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 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-blood 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 theory, postcolonialism and decolonisation.

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