

Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences

A critical assessment

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Abstract

This article reviews the compelling volume edited by Wiebke Keim, Ercüment Çelik, Christian Ersche and Veronika Wöhrer *Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences: Made in Circulation* (2014) to critically assess some explanations of the emergence and the development the global regime of knowledge production and circulation of knowledge within it. While praising alternatives to some hegemonic and universalizing trends in knowledge production, it is sought to demonstrate that the way postcolonial studies have been projected in the Arab region does not sufficiently account for the complexity of the situation neither in this region nor elsewhere. It is argued, in the end, that it is necessary to forge post-authoritarian studies to supplement postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Internationalization of social sciences. Circulation of ideas. Sociology of the South. Post-authoritarian studies.

This article will grasp the occasion of reviewing the very compelling volume edited by Wiebke Keim, Ercüment Çelik, Christian Ersche and Veronika Wöhrer *Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences: Made in Circulation* (2014) to critically assess some explanations of the emergence and the development the global regime of knowledge production and circulation of knowledge within it. Some are interested in the epistemology and hegemony (Kuhn; Okamoto, 2013), others focused on more structural underpinnings. Many scholars have opposed the internationalization and globalization of research and its relevance to societal needs. I tend to see this as a tension rather than contradiction. Some of my colleagues are very sensitive to the cognitive and epistemological contents of the internationalization of the social science. For me, the internationalization raises fewer problems in terms of incompatibility of the Western concepts that have been forged in specific contexts of the European nation states than in terms of sociological and institutional environments and challenges influencing researchers in the southern countries. While this article will praise alternatives to some hegemonic and universalizing trends, I will demonstrate that the way the postcolonial studies have been projected in the Arab region does not sufficiently account for the complexity of the situation neither in this region nor elsewhere. I will, finally, claim that it is necessary to forge post-authoritarian studies to supplement the postcolonial studies.

The Keim et al.'s edited volume brings together contributions that unfold processes and problems related to global knowledge production and knowledge circulation in the social sciences. They learn about the outcomes of these processes and their multiple tracks, complexities and versions through sociological and ethnographical studies of the infrastructures, organizations, debates, discourses and people working on these productions. Through empirical studies and theoretical reflection to this topic, this volume deals on practical material aspects, as well as epistemological ones, of knowledge production.

The volume is divided into four parts: current challenges of time, space and concepts of circulation; historical and recent initiatives of cooperation across the South; alternative social science perspectives from the South; and, finally, the epistemic consequences of a re-ordering of sociology on a global scale. But before, Burawoy, in his preface of this volume, sets the tone of the volume by raising many issues related to the a commodified global knowledge production and providing interesting categorization between sociology *in* the South (simply Northern sociology, presented as a universal sociology, transferred to the South), sociology *of* the South (sociology developed in the South such as sociology of labor in South Africa), and sociology *for* the South (a theory that binds the South to an emergent counter-hegemony that presents the interests of the South as the interests of all).

Circulation of knowledge

The first part is about historical as well as the contemporary asymmetry of knowledge transfers and international cooperative arrangements that disable or enable a non-hegemonic circulation of knowledge. The virtue of this part is that it questions both the Friedman's 'flat world' (2005) without borders, where power structures have almost disappeared, and the Bourdieu (2002)'s argument that texts circulate without their context. Circulation of knowledge posits that knowledge does not only circulate, but is also produced in circulation and this was the standpoint held explicitly or implicitly by most of the volume's authors. The study of circulation should, thus, be made through case studies and qualitative methodologies that help us to follow the actors.

Leandro Rodriguez Medina (Chapter 2) illustrates how the German sociologist Nikolas Luhmann was perceived and circulated in some countries of the Latin American and shows us how knowledge is (re)configured by being introduced in a network of people and objects that enables or constrains the possibility of circulation. Certainly, Luhmann was introduced by the German-speaking scholars in Chile and Mexico,

but it was perceived in different way through time and generations. Generations were engaged differently with Luhmann and the use of his ideas alters more than in the past as Latino scholars are more confident. By means of an innovative methodology based on interviews to depict work life biography of scholars who used Luhmann, Rodriguez Medina provides very interesting insights, as he uses the notion of boundary work to describe the complex, (not always) articulated, international and material/textual practices through which some actors have created the conditions for a theory to circulate. He argues that “when boundary objects travel from a powerful site (such as a metropolitan university) to a less endowed one (such as a peripheral book market) they become subordinating objects”. Thus, they can (re)structure peripheral fields by encouraging (or forcing) local scholars to react to that intellectual production. Subordinating objects usually compel peripheral scholars to make intellectual interventions that are responsive to the knowledge embedded in them. The main reason behind the necessity to think of theories as subordinating objects is that the boundary work that takes place in peripheral contexts is not the same as the one that is done in central areas. However, this (re)structuring does not mean a general and radical change of institutions, intellectual traditions and worldviews, but rather subtle transformations of everyday practices that contribute to (re)shape new intellectual interventions in the field. Rodriguez Medina shows indeed, in his recent book (2013), that the relation between the centre and the periphery is not one simply of one-way domination.

Another beautiful example of international circulation of ideas comes from Nicolas Guilhot, who studied the international circulation of International Relations (IR) Theory and the role of transnational actors (for instance French scholars residing in US) in shaping the theory. For Guilhot, the assumption that IR is an ‘American social science’ first developed in the US and subsequently imported into France is not true, as the IR theory was not designed as a ‘social science’ and was not in line with American intellectual traditions: postwar realism was in

a fundamental way ‘un-American’. He denounces the methodological nationalism of the way Bourdieu applied his field theory to the international circulation of ideas. For Guillot, “the meaning of ideas is no longer exclusively indexed to underlying social positions relating to each other within the coordinates of a nationally bounded social field, but may also reflect transnational circulations as well as their capacity to reshuffle social fields”. So the circulations become salient that “the scope and extent of the contexts in which ideas originate and circulate is not fixed in advance or restricted to the boundaries of national fields.”

Beyond diffusionism and perspectives

Beyond this two cases, Wiebke Keim conceptualized different configurations of circulation that go beyond the simple diffusionism in the current history of science, or perspectives from an early problematization of Edward Said’s ‘travelling theory’, Bourdieu’s ‘international circulation of ideas’, Heilbrun’s ‘transnational science history’ and Beck’s ‘cosmopolitanism’, paying particular attention to circulation across centre–periphery structures. For her, one should look beyond the reception to see also the exchange. Exchange takes two forms: controversy and co-construction. While co-construction enhances means of intersubjective control already during the research process, controversy, as a form of open critique, functions as peer-control of results and research output and, thus, similarly furthers scientific advancement. However, controversies in the international arena often contain major reference to ‘national’ or cultural difference. Keim is right to see that it is often difficult to be challenged from the South.

However, the most interesting section of her chapter deal with *Negotiating Theory and Practice*. She explores the circulation of knowledge between academic and extra-academic fields by focusing on the intellectual engagements with the labour movement in South Africa. Following Burawoy on the importance of negotiation between theory and practice and producing socially relevant sociology in a

peripheral context, she shows moves towards alternative audiences and arenas of competition that has counter-hegemonic potential as it weakens the recognition of and orientation towards central, prestigious arenas of competition. She continues that the historical studies reveal that it has often been through a negotiation of theory and practice that South–South circulation of knowledge has developed historically, rather than out of purely academic concerns. Out of negotiation of theory and practice, broader intellectual configurations have created ‘shared transnational public spaces’. Keim brought examples from the anti-colonial movements and the intellectual debates they generated in constant negotiation with political practice.

Cooperation across the South

To counterbalance the current Western domination of many academic networks and cooperations, part 2 intends to have a closer look at social science networks in the South by presenting historical and recent initiatives of cooperation across the South.

Teresa Valdés, in Chapter 6, studies the case of *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*. DAWN is a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the South that works for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development, a network that today covers Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific. It was started in Bangalore, India sooner after the Third UN Conference on Women (Nairobi 1985), when a group of women from different countries from the South met and shared their experiences of development strategies, policies, theories and research. They elaborated a South feminist critique of three decades of development; this highlighted the impacts of four interlinked and systemic global crises – famine, debt, militarism and fundamentalism – on poor women of the South, and offered alternative visions, which they presented at Nairobi, putting macro-economic issues firmly on the agenda of the women’s movement. They challenged the

dominant discourse on ‘women and development’, and introduced an analytical framework that changed the terms of the debate on women’s issues.

Edward Webster (Chapter 7) follows Burawoy useful distinction between sociology *in* the South, sociology *of* the South, and sociology *for* the South. He challenges those who think that knowledge only flows unilaterally from the global North to the global South and the fact that Northern scholars seek to induce ‘epistemic dependence’ by expropriating the voice and experiences of the South. While the North clearly continues to dominate the production of knowledge, following Keim, he believes a more interactive approach is emerging in the form of an exchange model, where knowledge is co-constructed. He identifies concepts in his research and debates – such as livelihood strategies rather than decent work, self-employed proletarians rather than informal work, informal security regime rather than welfare state regime, neo-development state rather than social democratic state. I think these concepts find their way, but the theoretical implications of our findings are not yet clear.

Alternative social science perspectives

Part 3 introduces alternative social science perspectives from the South: authors question the current sociological canon, dominant historicizing of the discipline and commonly accepted rules for producing knowledge and new visions for knowledge production are developed.

The South African sociologist, Ari Sitas (Chapter 9) contends that there will only be a new sociology with some universal take if, and only if, one manages to move beyond reciprocal reductionisms and mimicries. This is about a process of borrowing from everywhere which is intensely local but at the same time intensively global, modern, pre-modern and postmodern.

Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell (Chapter 10) show how social theory from the world periphery has power and relevance for

understanding our changing world and how this tremendous resource has been disregarded by mainstream social science. Through the case of study of the neoliberalism, they argue in favor of the significance of a southern-centred analysis of neoliberalism by bringing to fore Samir Amin central-periphery theory and Armando Boito's class analysis. For Dados and Connell, a value added of the southern perspective is immense. While David Harvey (2005) takes into account how privatization, commodification, financialization and the manipulation of crises are all ways in which contemporary neoliberalism has enabled the redistribution of wealth and resources from poor countries to rich countries, the North/South relationship is not, to him, a driving force of market society. For Amin, this latter point is crucial. The only criticism I can formulate is that Dados and Connell did not tell us whether a researcher from the South can reach such theorization while s/he is in the Southern countries. Both Amin and Boito studied in the North (France) and Amin spends most of his time in its Northern academic spheres. They are not simply voices from the South.

Postcolonial Global Sociology: an alternative

In the fourth part of the book, rearrangements of the social sciences after critiques of Eurocentrism and postcolonial studies are discussed at an epistemological level: the epistemic consequences of a re-ordering of sociology on a global scale are elaborated and evaluated.

I found particularly interesting the contribution of Martin Savransky (Chapter 13). He calls for an experimentation "with the possibility that the speculative construction of a 'global' social science might perhaps not begin from a solid, critical, politico-epistemological foundation capable of guaranteeing the relevance of our practices beyond those parts of the world within which the former have been cultivated, but from an activity which, by entertaining experiences of hesitation, may put our own metaphysical foundations at risk". This endeavor will encourage establishing a modest global social science with

less universalist pretension. Boike Rehbein (Chapter 11) was suspicious of universalist social science which necessarily drew him towards multiple epistemologies as an alternative and to different locations such as the global South for their instantiation. He refuses thus to undertake singlehanded general theory, including postcolonialism, but rather “piecemeal transitions, experimentation and practical risks”.

Gurminder Bhambra, professor in Warwick university (UK), in Chapter 12, criticizes Rehbein from moving from universalism to multiplicity as a panacea, neglecting the fact that they are closely intertwined. The perceived limit on what was previously claimed to be universal is the occasion to re-present it as particular and merely one of a number of possible particularities. In contrast, Bhambra argues for a reconstruction of categories in which transformed understandings create new ways of understanding connections. These are not to be understood as transcendent categories, but as categories with particular histories of recognition and learning from others. In this way, learning from others makes a difference to what was previously understood and in so doing involves the transformation of previously constituted universals and particulars. Simply presenting ‘new’ arguments is to offer a variety of alternatives that leaves the existing paradigm intact. Bhambra argues, instead, for a reconstruction to follow any deconstruction of what was previously understood as deficient and an accounting of how the deficiency was previously unnoticed. Bhambra quotes Seidman that sociology’s emergence coincided with the high point of Western imperialism, and yet ‘the dynamics of empire were not incorporated into the basic categories, models of explanation, and narratives of social development of the classical sociologists’ (1994, p. 314). This is why she calls for “Postcolonial Global Sociology”. She goes further in her recent book, *Connected Sociologies* (Bhambra, 2014) to develop an approach built on postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Eurocentrism as a better way of understanding a shared global present.

Post-colonialism vs Post-authoritarianism

The volume of Keim et al. is certainly an original contribution and timely in its eloquent call for global dialogue and mutual learning. It raises questions and provides some reflections that required from us to go to empirical work (and not only desk-study) in order to address epistemological biases, symbolic violence of the inequality and structural unbalances in knowledge production. It stresses thus the importance of locality, translatability and social embeddedness of knowledge production. It calls for a sociology that is described by Ari Sitas (2004, p.23) as ‘universally comprehensible but arrogantly local ... neither pre-modern, modern nor post-modern. It could be all of them at once and at once communally accessible’ and has a more democratic global recognition beyond the dominant European and North American metropole’. Because I abide to this kind of sociology, I will formulate further critical assessment to how postcolonialism was used and abused in the Arab world. This will be based on extensive overseeing of a large number of social science manuscripts, as I am an editor of Idafat: The Arab Journal of Sociology (Arabic) and a member of the editorial board for many Arab and international academic journals.

Seen from the Arab World lens, the intersection between sociology and post-colonial studies does not go without problems, and reflect a crisis among the Arab left who spouses post-colonialism and in its projection it was distorted. I will highlight two trends of the Arab left, inspired by Fadi Bardawil’s (2016) classification: the Anti-imperialists, and the Anti-Western enlightened (*Tanweriyyon*).

After half a century of authoritarianism in the Arab World, post-colonial anti-imperialist scholars have been unable to comprehend or have overlooked the local power dynamics. For them, democracy does occupy the top list of their agenda. These scholars read for instance the Arab uprisings (with all their ramification: political changes, civil strife and violence) simply as a geo-political game in which former colonial and imperial masters are omnipresent and sole to be blamed

for. Portraying the current transformation of the Arab societies in this line makes many of these scholars simply defending “progressive” Arab dictators. The quasi-conspiratorial apologetic and defensive claims become tools to justify local repression and even torture. Postcolonial scholars in the Arab region and sometimes some leftists in the West have rarely articulated a set of internal and external influences that shaped the political landscape of the Arab World. Hamid Dabashi’ *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012) is the best criticism of the regime of knowledge production that ignores the development and the social and intellectual changes inside of the Arab world. More generally, postcolonial critiques have ignored the current crises in Africa, in East Timor, Myanmar, Peru and other societies suffering from neocolonial structures (San Juan, 1998). The post-colonial attempts to reify cultural differences and to generate cultural compassion unsuccessfully grappled with the reality of globalization, both its history and its more recent intensification, and of specific historical contradictions in the ongoing crisis of late, transnational capitalism and repressive regimes in many Southern countries.

To illustrate this argument, I shall give an example from the work of Gurminder Bhambra. While her excellent scholarship on how, within sociological understandings of modernity, the experiences and claims of non-European ‘others’ have been rendered invisible to the dominant narratives and analytical frameworks of sociology is to be commended, her approach can be reductionist for reading some social phenomena. In her keynotes “Postcolonial reconstructions of Europe” in the 9th European Sociological Association Conference (Prague, 2015), she portrays Syrian refugees in Europe simply as post-colonial migrants. She explains that Europe attracts them as former colonial masters and the white European societies do not want them because these societies had not addressed the memory of colonial legacies. This post-colonial framing cannot account for the fact that their wave of exile was generated by a very violent authoritarian turn in the Arab World, where the weight

of local authoritarian regimes (eg. in the case of Syria: Assad regime, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran are major players) surpasses that of the imperial Western power.

The second group of the left (the Anti-Western enlightened) understands postcolonialism as an approach to de-westernize knowledge production in the Arab region. However, following Talal Asad, who did not emphasize the Western origins of social science concepts *per se*, but the authority behind these discourses (Bardawil 2016a), some of those who call for de-westernizing knowledge have ended up by impoverishing themselves because of the tendency to keep on harking back to the achievements of the historical vernacular scholars. As an editor of the *Arab Journal of Sociology (Idafat)*, I found often either decorative the use of reference to Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406) or Malik Bennabi (1905-1973) or forcing the analysis to fit some of their concepts. For instance, in spite of the fact that the French colonial authority and post-independent one have destroyed the tribal structure in Algeria, many social researchers keep using *asabiyya* (tribal cohesion) as a major source of the political organizations. This misuse can be found as well among those who advocate the Islamization of the knowledge *tout court* and the social science in particular. They conceptualize an anti-thesis of the “western” social science, through a structure of antinomies modernity, development, democracy and secularism. The civilizational manufacturing of boundaries was not a heuristic mechanism to understand changes in the Arab world. Having said that, I am in favor of using local sources of knowledge not only in terms of data but also concepts and theories, but this should be done not as a nationalistic project but as a necessity of grappling with local realities.

Post-colonial arguments suddenly unified indeed a fringe of the left with a fringe of Islamism who keep blaming the West for any social, economic or political problems they face in the region. What I propose here is to complement postcolonial studies by what I call *post-authoritarian studies*. This field should pay attention to how

authoritarian regimes shape the knowledge production in different ways and, in response to them, resistance to these regimes is generated. Why do we need post-authoritarian studies? There are many reasons:

- There is a paucity of systematic studies, in the meaning of André Béteille (2013), ie., the interconnections among social processes in a systematic way, without any presumption as to whether those interconnections are basically harmonious or basically discordant. Many social research in the Arab World suffice to understand/describe simply a social phenomenon without connecting it to the political economy and the nature of political choice adopted by the state. For instance, browsing two social science journals in the Arab Gulf, we found that social science is lacking consciousness. Sociology keeps studying micro problems using science techniques but without addressing the authoritarian nature of existing monarchies in addition to other power structures.
- The self-censorship of the scholars makes the social science production full of unspoken issues. For instance, we often find broad criticism to society or state where the message becomes diluted. Those who resist would use a lot of subtlety, otherwise they will end up in prison. The fear is not only from the state, but from some violent ideological groups such as radical Islamists.
- Overstating the external factors over the local ones. The way Arab uprisings have been analyzed demonstrates that.
- Fear and suspicion of any form of universal concepts such as human rights. Some of the scholarship under authoritarian regimes propagate the mythology of uniqueness of each society and culture.
- Reluctance to engage with the public and policy-makers has reduced the knowledge production into its professional knowledge (Hanafi; Arvanitis, 2016). The fact that the authoritarian state is not interested in having evidence based

policy, knowledge production becomes more project-based research rather than program-based one using funding coming often from abroad.

- The good critical research produced under authoritarianism often leads to marginal career of its authors.

So, post-authoritarian studies should address all the above issues, if we need to generate not only new epistemologies but also healthy working conditions conducive to the research practices. Again I am not opposing post-authoritarian studies to post-colonial ones, but simply one cannot understand the knowledge production or its current situation by simply delving into a remote past and forgetting how local political subjectivities shaped as well this very production. Recently, many events in the Arab world has commemorated a century of Sykes-Picot Agreement and colonial interventions and geographical divisions in the region. I participated in one of them and I suggested to identify local names who have fostered divisions instead of French, English or American names. This does not reflect the fact that ISIS removed border posts between Iraq and Syria in 2014, as part of the group's proclaimed plan to restore the Islamic Caliphate on the ruins of the Sykes-Picot border, but also new geographical borders and social boundaries are at work by regional powers, which include, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Syria.

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