, but by their intrinsic heuristic richness. Likewise, candidates for a position would be selected on the basis of texts without knowing in which specific journals they have been published and by valorising their linguistic diversification. I say “dream,” as academic capitalism is structural and it knows how to play with our narcissistic wounds and need for recognition. We are dealing here with visceral values related to symbolic and economic forms of profit. And there are no simple answers, because national contexts are very different from each other whilst changes must be political as well as behavioural. I have devoted considerable



energy to trying to gain legitimacy through Anglo-American knowledge production infrastructures and I still do. Yet, if I am part of the problem, I can be part of the solution. Individual initiatives are important (especially those from Anglo-American established scholars). One needs to have loud voices in the field declare for instance, “from now on, I will write (open access) books only,” and decide to break with this system, whilst we can challenge the globalisation of such hegemonic model on multiple levels, e.g. by creating exchange forums in scientific associations (like the EASA), by demystifying it with our colleagues and students, by raising awareness among our authorities and by continuing to cite our favourite authors whether they are Anglo-American or not. However, isolated academics will have no power on their own. They have to be supported by their universities, national scientific agencies and critical anthropological communities. It is only the conjunction of these levels that, in my opinion, would make it possible to stop the machine in which we currently alienate ourselves.

Image Credits:

Featured image Shades of Blue by [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Podium photo by [Romain Chollet](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Graduate photo by [Cole Keister](#) on [Unsplash](#).

USA by Night photo by [NASA](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Gradients photo [Veronica Benavides](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Reference:

Winnicott, D.A. 1960: The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41: 585-595.