



‘Provincializing the Social Sciences’

Workshop Report

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The three-day workshop ‘Provincializing the Social Sciences’ took place in June 2015 at Freie Universität Berlin from 4 – 6 June.¹ The workshop was explicitly framed as an exploratory exercise: the notion to ‘provincialize the social sciences’ (see also Burawoy 2005; Mitchell 2004) thereby served as a starting point to explore the politics of knowledge production between area studies and the social sciences. On the one hand, postcolonial critique of social science epistemologies forms an important background to this undertaking: Chakrabarty and others have masterfully shown that the purported universal categories of the social sciences are deeply imbricated in the imperial history of European modernity.

On the other, our idea of ‘provincializing the social sciences’ aims to take postcolonial critique one step further by concretely engaging area studies knowledge, and strategically using it as a location to reflect upon social science epistemologies. Rather than only marking, locating and politicizing the exclusions produced by epistemological hegemonies, our long-term aim is to facilitate possibilities for epistemological openings that allow for alternative conceptualizations. To be sure, we understand the social sciences here as a set of epistemologies that have become hegemonic and that are equally, if often

¹ For the complete program, see http://www.bgsmcs.fu-berlin.de/events/workshops_seminars_conferences/workshop_2015_provincializing/index.html

implicitly, ingrained in area studies. Our impetus to engage 'area studies', in turn, stands for our goal to engage archives of knowledge that have been excluded from this hegemonic canon.

Three key themes guided the workshop discussions. First, under the heading of 'genealogies', we invited projects that have traced the historical pathways of disciplinary formations as a critical exercise indispensable to questioning the categories we are operating with. Given that the overwhelming majority of critical works on area studies has focused on the US, we were particularly interested in works inquiring into the German historical context. This focus turned out to be very productive, given the lack of in-depth work on the German variants of Orientalism and its prevalence in disciplines such as Islamic Studies or International Relations.

A second overarching theme was the contestation of epistemological boundaries of the social sciences, coupled with the question how area studies knowledge can be engaged to rethink social science categories. Third and related, we suggested to concretely work on the theoretical categories of gender and religion. We thereby departed from the insight that the epistemological authority of social scientific knowledge production is integrally connected with the construction of a masculine 'view from nowhere' (Haraway), which is also constitutive of the division between secularized disciplinary knowledge and the study of 'religions' in 'other areas'.

Genealogies of the Social Sciences and Area Studies in Conversation

The discussions and presentations on the topic of genealogies produced a number of important conversations and questions for further inquiry. The focus on the German historical context was highly appreciated by many participants. Many pointed to the need to deepen the work on Orientalism and disciplinary formations at German universities, and in particular to expose their present-day legacies. A sizeable number of presentations

thus took up the impetus to explore the historical formation of both area studies and the social sciences in conjunction. In her critical exploration of Middle Eastern studies in Germany, Cilja Harders presented C.H. Becker as an exemplary figure. His vision to strengthen the social scientific tools within Orientalist scholarship at the beginning of the 20th century not only led him to establish institutes for both political sciences and oriental studies but also molded a particular formulation of state-led politics towards Islamicate societies, which finds reconfigured echoes in today's efforts to manage Muslims in Germany. Harders also importantly stressed the two-fold hegemony of Middle Eastern studies today: While the field is dominated by the US academies and think-tanks which largely ignore scholarship from Germany or elsewhere in Europe, social scientists from Middle Eastern countries are remarkably excluded from both contexts.

Using approaches from social history, several presentations scrutinized the entanglement of the formation of disciplines and scientific knowledge production with colonial and national projects. Christof Dejung presented interesting material on the establishment of folklore studies in interrelation with the disciplines of anthropology and history in 19th century Germany. Folklore studies, he showed, first emerged in conjunction with anthropology to examine 'primitive' people in European peripheries, but was later integrated into national historical narratives. Meanwhile, an increasingly racialized anthropology took over to examine the people 'without history' in colonial settings. Further exploring these intricate connections with colonial rule, Ulrike Schaper showed that research on African law in German colonies was largely based on racialized anthropological models that assumed the 'barbarity' of their African research objects. The political effects of this 'scientific colonialism', she explained, were much more important in the European and German political context than in Cameroon itself: exclusionist research practices served to confirm Europe as the only legitimate place of universal knowledge production and supported Germany's rise to colonial power.

Many discussions moreover highlighted that attending to the mutual entanglement of natural and social sciences is indispensable to a project of 'provincializing the social

sciences' in general, and the genealogical approach in particular. Thus the deep imbrication of social scientific truth claims in natural sciences and mathematics was highlighted in Boike Rehbein's argument to overcome the Eurocentrism of critical theory. Schirin Amir-Moazami's contribution took up this point by showing the contemporary legacy of purportedly objective numbers and statistics in the social scientific measurement of Muslims in Europe which echoes the legacy of statistical measurement and simultaneous production of 'populations' as means better govern them. These discussions also highlighted the significance of German romanticism in examining disciplinary formations such as folklore studies, and pointed to the need to attend to shared historical moments of Darwinism and evolutionary theory in critical examinations of scholars such as Max Weber.

Manuela Boatca's presentation on Max Weber's occidentalism prompted the important question of how to teach classics of the social scientific canon against the background of such genealogies. Revealing the deep imbrication of Weber's theories in the nationalist and racist project of 'Germanism', Boatca argued against simply discarding Weber as a classic or re-reading him as a neo-racist. Instead, she proposed to situate his universalistic claims as historically particular and politically motivated. The provincializing project would then also need to alter our practices of teaching canonical social science literature. Instead of ignoring the situatedness of allegedly abstract social theory, teaching classics like Weber would then imply not only to situate them historically and demonstrate significant blind spots, but moreover to examine how they have been received, criticized and re-written on a global scale.

Area Studies and the Contestation of Social Science Epistemologies

In his discussion of female fakirs in Pakistan, Omar Kasmani elaborated an instructive example on the limitations of social science epistemologies in the domain of gender theories when confronted with different regional and religious traditions - even those of

radically critical scholarly debates. He argued that the paradoxical double-movement of female fakirs cannot be captured by queer theory. Whilst queer theories often imply that doing gender differently signifies its undoing, he showed that fakirs depend on both the post-sexual authority of motherhood and the notion of femininity as favorable for the co-habitation of spirits. Taking such theoretically condensed ethnographies one step further could open up paths for a fresh conceptualizations of gendered bodies in relation to space.

Two presentations engaged with the project to ‘provincialize the social sciences’ by inquiring into the politics of appropriating social science epistemologies in various regional contexts. In a contemporary example, Alexandre Caeiro tried to make sense of the troublesome vocal calls by Islamic legal scholars for integrating social scientific research into Islamic law to establish objective truth claims. In a historical case, Ruth Streicher explored the appropriation of the conceptual grammar of comparative religion by the royal elite in the imperial context of 19th century Thailand as an important epistemological shift undergirding the construction of the modern Thai nation-state. Both analyses triggered the crucial question as to how to analyze and understand the appropriation of such epistemologies not only as entangled with the project of modern secular nation-states, but also as embedded in specific regional conceptual grammars.

Some of the presentations proposed methodological tools to grapple with these entanglements. Both Allaine Cerwonka and Armando Salvatore in different ways referred to the notion of ‘transculturation’. Cerwonka borrowed Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept of transculturation as contact zone to analyze the traveling of feminist theory to Central and Eastern Europe. Armando Salvatore radicalized the notion of transculturation by tracing the histories of a Chinese stele and its travels to Canada. His move was to point out the complexity of inter-textual circulation even before the invention of ‘radical difference’ in the 19th century, demonstrating the need to take a deep historical interconnectedness of different cultural spheres as a starting point for any project of ‘provincializing the social sciences’.

In another methodological contribution, Goh Benglan argued for retaining the universal as a register to think through both radical difference and larger commonalities across divides. Providing a concrete suggestion for such a universal concept, Kai Kresse proposed to take ‘intellectual practice’ as a tool to grasp the local universe of knowledge cultivation practices in diverse contexts and thereby contributed to the project of intercultural philosophy. While such methodologies obviously do not get rid of asymmetries of power and cannot solve questions of situatedness and difference, they still could help to improve our ‘understanding’ in the Gadamerian sense of different philosophical traditions around the world. Kresse importantly stressed the constructive moment opened through the integration of conceptual perspectives from elsewhere, a moment sometimes missed in postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism.

The Limits of Critique and the Geopolitics of Area Studies

The questions of situatedness and power were taken up in Ruth Mas’ intervention on the limits and movement of critique. She cautioned that in the moment of critique we are continually reinscribing the very frames we want to criticize – including, most pertinently, the frames of secularism and imperialism. Schirin Amir-Moazami presented a concrete example of the power of secular discourse and the limits of her own critique. She argued that the discursive explosion on questions around the ‘Muslim subject’ in Europe simultaneously produces discursive closures that very much limit the intelligibility of her own critical project. Before engaging in any project of provincializing, she consequently argued, it is important to explore more in-depth the secular grammar underpinning the ‘scientific’ knowledge production generally and on Muslim populations in the European context in particular.

The geopolitical dimension of a project of ‘provincializing the social sciences’ was taken up and dealt with in various ways. Whilst some voices advocated for strategically using the current geopolitical discourse on the rise of the global south for the project of

provincializing the social sciences, most participants were skeptical about the rediscovery of postcolonial critique for geopolitical purposes. The current geopolitics of criticizing social science epistemologies and disciplinary divides of area studies thus emerged as a crucial aspect that has to be explored more thoroughly when asking about ways to ‘provincialize the social sciences’.

In a forthcoming series of reflection papers, participants will present some of the discussions to a wider public. While based at Freie Universität Berlin, the project aims to foster a broader and sustained conversation between international scholars.

References:

- Burawoy, Michael. 2005. “Provincializing the Social Sciences”, in George Steinmetz (ed.), *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 508-525.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2004. “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science”, in David Szanton (ed.), *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 74-118.