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Conclusion: Next Steps towards Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences

Veronika Wöhrer, Wiebke Keim, Christian Ersche and Ercüment Çelik

The transfer of knowledge between cultures and within single research institutions, between people and between peoples, over long and over short distances, has always been present in the history of science. It is hardly possible to imagine a form of knowledge that is not ‘made in circulation’. However, large parts of the world have played only a marginal role in the mainstream social sciences for a long time. Although the global South is more visible in international social sciences today, the movement of ideas is still far from being equal and symmetric. While the need to move towards more non-hegemonic forms of cooperation has been recognized by many in the social sciences, the question of how to achieve this fails to produce an easy answer. This is a practical-material, as well as an epistemological issue. First, practically, the question is what international cooperative arrangements would be needed to enable a non-hegemonic circulation of knowledge. The material issue is one that concerns the academic community but cannot be resolved solely within their realm; it is shaped by higher education policies, funding and publishing mechanisms and international economic relations. Second, epistemologically, what is at stake when finding ways of abandoning a presumptuous European universalism without falling into complete relativism? Third, apart from that, authors point to the need for deepening conceptual efforts at tackling international knowledge circulation in the social sciences. We shall elaborate on some overarching reflections regarding these three points that the volume collectively problematizes, starting from the last one. We shall conclude with a brief outline of possible visions for the future of global knowledge production in the social sciences.

Conceptualization of Circulation

The presented chapters attempt to explain and explore the terminology of ‘circulation’ of knowledge and make the concept fruitful for the travelling of social science ideas in regard to

(geographical) space. A closer look at empirical cases of knowledge circulation reveals very different practices of engagement with the ideas of others. These may be scholars who are becoming more self-confident – generation by generation – in further developing received theories and adapting them to their societal background, as Rodriguez Medina has shown in the case of the reception of Luhmann's theory in Latin America; or scholars who occupy peripheral positions in different countries in the scientific centre, creating their own networks and elaborating new perspectives, as Guilhot has illustrated in the case of the emergence of international relations theory. Furthermore, as Devés-Valdés has shown for the past, and Valdés and Webster for the present, there are different regional and trans-regional networks in the South and beyond, seeking to create autonomous spaces for their research. Some contributions also highlight ways of conducting social science research which are less familiar or mainstream within North Atlantic practice, such as in-depth cooperation between social movements and academia (Devés-Valdés, Valdés, Webster and Damodaran). All of them confirm the point that knowledge is not produced in one location and then internationalized through its subsequent circulation, but is more often than not produced in and through circulation.

The presented examples thus contest commonly accepted assumptions, such as the idea that national academic fields precede international academic exchange. While postcolonial perspectives on transnational entanglements and connections, as presented here by Bhabra, contribute to abandoning an unquestioned starting point from the national context, John opens up a critical tension in arguing that the specific constellation of the national must equally not be overlooked. With regard to discourses around gender in India, she contests commonly accepted terms and assumptions like the current almost self-evident usage of the term 'postcoloniality'. More specifically, we cannot afford to speak about international circulation of knowledge, let alone 'social sciences at a world scale', an example of an all-too-quick

assumption in the field of gender studies and feminism (see also Wöhrer forthcoming), without thorough in-depth knowledge of the regional, national, local and institutional contexts in question. Differences in accentuation may be related to the fact that Guilhot, for instance, addresses the emergence of a transnational intellectual field across countries whose basic contextual elements can be taken for granted – in contrast to a scholar like John who writes from a location where the reconstitution of the most basic historical and contextual framework needs to be provided due to overall ignorance of an international audience.

Keim's conceptualization of three types for different configurations of the international circulation of knowledge is important in this regard. Her contribution outlines major characteristics of these types of circulation, their preconditions and functioning as well as their methodological implications. She tries to expand on existing literature, taking into account particular issues related to circulation across unequal positions within the international social sciences community. However, it is important to mention that these types drawn by Keim should not be taken as definite 'models' that prevent us from imagining other possible approaches to various scholarly engagements with knowledge in circulation.

Practical and Material Challenges for Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences

One key problem apparent in most contributions is that of differentials in power and prestige as well as material and institutional inequalities. These affect knowledge circulation and contradict the aim of non-hegemonic forms of knowledge production declared by many contributors. The so-called 'rise of the South' has not solved this problem. Instead of leading towards non-hegemonic forms of international communication, recent geopolitical developments seem to rather transpose the problem, leading to a diversification of centres and peripheries. And as Heilbron (2013) and Gingras and Mosbah-Natanson (forthcoming, cited in Heilbron 2013) show in their analyses of publications, quotations and translations, the

globalization of social science research has even led to an increased dominance of Northern American and European research as well as raising the dependence of other regions (Heilbron 2013: 8). This refers to various practical and material issues involved in knowledge circulation.

For instance, what needs to be underlined, in correspondence with the contributions in this book, is that people also travel. In spite of a highly developed information and communication technology, we have seen, from the development of international relations theory to gender studies, from the history of South–South intellectual spaces to social movements and arts, that travelling people play a key role in the travelling of ideas, theories and concepts. It is so important, as Rodriguez Medina has shown, that one person travelling with a baggage of a specific theory can shape the institutionalization of a discipline in a given country. Briefly, the journey itself and the people travelling are key components of the circulation of knowledge.

Another key concern regarding the practical and material, especially institutional, side are new forms of academic cooperation. Various contributions emphasize the circulation of knowledge across the periphery. The acknowledgement of the social science production of the South has been developing through academic cooperation in terms of research and teaching as well as policy programmes. This can be regarded as a learning process that includes developing familiarity with diverse research agendas, methodologies, theories and conceptual frameworks as well as institutional structures and curricula. Valdés's contribution on a given South–South cooperation demonstrates that the development of a common research agenda, conceptual frameworks and teaching programmes, as well as policy programmes, is challenging but possible. Valdés, Damodaran and Webster also remark that this process includes circulation of knowledge between academic and extra-academic spaces, referring to the cooperation of academics and activists in several areas. However, there is also a danger of

building new hierarchies or centres and peripheries within the South, such as in the frequent reference to a couple of countries usually labelled as BRICS. This would correspond to an extension of the intellectual and institutional landscape as it has prevailed within North Atlantic academia for a long time, which is equally not a homogeneous ‘bloc’, but internally similarly structured along centre–periphery relations at various levels. That knowledge is made in circulation between Southern countries does not per se mean that the involved circuits are in themselves non-hegemonic nor that the involved partner countries do not in fact establish new hegemonic relations with other countries.

Nevertheless, strengthening such networks outside of the North Atlantic milieu enables Southern scholars to re-engage and communicate with the scholarly community in the North and vice versa on a more equal footing. The South–South research network in Webster’s contribution is a good example. The network, established at a university in Germany, functioned as South–South cooperation, and favoured new ways of thinking on social policy that not only circulated between Southern countries, but also contributed to new thinking on Northern welfare states and their declining trade unions.

However, these developments seem to be in conflict with current developments in higher education and research policy worldwide. Instead of encouraging different takes on social scientific work, current changes in the organization of the higher education systems in most countries demand the opposite move: it becomes increasingly important to publish ‘internationally’ – meaning in English – and in peer-reviewed, high-impact journals. This means in fact that arenas dominated by US-American and European universities, journals and publishing houses set the standards (Heilbron 2013). Authors from a variety of locations worldwide increasingly feel the pressure to adapt to a certain canon and writing style that is required by these institutions (for example, ISA 2013). It will be one of the major upcoming

challenges to find solutions to the contradiction between visions for the discipline (see below) and ongoing higher education policies.

Epistemological Challenges

There seems to be a general acceptance of critiques of the current canon and its ignorance of theories elaborated elsewhere as well as of calls for more diversity and acceptance of seemingly ‘different’ ways of arguing – or tuning the cello. A more equal international circulation of knowledge, we argue, could thus deliver a vast amount of perspectives and experiences that would enrich the disciplines. This mutual learning should at least enable social scientists to question the paradigms they have been using in the past. However, more scholarly efforts are needed to imagine connections between these diverse traditions that should in turn render possible a process of mutual learning .

This implies, first of all, the need to recover, through systematic in-depth historical studies, the history and heritage of circuits of knowledge circulation that have remained invisible or largely unacknowledged by the mainstream history of the social sciences (Devés-Valdés) as well as of the substantive contributions they have elaborated (Connell and Dados, Damodaran).

Secondly, such efforts would need to address an observable discomfort with the idea of ‘Southern theory’, expressed by numerous concerned scholars today. Two points are made in this regard: focusing on individual intellectuals and their works from the South still does not help, on the one hand, to convince a large group of scholars, who search for a better explanation of what characteristics make these intellectuals ‘Southern’ and how their intellectual engagements are connected to the realities of their own societies. On the other hand, while more and more individual works of Southern scholars are put under the spotlight, some of them are seriously concerned with how their internal debates are portrayed by others. Sometimes they feel that others in fact provide prominent lenses through which to look at

their work without necessarily assessing the aspired aims or ends of a given debate. A general discomfort with ‘Southern theory’, ‘theory from the South’ and ‘sociology “of” or “for” the South’ is that they are seen as intentions to make these Southern scholars and their works into important theory before seriously delineating the content and quality of their intellectual contribution. Further dialogue and critical confrontation (see below) as well as critical (self-) reflexivity around issues of representation would be needed to erase this discomfort.

Thirdly, contributors have highlighted the need to move beyond general critiques and abstract all-encompassing claims for diversity and non-hegemony, thus moving towards a careful identification of research areas and suitable locations of theoretical inputs in relation to the arguments made. This involves providing, in specific domains, the necessary empirical richness and theoretical and conceptual detail (Connell and Dados, Damodaran, Webster). Connell and Dados showed, for example, that global phenomena like neoliberalism, which are experienced differently in various places, also look different when they are analysed from alternative perspectives and by means of varied categories. We need to ask, in each particular case, what has been gained from transformations of existing approaches as well as from alternative conceptualizations, in order to make the argument credible that we should engage in mutual learning. Why should sociologists engage in such a task at all? Which domains of research do empirically confirm that knowledge produced in processes of international circulation on an equal footing is particularly theoretically relevant? What experience and theoretical potential is lost and falls out of the picture otherwise?

Fourthly, it also seems that, while calls for more visibility, respect for unacknowledged thinkers and the will to include more multicultural voices in the history and canon of the discipline have been crucial to open up spaces for dialogue, this cannot work without a much more consistent and critical attitude towards one another. This concerns various levels of argumentation. On the one hand, there is a need to engage in serious and critical theoretical

and conceptual work that goes beyond ethically and politically motivated calls for ‘Southern alternatives’. While these are legitimate and necessary in the face of the current constitution and structuring of the social sciences, they do not help us to understand and differentiate in detail what is gained, what has potential to inform and advance (for example) sociology as a discipline, and what remains at the level of rhetoric. If we take our craft seriously, an overall critical attitude imposes itself in order to systematically sort out the richness and potential of the debates that have been going on in recent years and to really take theoretical and conceptual advantage from them. Any attitude that contents itself with acknowledging diversity and the coexistence of a multiplicity of voices without engaging in a thorough intellectual confrontation will remain a half-measure and will actually waste potential for the advancement of the disciplines. On the other hand, this also involves the need to take on a more humble attitude with regard to rapid calls for ‘social science on a world scale’. It should first be possible to clarify and empirically sustain with regard to specific debates, concepts and theoretical approaches, at what level these apply, and what their potential for abstraction and generalization is or could eventually be. In order to do so, the much-welcomed focus on entanglements and connections could be complemented with a not-yet-obsolete approach of systematic comparison and robust confrontation of empirical insights from different situations, time periods and locations and the conceptualizations building on them (as, for example, given by Damodaran).

Visions for the Future

This book brings together contributions that enable us not only to identify some problems concerning global knowledge production in the social sciences, but also to point out some cornerstones for the next step in their development.

Some of the chapters envision possibilities of how the recognition of a more diverse set of theoretical ideas might be possible. Connell and Dados try to give a view on neoliberalism

that acknowledges theories and experiences with neoliberalism elaborated in the South, which connect the influence of neoliberalism in various regions of the world and make us rethink mainstream concepts of neoliberalism and its consequences. While Sitas challenges the hegemonic canon of sociology, he stresses mainly that the ‘non-theorizations’ of Southern scholars are yet theorizations and they do not match with dominant ways of reasoning. He calls for the art of improvisation and the productive use of metaphors and parables as condensed forms of social knowledge with a theoretical surplus value. These not only serve the demands of excellence and importance, but also the ones of preservation and dissemination of predominantly oral forms of social knowledge.

Thus, beyond the dimensions of politics and rhetoric, beyond empirical case examples and in-depth analyses of given circulating scholars, theories and concepts, what is at stake are the very epistemological foundations of the sociological endeavour. The last section provides a panorama of possible epistemological stances. Rehbein elaborates a ‘kaleidoscopic dialectic’; Bhambra argues for a ‘postcolonial global sociology’. Still, as the diverging visions of Rehbein, Bhambra and Savransky indicate, the question remains whether it is possible – or even desirable – to elaborate new paradigms, concepts and theories we all could agree on in a global sociology or whether ‘global sociology’ is a term that is better used in the plural.

Savransky is the most radical in turning the whole question on its head. What remains to be done is to investigate given fields of knowledge production in order to estimate where his suggested reorientation from the epistemological to the ontopolitical level (that is, away from the assumption of ‘one sociology/many sociologies for one world’ towards ‘many sociologies for many worlds’) could lead. If such a repositioning sounds challenging, it would also need to elaborate measures of quality, such as validity, adequacy, problem-solving efficiency, intersubjectivity or relevance, or other elements to be collectively debated in the future, that

could allow us to venture further in this direction without falling into an anything-goes relativistic position.

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