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► **To cite this version:**

Wiebke Keim. The internationalization of social sciences: distortions, dominations and prospects. World Social Science Report 2010, Unesco, pp.169-170, 2010, 978-92-3-104131-0. halshs-01077035

**HAL Id: halshs-01077035**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01077035>**

Submitted on 4 Dec 2014

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Keim, Wiebke (2010): The internationalisation of social science: distortions, dominations and prospects. In: International Social Science Council (Hg.): World Social Science Report 2010. Paris: Unesco Publishing, S. 169–171

– Manuscript –

## The internationalization of social sciences: Distortions, dominations and prospects

Wiebke Keim

There is no doubt that scholars' scope for international communication, including the global interconnectedness of social scientists, has increased considerably in recent decades. This interconnectedness, combined with social-scientific interest in globalization, has led to the current debates on the internationalization of the social sciences. Optimistic voices, for example within the International Sociological Association, talk confidently about the internationalization of their discipline, currently a favourite topic at world congresses. However, these developments have also led to fierce contest, and to resistance to the idea of a single, unified and 'truly global' sociology. Arguments against the vision of a globalized discipline have in turn provoked fears of the fragmentation of the discipline into localized, nationalized, or indigenized sociologies.

This implies that the connection between the commonly accepted and shared idea of the discipline – in this case sociology – and its local realization is becoming increasingly problematic (Berthelot, 1998). I argue that it is not paradoxical that the call for more local sociologies, often emerging from the global South, appears at exactly the time of ever-increasing globalization. We need to take the dissident voices' backgrounds into account in order to understand that they come as no surprise. They are specific challenges to a North Atlantic domination that has to be resisted in order to develop an independent scholarly tradition, one that speaks from the context of origin.

Although social thinking has been present in all societies at all times, the social sciences as academic disciplines within specialized institutions are of European origin. In many cases, they expanded into other continents through colonialism and imperialism. This transfer of knowledge and its associated scholarly practices has led to problems of academic underdevelopment, intellectual dependency, unequal international division of labour, and the international marginalization of the social experience and social scientific production of the global South (see other contributions to this volume for empirical evidence). It is this North Atlantic domination that is the target of the challenges to a globalized sociology.

Besides political challenges and resistance to North Atlantic domination, there is a fundamental epistemological problem. General social theory *per se* pretends to produce universal statements, concepts and theories. But this does not happen unless these statements have been adequately tested against empirical realities outside Europe and North America. This has hardly ever been done. The North Atlantic domination therefore leads to a strongly distorted form of universality. It is distorted because to date, this claim of universality relies on both 'radical exclusion' and 'radical inclusion.' These supposedly general theories do not

take into account the experience of the majority of humanity, those living in the global South. Nor do they recognize the social theories produced in the South. I call this 'radical exclusion'. In turn, 'radical inclusion' means that despite these radical exclusions, general social theory is regarded as universally valid. The social realities in the southern hemisphere are thus subsumed, without further thought, under the claims produced in the North. This tendency, which has largely not been reflected on, blurs the distinction between the universal and the particular, and the North-Atlantic particular is thought to have universal validity. This is a fundamental epistemological problem for social science, i.e. for disciplines aiming at the formulation of generally valid claims about society.

In recent years, several attacks have been launched against the North-Atlantic domination of the social sciences. These have included critiques of Eurocentrism (Amin, 1988), the deconstruction of orientalism (Said, 1978), attacks on anthropology and area studies (Mafeje, 1997), and critiques of the coloniality of knowledge and epistemic hegemony (Lander, 2003). At the same time, the constructive approach of the indigenization project attempts to develop sociological concepts from knowledge contained in oral poetry (see the debate involving Akiwowo, Makinde and Lawuyi/Taiwo in Albrow and King, 1990; Adésinà, 2002).

There are also the detailed analyses of Alatas (2006), who has been working on Eurocentrism within Asian social science and proposes alternatives for research and teaching. In addition, Alatas has conceptualized how far imported approaches may be irrelevant to the analysis of local societies, and proposes a set of criteria to render Southern sociologies more relevant to their own contexts. Connell (2007) considers three current, general sociological theorists and, points out in greater detail how far their approaches show the tendencies of inclusion and exclusion outlined above. Lander (2003) takes a more historical and philosophical perspective on the coloniality of knowledge in Latin America. Keim (2008) analyzes North Atlantic domination's empirical factors and effects as well as the emergence of counter-hegemonic currents in Africa and Latin America. (See also Alatas in the next section.)

I understand 'counter hegemonic currents' more as implicit challenges to the North Atlantic domination. They include socially relevant social science research and teaching, which has the potential to develop into theoretically relevant fields of knowledge production over time in the countries of the global South. A historical example is the emancipation of an entire continental community, Latin America, from the international mainstream through dependency theory, introducing a paradigm shift away from the then dominant, rather Eurocentric, modernization theory. Another example is the development of South African labour studies into an autonomous scholarly community, which has recently produced publications relevant to the field of labour studies, as well as to general sociological theory building (Sitas, 2004).

It appears that the present double movement, in which the scholarly community becomes more internationalized while specific local claims also gain in status, is not as paradoxical as it might appear. On the contrary, it seems that this recent development has its foundations in the very history of the discipline, in the realities of its worldwide spread, and in the forms of its international constitution. Tensions between local and general sociologies could be regarded as a direct consequence of growing international communication. Increased international exchange and the gradual accession of 'peripheral' sociologists to 'central' fora confront scholars, who have to date regarded themselves as practising universally valid theory, with the problem of North Atlantic domination. However, the expected internationalization of the disciplines can not be achieved on a more equal footing between

North and South as long as this problem is not recognized and adequately discussed. Taking the social experience and theoretical production emerging from the global South seriously will enrich the disciplines and enable scholars to reflect upon the possibilities of generalizing their claims beyond the local context to a broader empirical basis. This remains the major task for the current and future generations of social scientists. And so, onwards towards a truly global sociology?

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