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# Social Science on a World Scale
## Connecting the Pages

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**Abstract**
Parallel projects of class analysis, emerging at different points of the global periphery at similar times, pose the problem of connection and disconnection. An outline is given of the global economy of knowledge, centered on the global North which is the privileged site of theory (including methodology). Critiques and alternatives are discussed, particularly indigenous knowledge, decolonial perspectives and Southern theory. Questions are raised about the intellectual workforce, the labour process of knowledge formation, and the circulation of knowledge. The possibility is raised of a democratic world knowledge economy, based on an epistemology of solidarity.

**Keywords:** Knowledge economy. Class analysis. Southern theory. Indigenous knowledge.

## A personal introduction

Around 1968, at the Free University in Sydney, an ambitious research project on class in Australian history was launched by two young scholars, Terry Irving and Raewyn Connell. Free U was an experimental education and research centre set up by activists in the Australian student movement, dedicated to exploring radical questions that the mainstream universities mostly ignored. Free U lasted only three years, but the research project on class continued. A decade later, its main findings were published in a book *Class Structure in Australian History* (Connell; Irving, 1980), which was quite popular for a while. It tried to show, with a wealth of documentary evidence, the distinctive pattern of class formation and class conflict in the settler-colonial society of Australia.

Just a couple of years before we began this project, two radical scholars wrote a book on the distinctive patterns of class formation and class conflict in the postcolonial societies of Latin America. F.H. Cardoso and Enzo Faletto's *Dependencia y desarollo en América Latina*, written in 1966-67 and first published in 1969, was an even more ambitious project, continental in scope. It became a much bigger best-seller, with thirty printings by the time FHC ended his term as President of Brasil.

Three things are of interest here. First is the fact that similar intellectual projects could arise at very different points on the global periphery at almost the same time. Both were genuinely innovative, in terms of class analysis in the 1960s – not to mention the conventions of mainstream sociology at the time.

Second is the fact that these projects were entirely unconnected with each other. I doubt that Cardoso and Faletto ever came in contact with Australian social research. At the same time, no-one on the Australian left, unless they had personal ties with Latin America, had even heard of CEPAL (though Australia was pursuing a similar strategy of import replacement industrialization). I first heard of their work much later, via English-language translations published in the United States.

Third is the fact that neither project found a connection with the radical class analysis of postcolonial societies being made in the same generation on other continents. Notable work was being done about South African class dynamics during the anti-Apartheid struggles (Wolpe, 1972). Notable research was also done in post-independence India. One branch of this became famous, when *Subaltern Studies* was canonized as "postcolonial studies" in the universities of the global North. Yet Ranajit Guha's (1989) powerful critique of Gramscian models of hegemony as applied to colonial situations, emphasising that colonialism always rested on force, has still not had the impact it should, on class analysis worldwide[1].

We can lament lost opportunities for connection. But more important, we should analyze *why* the opportunities were lost. Why were the new pages of social science being written around the global South not connected, or only connected via the global North? And what alternatives do we have?

Those questions are addressed in the book *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2007). I have come to think that a fuller answer requires a new sociology of knowledge, conceived on a world scale. The task of this paper is to outline some elements of this sociology of knowledge, as it affects the formation of social science itself.

## The global economy of knowledge

A key contribution has been made by the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1994), who identifies the problem not as the simple imposition of 'Western' perspectives on the postcolonial world, but as a global division of labour in the production of knowledge, with its roots in imperialism.

[1] The cultural turn in class analysis in the global North has, in fact, moved thinking in the opposite direction – for instance through the influence of Bourdieu's confused concept of "cultural capital".

The conquest of the world by European (and then North American) power, over the 500 years of modern empire and globalization, not only produced material wealth for the imperial powers. It also produced a rich dividend of knowledge. The colonized world was a fabulous mine of information for European science; figures as famous as Charles Darwin and Alexander von Humboldt shared in the collecting, though most was done by humbler colonial officials, missionaries and military forces. As I have shown elsewhere, the assembling of information from colonized societies was also a key to the formation of Sociology as a discipline (Connell, 1997; Steinmetz, 2013).

The information was assembled in the museums, libraries, scientific societies, universities, botanic gardens, research institutes, and government agencies of what we now call the global North. This was not just a matter of the imperial centre exercising its greater wealth and power. The process produced a structural division of labour that is still deeply embedded in modern knowledge systems. The colonized world was, first and foremost, a source of *data*. The metropole, where data from different parts of the colonized world were aggregated (a process now automated in databanks), became the site of the *theoretical* moment in knowledge production.

Data were classified, and intellectual structures built and debated in the knowledge institutions of the metropole. Here, two key developments occurred. One was the formalization and routinization of research methods, a key dimension of theoretical work. The other was the creation of specialized workforces for producing and circulating knowledge, the modern collective intellectual worker. This process was increasingly centred in universities, with the spread of the German model of a research university, transferred to the United States by the end of the nineteenth century.

In Northern institutions, research was further transformed into applied sciences such as engineering, agronomy and medicine. In this applied form, knowledge was returned to the global periphery. Here it

was used by colonial powers, and later postcolonial states, in the mines, in agriculture, and in government. Applications of global-North science became central to the ideology of "development" in the second half of the twentieth century.

In our time, the periphery continues to be a rich source of raw materials for the knowledge economy as for the material economy. The periphery produces data for the new biology, pharmaceuticals, astronomy, social science, linguistics, archaeology, and more. It is, for instance, a key source of data for modern climate science, as shown in the famous reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. But the metropole continues to be the main recognized site of theoretical processing, now including corporate research institutes and giant databanks.

In this economy of knowledge, intellectual workers in the global periphery are pushed towards a particular cultural and intellectual stance. Hountondji calls this 'extraversion': being oriented to authority external to your own society.

This stance is familiar to all academics in the periphery. Whatever the discipline, one *must* read the leading journals published in the metropole, and know and cite the leading theorists in the metropole. One must learn and apply the research methods taught in the metropole. Successful career paths include advanced training in the metropole, attending conferences in the metropole, and for the more successful, getting jobs in the metropole. To gain status at home, the most direct method is to gain recognition in the metropole. Thus the intellectual frameworks developed in the metropole become embedded in the intellectual work of the periphery – not by the exercise of direct control, but by the way the whole economy of knowledge is organized.

The problem is not that local content is absent from research and writing done in the global South. The problem is that local reality is methodically reduced to the status of a 'case' framed by metropolitan conceptualizations. The typical social-science article from the periphery,

even when published in a local journal, combines local data or examples with concepts drawn from one or other theorist from the metropole, whether Latour, Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, Marx, or Habermas... This combination practically defines good practice for social scientists in the periphery.

The pressure to think and write this way has intensified in the neoliberal era. Neoliberal managers in the university sector have introduced an apparatus of performance management, audits, performance indicators and "league tables". There is particular pressure to publish in the "top" journals, which means, necessarily, joining the debates and using the methods recognized in those journals. And surprise! the top journals in the league tables are almost all published in the United States or western Europe. Sociology is no exception: the top 20 journals in the ISI rankings for sociology *all* come from the USA or UK.

Some Northern scholarship about globalization has declared that the distinction of global North from global South is an obsolete binary. Rather there are complex and multidirectional flows and a system without a centre. One recognizes the good intention of such arguments, to acknowledge global complexity and move beyond colonialist stereotypes.

But the facts of gross world economic inequalities, disproportionate military and state power, the transnational corporate economy, and the hierarchical practices of knowledge institutions, remain[2]. There are large inequalities within the metropole and within the periphery, too. The global economy is a dynamic and often turbulent affair. It does not produce a simple dichotomy. It does produce massive structures of centrality and marginality, whose main axis is the metropole-periphery, North-South relationship.

[2] For evidence of continuing hierarchies in knowledge see Collyer, 2014.

Recognizing this is crucial to understanding the global politics of theory in social science. Priority for theory produced in the metropole, and marginality for anything of the sort from the periphery, is the normal functioning of the global economy of knowledge. Innovations in Latin America, or southern Africa, or India, or Australia are *normally* not known to each other, until they are adopted and publicized in the global North.

**Critiques and alternatives**

This situation is no secret, and it is under criticism from different directions. The rise of "post-colonial studies" in the global North is only one of the currents of critique. Other currents include the "decolonial" movement, the exploration of alternative traditions in social science and the possibility of postcolonial sociology (Reuter; Villa, 2010), indigenous knowledge and the decolonization of methodology, and research on Southern theory.

The most clear-cut alternative is provided by the idea of indigenous knowledge. Except where colonization involved absolute genocide, elements of pre-colonization knowledge survived, and in principle offer a standpoint independent of the Western knowledge system. This has been most vigorously endorsed in Africa (see the discussions in Odora Hoppers, 2002), but similar arguments for indigenous knowledge are found in North and South America, in Australia, and elsewhere. The de-colonial school (Mignolo, 2007) often comes close to this, proposing a politics of knowledge based on absolute opposition between the colonizing culture and the colonized.

Indigenous knowledge movements present a powerful critique of the imperialist structure of knowledge in mainstream social science, where colonized peoples are still treated as the objects of knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's influential book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999/2012), based on Maori struggles for cultural survival in Aotearoa New Zealand, shows how colonized people can become the subjects of their own knowledge projects and educational practices.

Indigenous knowledge projects generally assume what might be called a "mosaic epistemology", in which separate knowledge systems sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture or historical experience, and each having its own claims to validity. Mosaic epistemology offers a clear alternative to Northern hegemony and global inequality, replacing the priority of one knowledge system with respectful relations among many.

However a mosaic approach also faces major difficulties, pointed out by Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2004) in her careful critique of a well-known Afrocentric text about gender. Cultures and societies are dynamic, not fixed in one posture. Pre-colonial societies were not silos, but interacted with each other over long periods of time, absorbed outside influences, and had internal diversity. These arguments are reinforced when we recognize the massive disruption of existing societies by colonialism and post-colonial power, meaning that much contemporary research, outside the metropole, is done in conditions where 'relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise' are the *norm* not the exception (Bennett, 2008: 7).

The indigenous-knowledge retort to the imperialism of Western knowledge has had a political impact, with consequences not always happy. The attempt in South Africa to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic by using local healing practices in place of antiretroviral drugs, rather than making these approaches mutually supporting, was a devastating mistake that cost many lives (Cullinan; Thom, 2009). Hountondji is one who is critical of a silo approach to indigenous knowledge. His concept of "endogenous knowledge" emphasises active processes of knowledge production that arise in indigenous societies and have a capacity to speak beyond them: the emphasis is communication not separation (Hountondji, 1994; 2002).

The concept of communication, of new kinds of connection between knowledge projects in the postcolonial world, is at the centre

of discussions in social science about what Gurminder Bhambra (2014) calls "connected sociologies".

It is, of course, important to establish that there *are* different sociologies to connect! It matters that we are not all producing local variants of the same product – though that is what defenders of mainstream sociology believe. An important step here is the historical documentation of multiple traditions in social science, clearly presented by Sujata Patel in her *ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions* (2010), and by Farid Alatas in his *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science* (2006). As João Maia (2011) shows, in the case of Brasil, intellectuals of the settler/creole populations also produced social knowledge that had different themes and sensibilities from those of European social science.

This work provides important evidence of the heterogeneity of social knowledge projects around the postcolonial world. They are not only intensely local knowledge systems embedded in local cultures. Alatas, for instance, shows how the universalism of Islamic thought gave rise to powerful social theories – his key example is the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun – which have applications far beyond their place of birth.

Yet the framing of the issue in terms of "diversity" or "alternatives" still leaves us with a problem: the overwhelming, and (under neoliberalism) *growing*, authority of the global-North "alternative", which is very much more than just another variant. Here the contribution of the decolonial theorists is important, because their work has involved a critique of the formation of European modernity within imperialism, and has produced the important concept of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) – and the coloniality of knowledge. The connection of sociologies from different parts of the world requires a profound *critique* of the Northern-centred global economy of knowledge, and of the processes that produced it, and now sustain it.

The exploration of "Southern theory" starts with this critique, and with the realization that there are alternatives (Connell, 2007; Epstein;

Morrell, 2012). It can be shown that key categories of Northern social science arise from the experience of the societies of the global metropole and their position in the history of imperialism (Connell, 2006). These produce characteristic moves in Northern social theory, which I have called "the claim of universality", "reading from the centre", "gestures of exclusion", and the "grand erasure" of colonialism itself. Such moves can be found even in specialised areas of social science. Helen Meekosha (2011), for instance, shows how they have distorted the social analysis of disability. Questions about disability look very different when seen on a world scale, prioritising the experience of the colonized.

This critique leads to a different view of the history of social science from the usual story of European "founding fathers" and the global diffusion of their ideas. The story, rather, centres on the *exclusion* of the social knowledge actually produced in the periphery, the denial of recognition.

Colonized peoples did try to understand what was happening to them. They had their own cultural and intellectual traditions to build on, as well as the ideas of the colonizers. The Southern-theory approach frontally denies the assumption in the mainstream economy of knowledge that powerful theory is only produced in the metropole. From colonized peoples, from settler populations, from postcolonial societies grappling with dependence, violence, and new forms of exploitation, have emerged a wealth of social knowledge. This Southern knowledge contains a strong component of theory, i.e. concepts, methodologies, intellectual framings and agendas.

Southern theory is often formulated in different genres from those of Northern academic social science, because the circumstances of Northern research universities were almost never reproduced in the colonial world, and only rarely in the postcolonial world. Yet only a very blinkered view of knowledge would deny the power and originality of thinkers like Heleieth Saffioti, Ashis Nandy, Paulin Hountondji, Samir

Amin, Ali Shariati, Celso Furtado, or Bina Agarwal, to mention only a few. There is a tremendous resource here to build on.

**Workforce and labour process**

The discussions just mentioned have proceeded mainly at the level of ideas, texts, and discourses. But a sociology of knowledge must be concerned also with the social circumstances in which these ideas are formed and distributed, the social institutions that support (or fail to support) them, the practices of knowledge-making, teaching and learning. These issues too must now be thought through at a world level.

The first questions here concern the intellectual workforce[3]. In the mainstream economy of knowledge, the intellectual workforce substantially consists of academics, as teachers and researchers, including trainee academics or graduate students (who by some calculations produce about half the knowledge that comes out of universities). It also involves the non-academic, support or professional staff, of universities. Beyond the universities, the knowledge workforce involves similar structures in corporate and state research centres, and in hybrid public/private institutions like the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Brasil.

Outside the mainstream economy of knowledge, large institutions are still significant but not so dominant. Indigenous knowledge projects are based on decentralized communities that are often very poor. Social movements may be important producers of ideas and information. Millie Thayer (2010) has argued, in a discussion of the translation of ideas and language in feminist activism, that a worldwide 'counterpublic', vast and heterogeneous, is constituted by social movement activists, academics, women's organizations, even state and development agency staff. In poorer parts of the developing world, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, a large part of all social research is produced by NGOs or by

[3] For an account of my approach here, see Connell, 2011.

their contract workers, often funded on a small scale by development aid money (Mkandawire, 2005).

Several forces have been re-shaping these workforces. The worldwide growth of literacy and the spread of formal education, especially among women, have produced many more actors capable of participating in the mainstream knowledge economy. It also means more who are capable of participating in alternative knowledge projects with more than local reach, such as Islamic feminism.

The spread of neoliberal power and the dismantling of developmental states in favour of global market forces have taken resources out of public-sector knowledge projects, and have produced more economic insecurity among knowledge workers. The conversion of social movements into NGOs has both formalized alternative knowledge projects and tended to make them less ambitious, since in the neoliberal system "accountability" and "best practice" usually means reproducing familiar, Northern-derived, research paradigms.

We also need to consider the materials of knowledge and the transformations to which those materials are subject. The tendency in the mainstream economy of knowledge has been towards formality and abstraction in the constitution of the data that enter a social-scientific argument. The dominance of statistical analysis and formalized modelling in economics, currently the most prestigious of the social sciences, is well known. It is also noticeable that the *American Sociological Review*, the top sociology journal in the world on neoliberal league tables, has a strong preference for papers that present statistical analyses of large sets of abstracted data, whatever the substantive topic. This is so marked a trend in the social sciences that there is a tendency to view "qualitative" analysis as in itself radical – which is not the case.

Thomas Piketty, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), laments the absence of standardized income distribution data sets from much of the world; he excuses the Eurocentrism of his project on this ground. There are projects to extend the reach of abstracted,

standardized data collection around the world. A notable example comes from educational science. What was originally a Scandinavian-based research project on student outcomes has turned into a monster intergovernmental testing and ranking regime, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), co-ordinated by the rich countries' neoliberal think tank, the OECD.

It goes almost without saying that the educational *experience* of students in schools is of little interest to the PISA testers, just as the social relations of production are of little interest to Piketty. Knowledge projects coming from severely marginalized groups often have the character of "testimony", as if telling one's life, narrating experience and affirming a reality not represented in mainstream sources is itself an important achievement[4]. But testimony alone does not create social-scientific knowledge with reach and analytic power. For that, structural analysis, interpretation, and quantitative information too, are necessary.

Finally, we need to consider the means of circulation of social-scientific knowledge. The creation of specialized knowledge institutions in the global North also created a system of communication within the North. This centred on the academic "journal", supplemented by handbooks and systematic reviews – of which a pioneering example was Durkheim's *L'année sociologique*.

The creation of analogous journals in universities of the periphery promised a certain decentralization of the economy of knowledge. But this was negated locally by the extraversion of the content within these journals, and on a macro scale by establishing hierarchies of journals, now formalized in citation counts and league tables, in which journals of the North always predominate. The Internet has more recently promised a technological decentralization and democratisation. But this is mostly negated by the massive commercialization of the Net, and by the way

[4] For a striking though little known example, see the life stories of transsexual women and men in South Africa, collected by the activist group GenderDynamiX: Morgan et al., 2009.

rich Northern institutions have used it to establish their agendas as global norms (a recent example being MOOCs).

There is indeed no simple way to create a radically democratic social-science communication system on a world scale. Some international organizations, including the International Sociological Association, are making real attempts at being conduits for multi-centred communication. The attempts at direct South-South linkage that are proliferating at present[5] are very important, but are still on a small scale compared with the mainstream economy of knowledge.

I can see no alternative to a patient process of building connections, organizing translations, funding travel, encouraging joint projects and joint publications. That this is a long-term approach, inadequate to the urgent problems of social analysis around the postcolonial world, is all too obvious.

**In conclusion**

The alternative to a pyramidal epistemology, which preserves the dominance of the global North, and a mosaic epistemology, which separates global South knowledge projects from each other, must be some kind of solidarity-based epistemology (Connell, 2015). This looks for the connections between knowledge projects, as much as the differences between them (e.g. Bulbeck, 1998). At the same time, it is critically aware of the history of the global knowledge economy and its current politics.

A social science that embodies such a view of knowledge must be based on practices of knowledge formation and circulation that contest the exclusions and hierarchies that have proliferated, not just under colonialism, but in the neoliberal era too. Knowledge production is a radically social process. The attempt to force it into a mould of competitive individualism, which is at the heart of neoliberal management strategy,

[5] See www.southernperspectives.net

inevitably distorts and ultimately trivializes the knowledge project. It is not by chance that neoliberal managers of universities now employ public-relations workforces, who are closer to top management than the actual research workforce is.

Against the juggernauts of commercialization and global-North dominance, it may seem hopeless to struggle. But many other knowledge projects exist, and even flourish. It is by recognizing their multiplicity, scope, and intellectual power, that we will find the energy and inspiration to build a social science fit for democratic purposes, on a world scale.

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