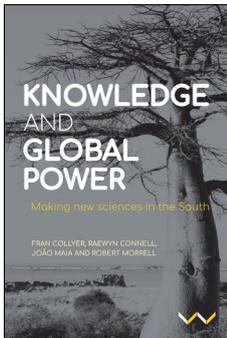




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Knowledge and global power: Making new sciences in the South



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Southern crossings: Thinking inside/outside the hegemon

'Thinking from the South' has become an attractive buzz phrase for those who want to challenge the seemingly hegemonic control that the North exerts on the global production of knowledge. In a growing market of competing and competitive universities and research institutes, the proliferation of predatory journals, the conglomeration of the traditional peer-reviewed journals and the ubiquitous and relentless race for ever higher global rankings, it is becoming more complicated to define what the 'production of knowledge' actually consists of. This difficulty is in part because the term 'product' is itself controversial. On the one side are those scholars who argue that universities, especially, should not become analogous with factories and assembly lines where 'products' are produced and packaged. These scholars resent and critique the marketisation of the academy and, more often than not, they also vilify the commoditisation of publishing, promotions and other markers of academic excellence. On the other extreme are the 'beneficiaries' of the current system – the 'new' private universities, the indexing databases and the university executives whose pay is linked to performance – who will argue that the old system and the status quo that came with it, entrenched the power of universities in the North and that the current marketisation is disrupting that entrenched hierarchy. Whichever side one chooses, the 'neoliberal turn' is rapidly becoming the new norm and it is to the credit of the authors of *Knowledge and Global Power: Making New Sciences in the South* that they do not begin by assuming that this neoliberal turn is a universal occurrence. Instead, what they achieve in the book is a nuanced and articulate description of how three domains of knowledge have been shaped by the globalisation of knowledge and what the responses of knowledge producers have been. However, as is clear from the latter sentence, the vocabulary is itself quite unwieldy. Instead of writing and thinking about 'intellectuals' or the 'intelligentsia', we now have to resort to 'intellectual workers' or 'knowledge workers'. The old is indeed dying. In tracing the three domains of gender studies, HIV/Aids and climate change, the authors not only investigate the global growth of publications in these domains, but they specifically focus on the political and scholarly contexts from which these domains have grown in the South. The countries chosen – Brazil, South Africa and Australia – exemplify the complications of even applying the term 'South' to a domain of intellectual endeavour. Superficially, Australia does not seem to fit the description of a 'Southern' country, yet, as the research shows, the dominance of the Northern academic industry affects a former settler colony in much the same ways that it affects post-apartheid South Africa.

The main strength of the arguments proposed in the book is that they are all based on interviews and statistical analyses of peer-reviewed journal indices. Again, rather than merely resorting to the rhetoric about the 'neoliberal university', the authors test the applicability of this terminology by speaking to intellectuals in Brazil, Australia and South Africa about the evolution of their institutions over the last 30 years. More importantly, the authors take seriously the concept of extraversion proposed by the Beninese scholar Paulin Hountondji which describes 'the practical ways knowledge workers in the periphery are oriented to, and become dependent on, the institutions, concepts and techniques of the metropole' (p.10). This notion of extraversion functions as a neat backbone around which to hang the arguments of the book and the authors constantly return to the question of how and whether Southern scholars do shift away from or modify received ideas from the metropole. The contrast between the periphery and the metropole is further elucidated by the intellectual trajectories of the Southern scholars as many have experience of either studying in the North or being in collaborative relationships with Northern institutions. These positive attributes mean that the book is an essential and important contribution to the debates about Southern theory, postcolonialism and decolonisation.

The main limit of the book is that it is based on anonymised interviews, although the anonymity is understandable, that is, not only in the face of possible adverse consequences for the researchers and interviewees but also in terms of the repercussions that may affect the future employability of academics. The overall effect is that although the book contains ample evidence for a 'sociology of knowledge' that is based on accounting for the contributions of Southern intellectuals, these intellectuals become empty and generic ciphers who not only have anonymised names but their intellectual trajectories are also anonymised, for example in descriptions such as 'Pat...who attended a university in the North'. The latter diminishes the book's potential as a resource for other researchers working in Southern countries. Additionally, and despite its intent, the book ends up presenting Southern intellectuals as disembodied repositories of 'Southern-ness' rather than as flesh-and-bone academics who also have a vested interest in the success of their careers. The other weakness of the book is in the second phrase of the title, 'making new sciences in the South'. The authors repeatedly challenge the manner in which the three domains under consideration have been dominated by either biomedical science (in the case of HIV/Aids research especially) and the physical sciences (in the case of climate change and gender studies) and that this dominance has come at the expense of the humanities and social sciences. Yet, by titling the book using the words 'new sciences' the authors have created an expectation which they do not actually meet – which is that Southern scholars are collectively creating a novel and innovative epistemology to challenge the current American-centric worldview. In the place of radical raptures, the authors instead found the repeated invocation of local knowledge as an alternative gnosis. Although such a conception of knowledge is potentially useful in understanding the future paths of 'Southern' knowledge production, it is hardly the stuff of 'paradigm shifts' as defined by Thomas S. Kuhn. Thus, the authors seem to have anticipated their own conclusion, which is that where alternative knowledges are propounded, they are 'epistemologically loose' (p.174) and depend in large part on the intellectuals' histories as activists and/or frontline respondents to crises such as the HIV/Aids one. By ending the book with these conclusions, the authors present the big ambition of 'Southern' knowledge while factually illustrating the meagre dividends of these putatively new approaches.

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