

Resource Reviews

SOUTHERN THEORY: THE GLOBAL DYNAMICS OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Review by Su-ming Khoo

Readers of *Policy and Practice* may find it rather unusual to see a review of a book that is not newly published, but that has been out for several years. However, it has not gained wider popularity, despite a good number of scholarly citations. This is an important book and one that demonstrates the benefits of critical, yet wide and unspecialised reading. As a development educator and a social scientist, I feel that I should have been discussing this book with colleagues and students since it first came out. I see it as a resource that should have more currency in our community of practice.

The basic argument in this book is that social science, as we know it, is reductively 'Northern'. To become properly global, world social science must democratise to include significant Southern theoretical voices and debates. These have been disregarded and marginalised by a social science practising an ersatz metropolitan version of universality. Connell engages substantively with a range of Southern theorists, showcasing their diverse contributions to social theory, while arguing for their relevance which is grounded in particular political, economic and cultural experiences. These works are disciplinarily rich, drawing insights and analysis across history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, economics and cultural studies.

Southern Theory is undoubtedly a major work from a writer who has made distinctive contributions to the debates on gender, power and culture. This book extends Connell's concerns with problems of gender power and domination to more general problems of global power and knowledge and pertaining to the social sciences and sociology in particular. It will therefore be of especial interest to social scientists and sociologists, but this is by no means a dry and specialist contribution. It is a lively, open-minded and mind-opening product of decades of broad reading and critical engagement. I can thoroughly

recommend it to any non-specialist reader who puzzles over the place of theory in relation to experience, thinking, faith or politics, and who worries about how to think and explain the relationships between the global North and the global South. The author has ambitious aims to shift the ground of social theory with this book. Most readers will find this an intellectually challenging, enriching and relevant read, and will find something new in the wide span of material encompassing a range of writers, writings and issues from the South and Antipodes. Reading this also refreshed my thinking about the 'business as usual' of Northern social thought and opened up new connections and avenues for critical thinking across political economy, gender, religion and culture. Considering the breadth and unfamiliarity of much of the material, and the depth of critical analysis, this book is very readable and accessible.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first section is a long prologue on 'Northern theory' with three chapters covering the relationship between empire and the creation of classical social theory and sociology, a discussion of general social theory focused on three important sociologists (Coleman, Giddens and Bourdieu), and a chapter on theorising globalisation. Northern theory is notably abstract, and characterised by the absence or routine denial of the historical context of imperialism and of relations of power and domination. Connell's critique centres on how the South is known but never the knower, construed as a source of data for metropolitan theorising, while theory that arises from the actual social experience of the South is excluded.

Knowledge about the South tends to be acquired by Northern authors, for use in Northern debates, while Southern debates which were rooted in the real situations faced by Southern intellectuals have been marginalised. Global social theory similarly claims to be cosmopolitan, while really being metropolitan. Even where globalisation theory is critical, questioning the neoliberal market agenda, it rarely challenges how global knowledge of 'the social' is constituted. Even respectful studies of the periphery largely function as sources of data, filling in thought categories created by metropolitan intellectuals (p. 66). Hence, political economy is a Northern artefact, even though Connell acknowledges that some studies, for example, those done by world-systems theorists, are admirable and even creative (p. 67). In place of an over-arching Northern theory, she would prefer to see more links across Southern theorists

and peripheries, drawing inspiration from the Australian feminist Chilla Bulbeck's 'complex relativism' that allows for international cooperation across diverse bottom-up initiatives (p. 85).

The second and fourth (concluding) sections of the book, entitled 'Looking South' and 'Antipodean Reflections', sandwich the large section on Southern theory between reflections from the author's own particular location – Australia. The insightful positioning of her engagement from a global periphery has resonant echoes for Ireland, provocatively and productively positioning reflections from a small, wealthy (de)industrialised 'Northern' country, far from the metropolitan core and burdened with the anxieties of the 'cultural cringe' (Allen, 1950, cited in Connell, p. 72) which characterise intellectual production in the periphery. At the same time, Australia is the place of the oldest continuous known human civilisation, that of the Australian Aborigines who have suffered devastating colonial histories, from dispossession to the trauma of the 'stolen generations'. This adds thickness and complexity to her critique of social science as an 'immaculately Eurocentric' (p. x) project and lends a personal dimension to her engagement with the problems of dependence.

The substantial third section of the book engages with four milieus of social thought across the global South that have tangled with, and challenged, the problems of economic and cultural dependence: 'African Sociology'; modernising Islam in Iran; Latin American debates about dependency, autonomy and culture; and subaltern and postcolonial thinking in India. To summarise Connell's position, ignoring these bodies of thought wastes a huge resource for learning – 'a body of writing about the global in which Weber is a major point of reference, but Al-Afghani is not, defines itself as profoundly limited' (p. 64).

The first part of this section is about the 'African Renaissance' thinkers and Connell's reading is both balanced and critical. She carefully explains Akiwowo's concept of an indigenous African sociology based on oral traditions and divination and the critics of Akiwowo who question culture-bound ideas of knowledge. The critics argue that this may lead to an over-simplification of African realities and a failure to acknowledge that these Africanist ideas may represent the outlook of a narrow group of privileged traditionalists. The

debates seem to show that the high hopes raised in the 1980s that indigenous sociologies would challenge metropolitan sociology have not been fulfilled (p. 96). Indigenous African philosophies have become a vehicle for the assertion of African dignity and creativity, reprising the Negritude movement of the 1930s and 1940s (p. 101). This assertion of dignity is important, given that African intellectuals have suffered from repressive regimes demanding ideological conformity as well as from neoliberalism and structural adjustment programmes that have left few resources available for the Africanisation of social thought.

Connell's reading of Islamic thought on the problem of Western dominance, is represented by three Islamic modernists who influenced Iran's Islamic Revolution: Al-Afghani who wrote *Refutation of the Materialists* at around the same time that classical Northern social theory emerged, the 1880s; Al-e-Ahmad's 1962 tract *Gharbzadegi*, or 'Westoxication'; and Ali Shariati's Islamist polemic against imitative bourgeois culture and imperialist cultural domination, also written in the lead-up to the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Her approach to these readings is broadly liberal, pivoting around the rationalist concepts of *tawhid* (divine unity vindicating the universality of science) and *ijtihad* (freedom of thought, interpreted in Connell's reading as also meaning 'scientific adventurousness' and 'knowing both cultures'). In practice, *ijtihad* and *tawhid* are highly contested by clerical forces, who advance the contrasting doctrine of *taqlid* (deference to clerical experts) and 'closing the door of *ijtihad*'. Connell notes that Al-e-Ahmad's 'Westoxication' pre-dated Edward Said's famous critique of Orientalism by some two decades, but its vision of Western cultural domination is 'in a way more frightening' since it is more about the colonised than the coloniser, and relies on a sustained inauthenticity on the part of the colonised subject (p. 121). Connell is enamoured of the Farsi term '*rushanfekr*' signifying an intellectual who takes responsibility to understand the concrete situation of their own society, grasp its 'inner truth' and spread the understanding to others (p. 136).

Connell's scepticism of things Marxist, neo-Marxist or even cultural Marxist is a bit problematic in her discussion of the Latin American dependency school which really defines neo-Marxism from political economy to world-systems theory. She criticises the Chilean author Brünner's work on cultural globalisation and postmodernity for being too 'Northern' in its assumptions

and language (p. 140) because he uses UN statistics to write about inequalities. Should we really consider world statistics on inequality to be specifically 'Northern' since they essentially provide a common reference point for the North and South? Does the use of United Nations (UN) statistics necessarily and exclusively vindicate only the North's need to 'know', but not the South's need to 'know about' inequalities? (p. 141) Basic statistics about trade surpluses and deficits formed the very core for the work of CEPAL (the Economic Commission for Latin America) and the work of UNCTAD (the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) that followed in the 1960s (p. 140ff). These figures allowed Latin American theorists to distinguish the centre from the periphery and analyse the mechanisms of neo-colonial domination and injustice. The growing trend towards inequality was the sticking point that led to Cardoso and Faletto's subsequent emphasis on the importance of democratisation for development, a work that Connell commends. Dependency and world-systems theorists will find Connell's account somewhat incomplete, though it is sufficient to demonstrate that Latin American dependency theorists had come up with a more sophisticated analysis several decades ahead of most Northern analyses of globalisation. Connell also interestingly picks up the work of García Canclini to conclude the section on Latin American thinking, particularly the theory of consumer mobilisation, as a potentially positive force for multiculturalism and democracy (p. 163).

Indian contributions to social theory are represented by subaltern and postcolonial studies. Connell queries the gender angle throughout the survey of Southern theory even where Southern theorists may have paid gender scant attention. Connell is critical of much of Indian feminism, as contributing a lot to empirical knowledge but not so much to feminist theory as such. She attributes this to the difficulty Southern intellectuals have in ignoring the metropolitan nature of intellectual production and perceives that Indian subaltern studies has drifted towards conventional (read Northern) postmodernism (p. 172). She is dismissive of Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism as righteous rhetoric, and is irritated by her generalisations and misunderstanding of eucalyptus trees (p. 174). She is, however, impressed by the sophistication of Indian subaltern theorising of power and dominance, Das' anthropology of

critical events and Ashis Nandy's psycho-cultural analysis of the complicity and interdependence between the coloniser and the colonised.

To some extent Connell's complaint about the Northern-ness of social science is not really new – Talal Asad's critique of anthropology raised the issue decades ago (Asad, 1973, cited in Connell, p. 66). This book provides us with a body of Southern theory and reminds us about the general disinterest of modern social thinking in place and material context. Her Antipodean gaze specifically rests on the issue of land, its connection to people and the profound problems raised by dispossession (p. 206). While rejecting the generalisations and Northern-ness of social theory, Connell does not reject generalising or theorising as such, seeing that generalisation is needed to communicate ideas and test them and for knowledge to grow. For social science to work on a world scale, we need the ability to name the metropole and register different situations in metropole and periphery. We need to overcome the erasure of the periphery and need the capacity to recognise its difference and dynamism. Then we need to connect different formations of knowledge to each other and this book makes a real contribution to building up such capacities.

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