Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery
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In 1851 the Italian philosopher and statesman Vincenzo Gioberti, arguably Italy’s most influential political thinker at the time and a former Prime Minister of Piedmont-Sardinia, self-confidently described England as ‘the Sicily of Europe’: an oceanic island in the continent’s northern periphery, whose connection to Europe was allegedly on a par with Sicily’s relationship to the Italian peninsula. While from an economic point of view, or within a global perspective, Gioberti’s description certainly did not correspond to the ways in which the British people perceived their own position in the world, the Italian thinker used the comparison to explain Europe’s political and cultural heterogeneity, including differences between institutions and constitutional developments. For the famous philosopher, there was not only one way of representing Europe’s core, not only one way of being modern. Convinced of Italy’s primacy in Europe, an argument based on the country’s cultural and religious legacy as a Mediterranean civilization, Gioberti rejected the idea that Italy had to be taught lessons by seemingly more developed countries. Instead, for Gioberti, political, constitutional or economic institutions had to reflect local and historical conditions.

While Gioberti used England’s alleged marginality as a relational description to speak about the Italian states prior to their political unification, from today’s perspective recent political developments seem to confirm Gioberti’s assessment of Britain’s position in Europe. Also today, this position depends less on objective facts than on discursive strategies, in this case on developments of Britain’s own making. During the campaign leading to the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union in June 2016, the country’s position within the EU was...
instrumentalized to negotiate and contest a broad range of social, political and cultural conflicts at home, many of which were only indirectly affected by EU policies. Both examples – Gioberti’s idea of Italy’s primacy as well as Britain’s marginality within Europe – show how discursive constructions of spatial differences between centre and periphery depend on subjective viewpoints that then serve as instruments in politics. As relational terms these differences construct selves as well as others, based on constantly shifting economic, political or cultural contexts. The semantic content of such notions is determined by transnational exchanges, where a range of different parameters is amalgamated to suit subjective discursive interests.

This book examines cultural, intellectual and economic exchanges in order to assess how these contribute to the construction of spatial hierarchies. While goods are usually exchanged in two directions, with regard to knowledge historians often assume a one-directional transmission, which is then used to establish an intellectual or political order that assigns particular spaces to positions of either core or periphery. We can identify a typical example of this approach in the field of transatlantic constitutional history, where, for instance, the global impact of the American constitution – and consequently the United States’ primacy in the world – is discussed without taking into consideration how republican or federal concepts that originated in European political thought related to the emergence of the United States’ political institutions. Taking a different, more critical approach, David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have underlined how the cultural and political experiences of many different peoples and nations have contributed to the American constitution’s emancipatory potential. One-directional examinations of constitutional flows tend to undermine the creative force associated with the amalgamation of ideas into local knowledge and practices. At times this process of amalgamation might turn into what the semiotician Umberto Eco has called ‘aberrant decoding’, where interpretations share close to nothing with the original author’s intentions.

Providing an example for spatial hierarchies from another context of historical analysis, the musicologist Anselm Gerhard has demonstrated the relative insignificance of geographical and/or political criteria for notions of centre and periphery in the development of European art music. For the long period from the fourteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century, Italy, and Southern Italy in particular, occupied a prime position in European music, largely a consequence of its institutions of cultural representation related to the life of its numerous splendid courts. Meanwhile, a city like Prague, in the geographical centre of
Europe, and since the Middle Ages a major imperial residence of the Luxemburgs and then the Habsburgs, created a significant international reputation as a centre of musical activity from the mid-eighteenth century only, symbolized by the original productions of two of Mozart’s great late operas, *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1791). It was on the basis of this reputation that the city was subsequently able to attract young conductors and composers like Carl Maria von Weber (from 1813) and Gustav Mahler (from 1885) to lead its orchestras.

In recent decades, transnational and global history have contributed to a more inclusive understanding of intellectual and cultural exchanges, challenging the ways in which we tend to assign positions of centre and periphery on our mental maps. For instance, Christopher A. Bayly has demonstrated how India’s liberal tradition helped to transform ideas received from progressive Western thinkers in order to challenge imperial relationships. During the nineteenth century the number of people affected by similar examples of global exchanges increased, as did the speed at which such connections were established. Meanwhile, challenges arising from globalization that subsequently impacted on existing spatial hierarchies were not a new experience in the nineteenth century.

As Michael North has argued, during the Middle Ages, from the twelfth century onwards, new commercial connections transformed a vast space from the Mediterranean via the Arabian Sea to the Indian Ocean into a single maritime network. This development had dramatic consequences for the ways in which Europeans, as well as particular countries within Europe, positioned themselves within global space and historical time. Following a more specific geographical and historiographical emphasis, Akira Iriye has demonstrated how in the case of nineteenth-century Japan the wider world suddenly became ‘the mental universe, in which Japanese people and their leaders have sought to understand their place and their role in the international community’. Based on a different epistemological approach, postcolonial theory has helped us to understand how empires constructed spatially specific hierarchies between notions of citizenship, gender, class, religion and race, in the colonial periphery as well as at home in the metropole. Rethinking exchanges between colonizers and colonized therefore challenged preconceived ideas about the flow of ideas and related cultural practices, emphasizing instead the hybrid nature of colonial relationships. Following their own political and economic rationale, empires also changed the world order by forming new transnational connections between themselves. These processes constantly defined, shifted and transformed the parameters of spatial hierarchies.
While global and transnational history, as well as a wider bibliography that responds to the recent spatial turn in the social sciences, provide the backdrop to our book’s approach to spatial hierarchies, this introductory chapter cannot offer a complete overview of those different fields of scholarship. Instead, a few references will serve to map out the origins of the multi-disciplinary debate on the interconnectedness of centres and peripheries, an issue further explored in the following chapter by Marta Petrusewicz. That historians have adopted a critical approach to concepts of core and periphery owes much to development debates among economists and geographers of the late 1960s and 1970s. Here Marx’s theory of surplus value and Lenin’s writings on imperialism presented an important starting point in trying to identify the causes of persisting global inequalities. A broad range of less ideologically driven economic theories that had emerged since the 1930s fostered empirical enquiries into those questions. For instance, Samir Amin and André Gunder Frank, based on different sets of data, analysed the relationship between advanced and less developed economies as a necessary condition for the rise of capitalism as a whole. Many of the concepts first discussed during those early years still remain influential in the most recent works on the geography of the world economy.

The most influential historian to critically adopt the ‘core’/‘periphery’ paradigm in the 1970s was Immanuel Wallerstein. At the centre of his world-system analysis was a critique of the ideological foundations of modernization theory, through emphasis on the exploitative relationship between ‘advanced’ economies and the allegedly less developed parts of the world. Wallerstein insists on the existence of a single capitalist world economy that defines the tensions between various ‘national’ and ‘colonial’ economies, and a single system of ‘international’ trade. The fact that particular states expanded their jurisdiction and administrative structures into foreign territories played an important part in fostering the system’s internal hierarchies. Wallerstein’s theoretical framework also impacted on economic studies of a smaller geographical scale, although often producing different outcomes. For instance, in her influential book *Latifundium* (1989), Marta Petrusewicz challenged conventional notions of centre and periphery by describing the Southern Italian economy as a rational system of production that after 1800 secured the livelihood of a society that efficiently combined feudal with capitalist elements of production.

These debates have subsequently been reflected in the various approaches to global and transnational history, and in particular in new economic and imperial history. Here a global focus on transnational
economic connections has helped to challenge conventional hierarchies by putting more recent world economic developments into a historically informed perspective. Kirti Chaudhuri pioneered the tracing of cultural and economic interactions in the Indian Ocean between 700 and 1750, demonstrating that the Islamic civilization entered this system of trade several centuries before the Europeans. Other historians, adopting a different geographical perspective, pointed out that between the so-called Middle Ages (in itself a Eurocentric concept) and the beginning of the nineteenth century, China was the world’s most powerful centre of commercial and cultural exchange. These very different studies have in common that they show how the rise of Europe as a global power is a relatively recent phenomenon. Contrary to many traditional accounts, written within a ‘Western’ or Atlantic perspective, Europe’s rise does not coincide with the ‘discovery’ of the New World several centuries earlier.

While it is correct that around 1900 Britain led worldwide manufacturing output, followed closely by the United States, as late as 1800 China was still producing more manufactured goods than any other country in the world, which helps to explain China’s long history as a global power and its related ambition in contemporary politics. As Christopher Bayly has argued, it was between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century that uniformities in state administration, trade and political ideologies placed the European imperial system at the centre of new transnational connections, in particular with the Islamic world and South Asia. These new hierarchies were reflected in concepts of race, in the economic and ecological degradation of entire world regions, and in the use of violence as a basis of defining global power. As a direct consequence of these forms of imperial exploitation, a historical lack of state structures in the world’s postcolonial regions still determines the peripheral status of, for instance, large parts of Africa. According to Andreas Eckert, it was the language of Empire that described Africa as a continent without history.

What makes our book original, and distinguishes it from this wider historiographical context, is its emphasis on the asymmetrical nature of intellectual and cultural encounters, and on examples where a traditional understanding of centre and periphery is turned upside down as a consequence of a change of focus. In three sections and eleven chapters, framed by a conceptual introduction and a summative conclusion, this book investigates the multi-directional structure of cultural and intellectual exchanges between different parts of Europe as well as within a global context. What the examples discussed in these chapters share is that they oblige us to rethink pre-established mental maps. While the book as a whole aims to challenge the way we use concepts like centre
and periphery as analytical categories, its individual chapters present case studies to illustrate how the terminologies of spatial hierarchy are constructed and applied, but also how empirical facts challenge established relational terms. In our book the asymmetrical and multi-directional structure of cultural and intellectual exchanges emerges from the multitude of empirical examples covering different parts of the globe over several centuries. This approach differs from other studies in the field, which tend to concentrate on very specific themes within relatively well-defined notions of time and space. We hope that our book’s change of scope allows us to gain a number of more abstract and conceptual insights.

In order to channel this debate in the direction of possible theoretical and methodological insights, the volume starts with a section that discusses some of the different conceptual approaches our authors have used to analyse and rethink the relationship between centre and periphery, as well as the normative value often attached to those terms. All three of those chapters take different regions within Europe, or Europe in its relationship to the world, as a starting point; but the main aim of these chapters is to familiarize readers with different theoretical and conceptual tools (as well as related methodologies) that all serve the purpose of discussing spatial hierarchies. In her opening contribution, Marta Petrušević provides us with a crucial historiographical background to the debates this book attempts to tackle. As already briefly outlined above, the relational nature of the terms centre (or core) and periphery was first revealed by critical development theorists in the 1960s who were keen to challenge the binary use of the terms ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’. Insights gained from the relationship between these terms were then applied to a wider range of historical contexts, initially to explain the origins and nature of the capitalist world system, and later to analyse different historical examples where spatial hierarchies played a constitutive role. Petrušević compares examples from four different geographical contexts in order to show that before the late nineteenth century, and preceding the consolidation of the political economy dogma, there existed not one, but several possible paths of economic development, and that no particular path was perceived to inherently define a region as core or periphery. In particular, there existed land-based models of modernization that defined themselves as alternatives to the classical economists of the Manchester School and that allow us to fundamentally rethink the ways in which we apply concepts of core and periphery.

Petrušević uses the term ‘reference culture’ to illustrate how modernizers in the periphery of the economic world system related their ideas
to those operating at the core. Several contributors to this volume, most of them working within the field of the digital humanities, employ the concept of reference culture in order to define the relationship between smaller countries and the wider world. Joris van Eijnatten illustrates the subjective nature of such asymmetric relations. He starts by reporting how recent public debate in the United States created (positive) images of America by constructing (negative) images of Europe. In this particular case Americans discussed racism as a specific European legacy. The subjective nature of such a rhetorical device, and the ways it is used to create hierarchies between different levels of ‘civilization’, is easily revealed by reference to those many generations of Europeans whose idea of the United States was formed by what they knew about the United States’ slave economy and its persisting consequences for race relations once the institution of slavery had been abolished.26 Following a survey of literature in critical theory and cultural studies, van Eijnatten suggests replacing the concept of identity that directly depends on alterity, with a new focus on mentalities, which he considers to be more self-referential and less dependent on the construction of an Other. According to van Eijnatten, reference cultures can be imitated, adapted and resisted, and therefore they remain more amiable than a discourse based on identities. Digital humanities allow us to examine a huge amount of information on those mentalities, and on the ways they construct what they see as central or peripheral.

In the final chapter of the introductory section, Jan Ifversen examines the construction of asymmetrical differences by taking a conceptual history approach, which he exemplifies by analysing different categories of marginality within Europe. In Ifversen’s account, marginality presents itself as a conceptual alternative to the terminology of periphery. As a relational term, marginality positively reflects Europe’s internal diversity, while also presenting the challenge of confronting us with a different normative category. His chapter compares different forms of marginality within modern Europe, while also introducing the term as an analytical category to identify new asymmetrical differences in a range of geographical contexts. As is the case with reference cultures, Ifversen shows how digital humanities provide a rich material basis for exploring this methodological approach.

The book’s second section introduces a set of empirical case studies, while also widening our geographical and chronological scope. ‘Globalizing peripheries’ demonstrates how places that are usually categorized on the basis of their peripheral location challenge such hierarchies through a focus on new or different parameters. Taken together, the chapters of this section
raise questions about the definition of spatial hierarchies as well as about the origins of global asymmetries. Based on a dense empirical survey of Russian colonial and maritime ventures, Michael North explains Russia as an empire of many heterogeneous peripheries that connected it with different parts of the globe. This scenario led to a situation where the Empire’s political centre did not necessarily overlap with its core of imperial power. By connecting its outposts in the Baltic Sea with those in the Pacific, the Empire attempted to turn geographical peripheries into imperial centres. Although a Russian Pacific never materialized, such ideas deeply marked Russia’s as well as Europe’s spatial imagination. With Nicola Miller’s chapter on republics of knowledge, we move across the Atlantic in order to gaze at the world from Latin America. Evoking a situation that shows clear similarities to the views on agricultural reform discussed in Marta Petrusewicz’s chapter, Miller starts with an anecdote about the celebrated Argentine poet José Hernández refusing to accept the decision of his government to place his home country on the margins of the developed world, pointing instead at the excellent conditions of future progress if existing knowledge, on a meta-regional level, was pooled together. Once again this example shows that the relationship between core and periphery cannot be defined in absolute terms. Miller’s chapter brings into relief the collectivity of knowledge and the fight for its social and political recognition, both of which are determined by spatial hierarchies and attempts to resist them. Her chapter challenges conventional approaches to the creation of knowledge under colonial conditions, showing instead how a peripheral position might invoke particular forms of authenticity that then reveal great creative potential.

Back in Europe, Harry Stopes argues in a chapter on Lille and Manchester around 1900 that global connections do not necessarily pass via capital cities. He demonstrates how a secondary or peripheral position on the national map might form the basis of a global economic or cultural strategy that in turn fosters a strong sense of regional or local identity. The example of the two cities presents a modernity and an experience of globalization that was navigated at a local scale, independent of pre-existing national hierarchies. Reversing existing hierarchies between core and periphery, Stopes illustrates his findings by exploring different forms of cultural representation specific to Manchester and Lille.

The book’s third and final section examines ideas and commodities that move between centres and peripheries. Jens Späth looks at the transnational impact of the Revolutions of 1820–3, which turned the Mediterranean from the alleged position of a European backwater into a global centre of constitutional change. Ever since the days of Spain’s resistance against Napoleon, the Spanish constitution of 1812
had assumed an almost mythical reputation among constitutional monarchs around the world. With direct reference to this document, the insistence on constitutional government among members of the revolutionary movement of the 1820s gave birth to a first liberal International. The centre of action was neither Paris nor Vienna, and there was not one centre, but many, including cities such as Madrid, Naples, Palermo and Lisbon. The following chapter by Alessandro de Arcangelis stays in the Mediterranean, discussing how Italian political thinkers have reconciled cosmopolitan with national ideals in order to overcome Italy’s perceived marginalization since the early modern period. Their creative intellectual force informed the transnational circulation of European ideas in Italy, while at the same time challenging existing discursive asymmetries. Read together, the chapters by Späth and de Arcangelis demonstrate how hegemonic constructs produced spatial hierarchies that the alleged peripheries could either accept or reject.

Although it examines debates around 1900, Tessa Hauswedell’s chapter is directly relevant to contemporary ideas of Britain’s changing relationship to Europe and the world, as mentioned at the start of this introduction. Combining a conceptual history approach with a digital analysis of reference cultures, her chapter surveys different junctures at which the British press constructed London as the ‘imperial metropolis of the world’. Affecting more countries than just Britain’s immediate neighbours across the Channel, those notions of superiority imposed a structure of centre and periphery on the entire world. London, during the second half of the nineteenth century, might have been huge and economically powerful, and its built environment imposing, but Hauswedell’s documentation shows that due to Britain’s isolated and insular understanding of itself there was little space for the many features that determined spatial hierarchies in the view of Europe’s Mediterranean civilizations. In this respect Britain’s self-image contrasts dramatically with views elsewhere in the world, with the examples discussed by Späth and de Arcangelis, and indeed with the views exposed at the time by Britain’s own second cities, as outlined in Stopes’ chapter. Britain’s discursive grandeur was at least partly the reflection of an inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe’s old and uncontested capital cities such as Paris and Vienna. In Walter Benjamin’s famous words, Paris simply was the ‘capital of the nineteenth century’, despite its ever-pertinent political crisis and its own discourse of degenerative decline after 1870. Unlike Paris or Vienna, London seemed to be in a position where it had constantly to explain its own status in the world. In this context it is telling that in the British press none of the major cities such as Berlin, Rome or Vienna – or related adjectives such
as ‘German’, ‘Austrian’ or ‘Italian’ – are present as collocates for the term ‘metropolis’.

The final chapter by Hermione Giffard discusses transnational patterns of advertising and consumption in a mid-twentieth-century global context. Reflecting hierarchies of core and periphery as they were established during the age of empire, modern marketing in a postcolonial world finds itself in a position to reverse this spatial order. Directly relating to one of the book’s key themes, Giffard shows how the twentieth century reflects and then overturns spatial notions we previously discussed for the nineteenth century, where local consumers in the global periphery determine economic decisions in centres of wealth and political power. Global companies are forced to adapt to the reversal of pre-existing hierarchies. Meanwhile, she presents an example of multinational companies located in smaller countries that do not represent the political and economic core of the global economy. Showing parallels to some of Stopes’ findings for the period around 1900, Giffard’s chapter exemplifies how the local and the global interact, and how the global is enacted through the local.

Taken together, the chapters of this book discuss a chronological range that takes us from the medieval period into the twentieth century, covering much of Europe, the Western hemisphere and parts of Asia, while also referring to the role of the global South in conceptualizing spatial hierarchies. Examples of economic development and changing structures of political power stand next to studies of intellectual exchange. Religion represented an important and very topical focus of the debate at the conference on which this collection of essays is based, but it is less clearly reflected in the chapters that follow, leaving an important field for future and more specialized investigation. Although all authors write in historical perspective, their arguments are based on a range of expertise from different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. The way in which they engage with notions of centre and periphery on a global scale does not suggest that, as analytical categories, these concepts are redundant. Instead, they demonstrate how, as products of human agency, centre and periphery are conditioned by mutual dependencies. They reveal constantly evolving asymmetries between them. Most importantly, they show that centre and periphery do not represent absolute categories. Instead, they present subjective categories defined by their discursive context. This is not to say that they are not real, but that in history, realities are shaped by the mind. In this sense the book is an invitation to understand each spatial hierarchy not as a fact, but as a preference of perspective.
This book is based on papers and discussions of a conference held at University College London in June 2016, a collaboration between the UCL Centre for Transnational History and the European research project ‘Asymmetrical Encounters’, based at the University of Utrecht, UCL and the University of Trier. The organizers of the event are also grateful for the financial support they received from the UCL European Institute and from UCL’s research programme Grand Challenge Intercultural Interaction. The editors of this book would like to thank all speakers and chairs for contributing their thoughts to our discussions, especially those who participated in the publication of this volume. With its wide thematic scope, this book will hopefully be relevant to researchers from across the globe, which is why we publish it in Open Access.

Notes

2. Gioberti was among the first political thinkers in Europe to use the term ‘modernity’ (as a noun) to describe changes in the semantics of historical time: Gioberti, Del rinnovamento, Vol. 1, 5.
3. Gioberti outlined his idea of Italy’s primacy in his extremely influential political pamphlet Del primato morale e civile degli italiani. Brussels: Meline, Cans, 1843. There is a strong similarity between Gioberti’s emphasis on local characteristics and some of the thinkers Marta Petruszewicz analyses in her contribution to this book. For a more detailed discussion of Gioberti’s understanding of Italy’s relationship to the world see Silvia Patriarca, Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 25. See also Axel Körner, America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and the Imagination of the Risorgimento, 1763–1865. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 100–7. For a contemporary contextualisation of Gioberti’s idea of Britain see idem, “Britain – the Sicily of Europe?” Continental Perspectives on Britain’s Amour Propre’ (Roundtable on Brexit), Contemporary European History 28.1 (2009), Gioberti is discussed further in the chapter by Alessandro de Arcangelis below.


25. There are obviously exceptions where the analysis is based on a much wider scale. See for instance Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. See also the following chapter by Hermione Giffard.
