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Wiebke Keim

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Wiebke Keim, Research Officer CNRS, SAGE, University of Strasbourg, France, wkeim@unistra.fr

Book review:

The privilege to select in an unequal research system

Nora Schmidt (2020) The privilege to select. Global research system, European academic library collections, and decolonisation. Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences 26, Lund University, Lund

The privilege to select by Nora Schmidt is a doctoral dissertation in Information Studies. Remarkably, the thesis starts out from an ethical stance: "the ultimate and underlying goal of research", according to the author, is to propel "global social justice" (p. 23). More precisely, the book focusses on issues of social injustice in the global research system related to the circulation of academic knowledge in the social sciences and humanities (SSH), in the form of published research results. Who participates in the creation and who benefits from the diffusion of new knowledge? How are inequities reproduced by it? And how are different contexts impacted by new knowledge? Those are the fundamental questions at the core of this book.

The research system in its current state seems to serve the needs of a minority of humankind only. In this sense, it is not fulfilling its function: "After all, assuming that researchers represent the interests of local populations at least to some extent, this thesis asks how far the world society's research system is out of balance in terms of involving local interests globally. The suspicion can be upheld that the research system instead only serves the interests of a minority. Regarding the interests of the majority of the world's population, the system is, at best, barely fulfilling its function, and at worst, it can even do harm, as this thesis will show" (p. 41). For ongoing debates around imbalances and divides within the global scholarly arena, the book is of strong interest. It fills a gap by focussing on one specific key factor in steering or hindering circulation of knowledge: the academic library and its institutional logics. This requires a degree of technical competencies that many scholars do not master.

The library appears as a key factor that reproduces social injustice in the sense that it keeps important parts of globally published literature undiscoverable within Europe. Indeed, from a European perspective, published research results are unequally discoverable depending on their place of origin. Therefore, the author argues, "[m]y main aim is to render visible the ways in which European academic libraries contribute to unjustified neglect [...] of scholarship produced in the 'Global South'. This neglect is explained as a consequence of specific crucial features of current world society, referred to as coloniality, social injustice, and quantified communication" (p. 40). Quantified communication, one of the book's key concepts, refers to the measurement of quantifiable research output. Scholars are supposed to publish many papers, and research management in most countries is based on counting the output of individual researchers or of single institutions, relying on bibliographical databases. However, this is inadequate, since those databases cover only a tiny part of global research output. In particular, they tend to marginalise the global Souths. Therefore, academic libraries, who increasingly rely on bibliometrics as well in order to constitute their collections, also marginalise the same literatures.

In writing this book, the author clearly had an ideal vision in mind: European libraries should make use of their privilege to select to make publications from the global Souths discoverable in Europe and thus diminish social injustice. The thesis therefore calls for cultural humility in library collections, quoting Tervalon and Murray-García: "Cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the [...communicative] dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations (Tervalon and MurrayGarcia 1998)" (p. 106).

The theoretical basis of the study is social systems theory (Luhmann) as well as decoloniality. Embedding the study in social systems theory has the advantage that it allows "[s]eeing science and research as an enormously complex, yet *single* system" (p. 25). According to the theory, the function of the global research system is to figure out what knowledge is relevant to world society. At the same time, the decolonial approach allows for seeing the modern science system as being part of colonial modernity. Coloniality is understood here as a multidimensional power structure that includes economic exploitation but also power imbalances in the domain of science and knowledge. While the combination of social systems theory with decoloniality is rare, it helps to understand the disregard for southern scholarly production within the northern centres of knowledge production as an expression of coloniality. This "unjustified neglect" is a structural problem that Schmidt tries to understand by looking into the institutional logics of libraries and of collection management.

The book follows a mosaic-like structure. Each chapter provides another piece to the puzzle of inequalities in knowledge circulation, combining quantitative methods with more conceptual pieces. The second chapter, entitled "The research system in world society", deepens the conceptual framework. The thesis' focus is on the hard structures inscribed in scholarly communication, i.e. the technical systems of scholarly publishing, registration and literature research. An important embodiment of those technical systems is the citation database, most prominently the Web of Science (WoS). That is the foundation of bibliometrics as a luhmannian "third order observation". In this sense, bibliometrics appear as a problem and as a method in this book. Bibliometrics is a means of stabilisation of the global system.

The third chapter, "Splitting the world, splitting scholarly communication", starts out from the idea of centre and periphery in the global science system: "In the scholarly communication system, a centre/periphery differentiation becomes apparent when a large majority of references of registered publications points to the same cluster of work, which then forms a centre of scholarly communication" (p. 134). This divide is enacted through communication. In this sense, peripheral

communication is necessary to ensure the global reach of scholarly communication: it is only because peripheral communication refers to the centre as centre, that the centre *is* the centre. The discussion about the current distinction between "international" and "local" journals, in the sense that international journals often count as more prestigious and central, is particularly interesting. It shows that different definitions circulate without agreement and that it is actually unclear what makes a journal an international or a local journal. The subsequent empirical parts confirm this. The book illustrates the broad critique of injustice with a study on Southeast African scholarly production. African scholars are confronted with specific problems. They are stuck between contradictory demands for internationalisation on the one hand and for local relevance on the other hand. They bump up against a generalisation barrier because their contexts are framed as "cultural differences" with regard to general social theory. Therefore, they are also faced with "area studies incarceration" (p. 147), i.e. their research is seen as being relevant first and foremost to African Studies, much less to the core disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

What follows is an application of the theoretical framework in a bibliometric study. Mainstream bibliometrics use databases like WoS in order to count the quantity of output. Schmidt instead uses them to demonstrate how peripheral communication is marginalised, combining researcher demographics with bibliometric data. The results of this original empirical study are partly unexpected and constitute one of the book's key contributions to ongoing debates. For instance, it appears that highly developed countries do not necessarily have high relative numbers of SSH university positions. At that level, the situation in the US is similar to that in Uzbekistan or Iraq. Very highly developed research systems do not necessarily result in a share of WoS-publications as high as expected from relative numbers of SSH researchers. However, a low relative number of researchers and a low human development index (HDI) result in negligible numbers of WoS-registered journals. This means that the HDI does not correlate exactly with scholarly communication. The latter follows its own rules. Other key results confirm existing studies: WoS covers a tiny part of publications from a few countries only. In sum, "three quarters of WoS publications in disciplines which are to a large degree publicly funded, represent the research interests of only slightly more than half of the global SSH researchers, who are working on behalf of less than a seventh of the world population" (p. 166 ff.).

The fourth chapter, "Decolonial scientometrics", confronts mainstream scientometrics with a culturally humble way of doing scientometrics. This comes with particular methodological challenges. It is an especially work- and time-intensive endeavour. Such studies therefore necessarily remain limited in scope, concentrating here on Southeast African literature. Empirically, the aim is to relate the number of WoS-indexed publications in the SSH by authors from Southeast African institutions to the number of researchers based in the region. Technically, this requires a very demanding sampling design, combining university rankings, database indexing, CVs and institutional records to construct an alternative database. At times, the reader runs the risk of getting lost between different types of indices, databases, search tools, discovery systems as well as between different units of analysis (authors, papers, journals, citation counts etc.). The thesis provides a thorough description of the African publication market and indexing landscape and complements the results for the region with an affiliation-based approach, zooming into one single institution, the University of Mauritius. The results reveal that there is a substantial quantity of publications: around 2000 journal titles exist in sub-Saharan Africa. We also find here concretely what has been outlined theoretically, e.g. the area studies incarceration in the form of an index of African published literature exclusively included in the AfricaBib bibliography, managed by the African Studies Centre Leiden Library, i.e. SSH research from Africa is channelled into African Studies in Europe. The WoS coverage is insufficient and with the ceasing of AfricaBib, the discoverability of African journals has worsened. Overall, publishing in the "Global South" is losing momentum.

An original insight generated through the alternative citation analysis is that "local journals" are not limited to Southeast African authors, and that publishing locally is as important as publishing abroad: "These findings confirm that 'local' journals or publishers are, in fact, very 'international', not only in terms of authorship, but also in terms of where they are read and cited" (p. 226). This means that a "local" publication does not automatically lead to a local audience, a result that contradicts authoritative studies like Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras (2014), who found that "Global South" scholars prefer to cite "'central' research". Schmidt demonstrates that this claim only holds when the underlying data is based on a "Global North" index. Overall, the bad coverage and the limited discoverability of Africa-based research confirms the hegemonic bias in the global research system.

The fifth chapter, "Decolonising academic library collections in Europe", asks why we are faced with this continuing hegemonic bias. It addresses the logics at play within European academic libraries, which is the location from where the current system could be changed towards more humble ways of doing research. The author looks into academic library ethics and operations, investigating the institutional level through an analysis of collection policies, and the actor level and professional values through a survey on the self-perception of librarians. The key problem she identifies is that collection management is largely outsourced to commercial aggregators and vendors: "Vendor-preselection products [...] decrease the libraries' agency in arranging records of knowledge, and support the maintenance of colonial power structures, since they seem to undermine the discoverability of small, 'local' or independent publishers' programmes" (p. 248). This has led to an immense influence over the entire research information landscape.

This development comes together with the professional ethos of librarians, "neutrality". It is largely apprehended as passive neutrality: the users' information needs guide the library activities; the task is to provide access to what the user wants to access. But since the user cannot discover literature that is not indexed, this leads to a vicious circle. Schmidt instead calls for more culturally humble neutrality, meaning that the role of the library is "to counter existing biases through proactive acquisition of resources that confront dominant positions with whatever they tend to marginalise" (p. 283). The last chapter addresses the implications of the study and future research perspectives. It returns to the ethical stance of the project and to the idea of the common good: "Libraries of public universities [...] as public institutions, their purpose is to foster knowledge production and dissemination for the common good, hence for cognitive and social justice. They are therefore the first who must advocate for restructuring scholarly communication" (p. 319ff.). Libraries should work together with academic staff and students towards redefining collectively what publications should form part of their collections. The conclusion also suggests inquiring, in future research, more in-depth into the workings of peripheral communication within the global science system. In particular, it would seem interesting to know more about "to what extent the periphery communicates on its own terms, unobserved by the centre"; as well as to understand better "the exploitation of the periphery as a backup system for the centre" (p. 326).

The book makes an important contribution to the ongoing debates around the centre-periphery-divide within global science, focussing on those disciplines that often remain rather marginalised within STS. While it is uncommon to frame this kind of research in terms of systems theory and the theoretical choice is not further justified, the results clearly fill a gap in our understanding of how the circulation of knowledge across places that do not occupy equivalent positions in terms of academic prestige actually works. The chosen theoretical framework leads to consideration of the important link between science and society. At the same time, the more properly epistemic dimension, i.e. the implications of what is observed and analysed for the knowledge produced, are not further discussed. The focus on communication and observation, according to Luhmann, enables us to properly distinguish between levels of observation, an important advantage in understanding the meaning of

bibliometrics as a measure to observe communication, not to measure output. However, simultaneously, the focus on communication leaves other important implications out of the picture. For example, the teaching and student perspective is not considered to be part of scholarly communication as a system. Yet, the reproduction of scholarly communities, the socialization of future generations into their disciplines is vital. Teaching plays a crucial role in circulation of research and lays the basis for future scientific communication.

More importantly, the problems of centre and periphery analysed here have their most serious reasons and effects at the level of consecration. Not only students are graded, but researchers are selected for employment, promoted, funded, allowed to employ others, depending on how they communicate. Leaving this level of consecration, legitimisation, evaluation and their material effects out of the picture is problematic. It is not only a problem of communication and social injustice at the level of whose interests are represented in the communication loops, but those communication circuits and the role that libraries have in structuring them have severe real-world effects on institutional, funding and staff policies, that in turn reinforce centre-periphery relations, globally, regionally, nationally and locally. The author is clearly aware of those problems and names them, but cannot cover them within the luhmannian theoretical framework. In particular, when it comes to understanding the effects of the economic system interfering within the research system, works based on Bourdieu, for instance, seem more convincing in theorising the concern about the threatened autonomy, or the heteronomy of science as a social field.

It seems that the discussion of existing literature on centres and peripheries of global science is too harsh in its critique. A social systems perspective is not the only conceptual choice that allows understanding that what is central or peripheral in communication is not necessarily determined by place, as the author claims. Most existing studies do indeed conceive of "centre" and "periphery" as an analytical tool in order to understand the relationships between different places of knowledge production, and not in a purely geographical sense. It is therefore not necessarily rooted in a tradition of othering, as Schmidt argues, but most often includes a reflection upon one's own position and the relationship between people, institutions, places. What appears within the social systems perspective as internal differentiation is similarly conceived in dependency approaches, for instance. To argue that this differentiation "reduces complexity while a limited number of contributions are flagged out as central, so 'must-have knowledge' stands out" (p. 133) misses the historical dimension that is inherent to the institutional, material and communicative set-up of global science. Social systems theory also proved difficult to combine with decoloniality. While decoloniality requires the idea of an exterior, "uncontaminated" standpoint to colonial modernity in order to produce epistemic alternatives, such exteriority to world society remains unconceivable within social systems theory.

Another point of critique concerns the locating and dating of WoS: "When ISI was acquired together with its indexes by *Thomson Scientific & Healthcare* in 1992, which marks the point of full establishment of this tool of self-observation of the research system, the emergence of research in the 'periphery' [see Chapter 3] was still easy to ignore, and postcolonial theory was only known to some literature and cultural studies scholars" (p. 87 ff.). This appears as historically imprecise, considering that Unesco had established regional and international scholarly associations after 1945 that brought together representatives from most world regions throughout the 1950s and 1960s already, thus creating fora where the representation of southern voices was a matter of discussion early on, let alone the existence of an important "cosmopolitan thought zone" (Raj) through the anti-colonial debates that linked people, movements and places across the globe and right through the European centre. Also, at the latest since F. Beigel's ground-breaking works on disconnected circuits of knowledge, another alternative bibliometrics project, by the way, that is not entirely covered in Schmidt's state-of-the-art, we know that the mainstreaming of the globally dominant circuit, WoS,

has happened at the expense not only of certain world regions, but also of certain disciplines (SSH) and of all languages other than English. This triple marginalisation has hit different world regions differently. Beigel's crucial insight is that regional circuits in Latin America, i.e. international circuits, pre-existed WoS and have been partly resilient to it. The Latin American example would also have been interesting in terms of the region's pioneering role in the domain of open access circuits, something that Schmidt values highly otherwise. WoS cannot count as truly hegemonic, since it is only within this mainstream circuit and its use by donors, funders, and in institutional staff development and promotion etc., that what is commonly defined as "local" becomes largely irrelevant. There are alternative circuits that function as well, with their own rules for accumulation of academic capital or means of consecration, sometimes more inclusive and open access. Such insights shed doubt on the overall idea of a single science system.

The methodological and empirical part of this book will certainly provoke questions by established STS scholars. It is uncommon to normalise bibliometrics with researcher demographics and by country's national population counts. Schmidt shows that this is a worthwhile endeavour though, and it is justified by her focus on social justice and the research system's function for world society. Statistical estimates and extrapolations sometimes appear as adventurous, something the author justifies as a means of demonstrating the shakiness of empirical data at hand. I personally find it regrettable that the survey amongst librarians remains anonymised. As public institutions, academic libraries could be held accountable by scholarly research for their policies. Now we can only hope they take this book seriously and react adequately in order to improve their practices.