

Michael Kuhn | Kazumi Okamoto (eds.)

Spatial Social Thought

Local Knowledge in Global Science Encounters

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Table of Contents

Foreword	9
Section I: Global Social Thought	15
Chapter 1 Concepts that Hinder the Progress of Sociological Research: Identity as an Epistemological Obstacle YOUSSEF SALAMEH	17
Chapter 2 Isn't Anthropology Already a Multiversalist Discipline? Assessing the Status of Anthropology in Asia NESTOR CASTRO.....	33
Chapter 3 Indigenised while Internationalised? Tensions and Dilemmas in China's Modern Transformation of Social Sciences in an Age of Globalisation Rui Yang.....	43
Chapter 4 'Academic Dependence': The World Social Science Arena—a Battlefield among Parochial Thought? Michael Kuhn	63
Section II: Spatialized Thought and Local Knowledge Production	81
Chapter 5 Michel Foucault and the Postcolonial African Theory: A Critical Essay LÉON-MARIE NKOLO NDJODO	83
Chapter 6 Knowledge Production: A Perspective from the Periphery Carmen Bueno.....	111

Chapter 7
Civilizational Encounter, Cultural Translation, and Social Reflexivity: A Note on the History of Sociology in Japan
| SHUJIRO YAZAWA 129

Chapter 8
The community of sociologists in Morocco facing the internationalization of knowledge | KAMAL MELLAKH 155

Chapter 9
Internationalization of Research in Lebanon: The case of the American University of Beirut | SARI HANAFI, RIGAS AVANITIS, JUSTINE BAER 167

Section III: Culture in Global Knowledge Encounters..... 199

Chapter 10
Culture as a Dimension in International Social Science Encounters | Doris Weidemann 201

Chapter 11
The Manifestation of Scientific Cultures: A Sociophilosophical Study of Islamic Scientific Tradition | Alparslan Açıkgenç..... 217

Chapter 12
The Study of Culture within Alternative Vision
| MAHMOUD DHAOUADI..... 241

Section IV: Globalizing Local Social Thought..... 261

Chapter 13
The Transformation Processes in Global Social Knowledge
| Hebe Vessuri 263

Chapter 14

**Can Peripheries Talk Back? Alternative Intellectual Trends
in Tamil Nadu and their Possible Lessons for
Knowledge-Making Practices outside Intellectual**

Power Centers | KUMARAN RAJAGOPAL.....285

Chapter 15

How to Overcome “Oriental” Sociology? | EBRAHIM TOWFIGH,

SHIRIN AHMADNIA..... 313

Authors.....327

Foreword

This book is a publication of the World SSH Net thinkshop series. The aim of these thinkshops is to engage scholars from around the world in non-disciplinary and non-national reflections about the challenges the social sciences are facing in the era of globalization.

Substantial changes in world conditions have dramatically challenged and altered the social sciences. These have affected the social sciences more than any paradigmatic shift of theories within a given approach to science ever could.

To mention only a few:

First, the transformation of the only real alternative society system, the project of socialism in the Soviet Union, later followed by China, into globally acting market economies, the very society model the Soviet Union, China, and their allies around the world had opposed for almost a century.

Second, together with the dissolution of this alternative society model, the abolishment of an alternative science system and of an alternative approach to social science thinking has transformed Historical Materialism, the set of theories fundamentally opposing the science model of capitalism and their representative democracies and its scientific interpretations of the world, into a mere variation of the multiplicity of relativized theories within the Western science system.

This, the transformation of the whole world into an arena for the competition for power between nation-states and using the growth of global capital to exploit this growth for their global political power, called “globalization,” has shifted the battle between antagonistic science approaches into a competition about theories within the Western model of science reflecting about a widely unified world - and into a “battle of cultures” with a newly emerging opposition. Overcoming the threat of a war between the two world society systems and the unification of the world under the regime of global capitalism has replaced the threat of a ‘hot’ war between the two world powers by a world of wars.

Third, probably based on the same Western model of social thought, the emergence of new science universes, has eroded the global scientific monopoly and theories, so far mainly created in Europe and the United States. It is evident that significant and powerful science arenas are emerging in countries like China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Korea, and Mexico. Namely, both the

sciences in China and India are growing rapidly and have the potential to become global scientific superpowers.

Fourth, and less visible than the changing scientific world power architecture, but certainly more significant in effect, are changes related to scientific concepts and paradigms that guide social thoughts. While Euro-American sciences have, to a great extent, set the global scientific standards for the social and human science knowledge productions during the last century, the era of globalization created a space for developing new approaches to social science thinking, which question the monopoly of European paradigms and concepts. Academics in the former colonies of Europe, as well as in other newly created states, have started expressing their grievances about their work as being victims of “Western” scientific colonization that still colonizes their forms of thoughts and reflections. Social scientists that have had little or no colonial experience, likewise, complain about imposed knowledge concepts and agendas, and claim a new role in the globalizing scientific practices and discourses. Some scholars entirely refuse to accept the Western knowledge concepts any longer, and propose “Islamic” or “Hindu” social sciences based on their indigenous religious-cultural backgrounds, incorporating an explicit opposition to Western knowledge paradigms. Academics in Africa experience a similar shift, divided between those who defend a catching-up strategy aiming at a deeper inclusion inside the existing science world and those who reject collaborations with Western-dominated sciences and defend a refuge into indigenous and nativist alternatives. Latin American scholars, who have had a longer history of defending a genuine “Latin-American” thinking, combine local knowledge with radical rereadings of Western scholarship to challenge the Western intellectual knowledge monopoly.

Aspiring for a nonhegemonic science world, the group of scholars gathered in the World SSH Net jointly reflects together with other scholars coming from around the world and from all disciplines on the effects these changes have on the world’s social science arena and on its ways of theorizing. To do this a series of thinkshops is being carried out, focusing on the epistemological, educational and institutional affects these changes have for social thoughts.

The first thinkshop took place in Buenos Aires in October 2010, focusing on “Cultural elements in social sciences and in academic labour - Epistemological and educational challenges constructing a scientific multi-versalism”.

The following second event was carried out in Beirut in July 2011 reflecting on “Social sciences in Arab countries facing a scientific multi-versalism: pathways, challenges and constraints”. The third thinkshop took place in Tokyo in

May 2012 under the title “Theories about and Strategies against Hegemonic Sciences.” Its outcomes are published in a book under the same title. Thinkshop four has been meanwhile performed in Mexico City reflecting on “*Multiple Epistemologies: Science and Time, Science and Space, Science and Culture, Science and Society*”.

The outcomes of our reflections of all thinkshops are published in series of books.¹

This book presents the outcomes of the conference in Beirut, which focused on the discourses between scholars from Islam majority countries and other social scientists not only from different disciplines but all from other rather peripheral sciences from Africa, Asia and East Asia, India and Latin America and on their views on a newly emerging science universe. It invites a global audience to controversial discourses about its findings presented in this book in four thematic sections under the title “Spatial Social Thought - Local Knowledge in Global Knowledge Encounters”.

The book title points on a set of paradoxes in the current discourses usually discussed under the notions of global versus local, North versus South, and alike, in short under notions making variations of *space* a distinctive attribute of science while discussing the current phase of internationalising social thought.

While one could raise the question, if social thoughts distinguished in the different location contexts where they are produced in an era where the locations of knowledge productions seem rather a declining aspect, the concepts of “global” and/ or versus “local” show some odd features in these debates, or more precisely of an approach to social sciences on which this debate of distinctive spaces of social thought is based.

Firstly, global knowledge seems to be spaceless knowledge, knowledge that is thinking about a nowhere, while the “local” knowledge is bound to a space outside of which it cannot be understood. There are, thus, two versions of a nowhere knowledge, constituting the current discourses about what was once discussed under the notion of universal knowledge: The global knowledge is nowhere and the local knowledges are only here, and, thus, as a whole also nowhere. Just as if this paradox intends to apply Chakrabarty's critique of the Soviet Union's interpretation of Marxism, the Historical Materialism, to the whole current science world, we are facing a world of theories, which, despite of their battles between spaces of knowledge productions, epistemologically

¹ The overall outcomes of the series of thinkshops will be published in a book with the working title „*Social Sciences in the Era of Globalization*“.

share the very same approach to social science thinking, the idea of contextualizing knowledge along spaces. It is this approach to social science thinking in which the substance of thinking appears as the “context” to which hypothetical thoughts, constructed through theoretical models is ex post applied, just as if the social reality was not the contents of social thought but an annex of its modelled theories. Only an approach to social science thinking, in which thinking about social phenomena means to apply hypothetical models of thoughts to the social reality and to then prove or disprove these modelled thoughts with theoretical constructs created through these very models, called an empirical reality, not only appears as a most tautological and most affirmative relation of the thinker to what they are supposed to unveil, it is only in this approach to social science thinking in which the nature of the phenomena is not the substance of social science thinking but the context for the modelled thoughts. The most constitutive elements of social phenomena, time and space, in this approach to social science thinking become an odd distinctive attribute, an annex of thoughts, as if any knowledge about the same thing could be knowledge here and no knowledge there. This, and only this approach to science feels then need to make the distinction of knowledge along the context, the circumstances under which it is created, the wheres of knowledge, and it does this, the more in the production of social knowledge, oddly enough, the more the where vanishes in a globalised social reality.

This book documents the many paradoxes and ambiguities of a debate distinguishing the world of social theories along such spatial dimensions of knowledge.

The four book sections document a reflexive round trip of spatilised social thinking:

Starting in section 1 with reflections on the challenges of “*Global Social Thought*” and their struggles within a preferably – politically – contextualized approach to social thought, section 2 discusses the frictions and ambiguities of “*Spatialized Thought and Local Knowledge Production*” created for globalising social sciences; section 3 about “*Culture in Global Knowledge Encounters*” specifies the tensions of locally contextualized knowledge for global thought along culture as a major feature of contextualized knowledge and brings us back to where section 1 started, the question, how to transform contextualized, local knowledge, towards global knowledge, that is “*Globalizing Social Thought*”.

On behalf of the World SSH Net and all other conference participants we want to express our gratitude to the American University of Beirut and the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Beirut for more than supporting us to carry out the encounter of academics from all over the world and to publish their thoughts and thus to carry on with their discourses. Especially without the engaged support we got from the Layla al Zubaidi, the former director of the Böll Foundation in Beirut, neither the conference in Beirut could have been held nor this book could have been published. We also want to thank Helen Jardine and Jack Rummel for editing the chapters, with some exceptions all written in English, all by nonnative English speakers, into proper American English, and, last but not least, Abdel-Rahman Ayas, who made enormous efforts to carry out what the above chapters theoretically discuss, that is, to translate some chapters from Arab into the Anglo Saxon categories of “Western” thoughts.

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