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Review

Raewyn Connell

Southern theory. The global dynamics of knowledge in social science, Polity Press, Unwin, 2007, 271 pp., ISBN -13: 978-0-7456-4248-2

by Wiebke Keim

Raewyn Connell, based at University of Sydney, has been recognized so far as an international scholar in gender studies (among others: *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995; *Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2001). She has now published a book in the field of general sociology and epistemology, where again, her main interest is in uncovering schemes of domination. The book consists of four parts.

The first part, "Northern theory", contains three chapters that follow the development of sociological theory in a historical perspective. "Empire and the creation of a social science" presents an inquiry into the very origins of sociology and scrutinizes the writings of a variety of early classics. The author's main objective here is to emphasize the role the global South has played in the creation of the discipline. Usually the emergence of sociology is contextualised as an endeavour of modern Europe, as a reflexive effort at times of social transformations related to the industrial revolution in the 19th century. Connell points out in how far this represents a reduction of the history of the discipline: what is just as obvious from early texts is the significance of the colonial project that European thinkers were accompanying – and partly justifying – with reflections on societies outside of Europe through "*grand ethnography*", within evolutionist frameworks. Early sociology is much more global in scope than current general theory.

The next chapter analyses the writing of three current representatives of general theory: Coleman, Giddens and Bourdieu. Apart from the topics addressed, and despite their ambition to achieve highly generalized accounts of society, the particular conditions of their actual location heavily impact onto their conceptualisations. Connell shows that, e.g., by highlighting the concept of the social actor in Coleman's approach which she takes for a "picture of the person and social relations that is drawn from recent European and especially North American social experience, reflecting the hypertrophy of the market" (Connell 2006: 244). The third chapter outlines in how far globalization theory, although looking at phenomena of a global scope, suffers from the same restrictions, i.e. context-boundedness and a European frame of thought.

The second part's main aim is to firmly locate Australia – a country that due to its history as an early industrialised settler colony has often been

left outside of the North-South-divide – within the global South. This is achieved by a double perspective on the history of the continent itself as well as on the history of Australian sociology. The latter shows very similar characteristics to the ones that Connell's colleagues have earlier pointed out for African, Asian and Latin American sociologies: intellectual dependency on the "centres of knowledge" production, "captive mind" and marginalisation from the "mainstream" of the global sociological enterprise.

The third part contains four chapters focussing on the sociological traditions of four world regions, namely Africa, the Muslim-dominated countries with a focus on Iran, Latin America and India. Each chapter traces the specific regional theory development, always highlighting the discussions of local realities versus imported theoretical frameworks and thus the struggles for intellectual emancipation from the dominant paradigms of Europe and North America.

This third part represents a considerable effort to pull together and put into perspective the many contributions to critiques of Eurocentrism and alternative theorizing that have occurred at a global scale. Connell shows how the African debates have mainly focussed on issues of cultural identity, indigeneity and the importance of social knowledge contained in the oral culture of the continent. The only critique that one could mention regarding this chapter is the omission of the recent works of Sitas who overcomes the limitations of the indigenization project initiated by Akiwowo – that Connell adequately points out – in his parable-project. The calls for islamisation of knowledge represent a specific form of indigenization in countries with Muslim majorities. Connell focuses on three central figures of Iranian social science: Al-Afghani, Al-e Ahmad and Shariati. The three have taken up in original ways the challenge of developing social science as a means of modernizing their region. Their idea of modernity, however, was not the conventional Western modernity. On the contrary, they wanted to modernize from a position of Islamic strength, as Islam represented the single cultural force that had resisted colonisation and was thus taken as the starting point for socio-political emancipation as well as for critical theorizing and autonomous development in various ways. The Latin American debates are probably better known to a European public, as they are among the few, if not the only ones that have succeeded in imposing themselves onto the mainstream agenda of the social sciences. Connell deals with Cepalism and dependency theory and follows regional debates right into García Canclini's cultural sociology. As for the Indian achievements, the chapter entitled "Power, violence and the pain of colonialism", starts with subaltern studies and ends with Das' works on sociology's failure to account for colonial violence and other critical, incomprehensible events that point to the very limits of the discipline's explanatory power.

Part IV, "Antipodean reflections", makes a contribution to the debate from the Australian point of view. "The silence of the land" follows the logic of the third part of the book, with the considerable difference that

here, the author does not review theory produced by others but makes herself an attempt to add relevant insights drawn from the Australian historical and social experience to sociological theory building as such. The last chapter, "Social science on a world scale", pulls together the different arguments of the former chapters. For social science internationally, this shows the need to problematize global centre-periphery-relationships within the discipline, to encourage South-South communication, to analyse the functioning of the metropolis as the global centre, and to recognize the limited validity of what has up to now been declared "universal theory". The author also mentions central topics that are broadly missing in mainstream sociology, such as the destruction of social relations, historical discontinuity, dispossession and suffering, the role of the land and loss of land for social relations and imagination, as well as the agency involved in the devastating experiences of much of Southern humanity, from colonial times right through to the neoliberal era.

"Southern theory", despite its fascination and globally favourable review of the most diverse endeavours in sociology outside Europe and the US, remains a critical book. By no means does the author idealize southern initiatives, on the contrary, she insists, among others, on the conservative and reactionary logic of some of the responses to Western domination. Furthermore, she systematically criticizes the absence of female outlooks and voices. "Southern theory" represents a critical contribution to current debates around the internationalisation of sociology and gives an overview over relevant initiatives emerging out of the global South. One weakness, however, may be criticized: the fact that the book does not proceed to the direct confrontation between northern and southern theory. The critique of context-boundedness of Northern theory remains separate from the collection of southern voices that make up for the larger part of the book. This is probably too much to ask for in a single book. But one might argue that the on-going discussion around Eurocentrism and self-reliance in the South can now, based on this book and others (Cf. Alatas 2006, Lander 2003), leave declarations of independence behind and pass on to critically scrutinizing what really happens when different strands of theory confront each other in the field of sociological practice. Connell herself indicates the need for such concrete and detailed analysis, to take up the above-mentioned example: "It would be interesting to see how Coleman's 'sovereign individual' would survive within a cultural presumption of 'Tawhid', the unity of the divine and of the world, which has been seen by some intellectuals as the foundation for an Islamic approach to science" (Connell 2006: 260).

It seems important to note that "Southern theory" is not a call for fragmentation into localised, indigenized or endogenized sociologies, but a powerful argument for a serious international debate on an equal footing, where the experiences and perspectives emerging from the South have to be fully acknowledged and might correct, complete, amplify or supplement existing general theory, where necessary.