



Southern theory: the global dynamics of knowledge in social science

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ESSAY REVIEW

Southern theory: the global dynamics of knowledge in social science, by Raewyn Connell, Cambridge and Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2007 (reprinted 2009), 271 pp., £55/€68 (hbk); £17.99/€22.50 (pbk), ISBN 13: 978-0-7456-4348-2 (hbk), 978-0-7456-4249-9 (pbk)

Raewyn Connell is a foremost Australian sociologist and gender theorist, currently teaching at Sydney University. Some of her previous books have a (Google) citation count in the hundreds which very few works in world sociology attract. *Southern theory* is probably her most audacious work so far. First published in 2007, it has already been reprinted and has received the Stephen Crook Memorial prize for the best monograph in Australian sociology between 2005 and 2007. Considering this, the book, with 17 Google cites (minus the self-cites; retrieved 26 July 2009), has yet to attain the major visibility such a bold endeavour demands.

The book is a cross between a polemical broadside and a *cri de coeur*. Connell herself calls it an ‘experiment with truth’ (xiii). Like many established theorists writing from outside the metropolises yet with some measure of recognition there, she is deeply outraged by the invisibility of most non-metropole writing in metropolitan fora. Her name for the non-metropole here is ‘Southern’ (austral, in its original meaning). Her task in this book is to present a convincing theoretical account for this invisibility, and then to showcase good exemplars of Southern thought to demonstrate that it has ‘as much intellectual power as metropolitan social thought and more political relevance’ (xii). This is a work of both critique and retrieval, each trope presenting its own particular challenges.

Part 1 throws down the gauntlet to Northern theory. The task of chapter one, first published in 1997 in the *American Journal of Sociology*, is to demonstrate that supposedly ‘universal’ theory embeds a Northern viewpoint, and is in fact more properly seen as ‘Northern’ theory. Connell revisits the sociological classics to make the case that this work arose from concerns rooted in colonialism (progress, evolution, the primitive/modern distinction), and only transferred its gaze to the travails of urbanisation and industrialisation after the first World War when the centre of sociological gravity moved to the US. Then, because the empirical work failed to ground the theory, the metropolises adopted a classical canon, hence planting an imperial gaze into the heart of the enterprise of modern social science. Chapter 2 continues this line of analysis, focusing on a particular text from each of three prominent Northern theorists, James Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Chapter 3 illustrates the case further by showing the ‘Northernness’ of globalisation theory.

There are a number of points here that merit comment. Randall Collins (1997), for example, has charged that Connell’s claim for imperialist origins can be sustained only for Britain, a country hardly central in establishing sociology as a discipline. I would like to draw attention to three broader points. To retrieve the agency and historical location of a theorist is one thing; to read the theory as nothing but the product of

that historical location is another, which condemns the theorist to speaking the truth of his or her own historical particularity and no other. Where does Connell stand? It is hard to say. At times she seems to be busy with retrieval, at others she comes perilously close to reductionism, to reducing the conceptual content to the standpoint making it. In the end, she seems to want it both ways; this is most evident in the thoughtful final chapter which concedes that theory legitimately drives to generalisation. The second point has to do with Connell's principle of selection of her examples, which is not made explicit. Why these writers and why these texts? Because they are canonical? That begs the next question: what makes them canonical? What installs them in the canon? Do they, as Collins would have it, build significantly on nineteenth century historical work to advance the power of social scientific thinking? Do these works have epistemic virtues despite their Northern origins, or do the origins vitiate whatever epistemic virtue they might have had? Again it is not clear where Connell stands, especially in Chapter 2. In the last chapter, Connell signals a larger intention to move beyond refusal and rejection, to a more inclusive social science based on 'engagement, critique, respect and recognition' (224). This indicates a project of integration and enlargement, but for that there will have to be agreement on the epistemic ground rules. Connell turns next to home austral turf and traces the lineage of sociological institutionalisation in this singular ex-colony. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Australia, together with other colonies, was treated as a 'data mine' for Northern social scientific purposes, which were largely to illustrate the evolutionary and progressive nature of social life. The settlers themselves, when they turned to sociology, followed in Northern footsteps, at worst becoming in the process a 'branch office of metropolitan sociology' (81), at best, 'doing Northern theory in new conditions' (85). By this account, Australia has merely cloned Northern theory and in the process helped to render invisible the metropole-colony relations that structure its social conditions of possibility. Connell returns to a particular strand, Australian sociology and dispossession, in the penultimate chapter.

In the substantive part of the book, Part 3, 'Southern theory', Connell devotes a chapter each to Africa, Islam, Latin America and India before returning to Australia. Connell's reading is impressively wide, and her intention is clearly to showcase a wide range of vibrant writing from the peripheries. Yet all of it has a slightly dated feel to it. The chapter on Africa is perhaps the least satisfying. We are introduced to the quixotic attempt by Akiwowo to derive a sociology from indigenous poetry; the philosophers Hountondji and Wiredu, both of whom were critical of attempts at ethnophilosophy; the idea of 'African renaissance', often proclaimed but never really theorised, by that relentless but luckless moderniser Thabo Mbeki; and the chapter ends with a discussion of Sol Plaatje and what Connell regards as one of the 'classics of world sociology' (110), his impressive documentation of land dispossession in South Africa in *Native life in South Africa*.

The themes of land and dispossession are central to Connell's recuperation of Southern theory, so one can see why Plaatje fits the bill here. Yet Plaatje was first a linguist (he spoke seven languages) and an indefatigable journalist and newspaper editor rather than a social scientist. He was above all an Anglo- or Europhile: he named his son Johannes Gutenberg and he translated several Shakespearean plays into Setswana, including the *Comedy of Errors*, *Julius Caesar* and the *Merchant of Venice*. He was also the first black South African to write a novel in English, *Mhudi*. Like Paulin Hountondji (who studied with Althusser and was tutored by Derrida, writing his thesis on Husserl), Plaatje is unquestionably a towering figure of African letters.

But to regard them as social scientists is a bit of a stretch. What I miss from this chapter is reference to the more apposite, vibrant and politically risky social science of 1980s South Africa, for example, that fiercely debated topics like ‘colonialism of a special type’ (still the South African Communist Party’s official position); whether African nationalism (‘populism’) or the working class (‘workerism’) was the decisive transformative social agent, and more abstractly, how ‘race’ and ‘class’ should be theorised at this place and time (Posel 1983). Activist social scientists could get shot for organising workers, as Rick Turner (who also studied with Althusser) was.

Connell then moves on to Islam, where she admits a familiar tradition of social science hardly existed, to discuss al-Afghani, Al-e-Ahmad and Shariati, none of whom I was previously familiar with. As far as I can tell, the various strands of this rich tradition marry western rationalism with atavism and a fairly determined anti-colonialism, particularly cultural colonialism. In this chapter we have displayed attempts to integrate positive features of both modernity and tradition, so to speak, but I still have difficulty in understanding how we can regard them as social science: the common factor seems to me to be anti-colonialism.

Latin America comes next, with stimulating discussions of Prebisch, the early Cardoso, Dorfman, Hopenhayn, Montecino and Canclini. As Connell says, a lot of Latin American social science shows the same pattern of Northern derivativeness displayed in Africa and Australia, hardly surprising since Paris always was a favourite destination of South American intellectuals. Also ubiquitous is the by now familiar opposition to neoliberalism and western growth models. The most orthodox sociologist in the group is probably Fernando Cardoso. Here, Connell concentrates largely on the justly renowned 1979 book with Enzo Faletto, which is far stronger on class analysis than it is on political strategy as Cardoso has recently conceded. Cardoso of course went on to become the most successful president of Brazil in recent times, making him in Gay Seidman’s words ‘surely the most public sociologist in the world’ (Seidman 2004). In the interview with Seidman, Cardoso also talks about his perceived swing away from the left and from dependency theory. He stresses that global economic integration and democracy had effects on Latin America that could simply not be ignored in the 1990s and 2000s. I miss a sense of this transition and its implications for dependent economies in Connell’s discussion of Latin American writing.

A similar sense of datedness is present in the discussion of the last national ex-colony, India. The subaltern studies movement is treated in an informative but hardly novel way, though Connell’s discussion of debates within Indian feminism by writers like Ghandi and Shah, Shiva, and Tharu and Niranjana is most enlightening. It is clear that this social scientific community, with well developed links to the North, is likewise not immune from the excesses and ills of Northern theory, like over-generalisation. Amongst these anthropologists, social historians and cultural theorists I did wonder where Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen might feature in this map of the Southern peripheries.

The penultimate chapter on land and land rights of indigenous people in Australia and the islands is one of the most suggestive yet elusive in the book. Through documenting a number of lands rights cases, thereby raising the intimate relation of indigenous people to their land, Connell advances a deeper point about what a non-Northern social science could and should be doing about ‘regenerating social science on a world scale’ (209). Land and place are central to this picture, but this centrality is not localising in the manner of postmodern valorisation of particularity. Rather it

illustrates how a general conclusion can emerge from place-specific particulars. Connell wishes to retain the particulars of place-connectedness that ethnographies and histories supply even as she wishes to retain the generalising arc of the social scientific endeavour. Quite how this is to be accomplished, however, remains elusive.

Part of the problem lies in positioning Australia, that most austral country, as an exemplary case of the kind of Southernness developed in the book – material and cultural subjugation on the one hand, movements of anti-colonialism and anti-neoliberalism on the other, labouring beneath a yoke of persistent attempts at erasure by the dominant social science discourses of modernity. The problem is one of scale. While the dispossession and delegitimation of the aboriginal people is surely equal in most respects to that visited upon the other ex-colonies Connell discusses, the scale is hard to compare. Australia is, by any measure, a Southern outlier. Acknowledging the ‘dynamism of the periphery’, as Connell does, hardly helps. The current population is around 21,850,000 people, of which 2.5%, just over half a million, are indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics: as cited by Connell, the global ratio of privilege [10%] to dispossession [90%] is the inverse, 212). The well-off settlers thus vastly outnumber the indigenes and, increasing at the rate of one international migrant every two minutes 23 seconds, seem set to stay that way. In 2005, Australia had the third highest human development index (HDI) in the world at 0.962, just behind Iceland and Norway at 0.968. As a comparison, South Africa, as a still relatively well-off ex-colony, is at the 121st rank, at 0.674. Finally, unlike practically every other ex-colonial society, Australia has yet to have its war of liberation, never mind a liberation struggle, one of the crucibles from which much fecund anti-colonial thought arises as Connell shows. No wonder that poor Australia remains culturally and theoretically predominantly Northern.

We should perhaps not take Connell too literally about place. Dispossession is a consequence of a social relation that is necessarily but certainly not sufficiently place-dependent. Many leading social scientists, like Bourdieu, struggle to eminence from a position of relative disadvantage in relation to the world-dominant middle class. One does not have to be in an austral country to have one’s identity shaped by the burdens of dispossession and erasure. Austral pathos is everywhere a reality.

In the concluding chapter, Connell reviews the fruits of her experimental explorations. Has she made her case? Does the indictment against Northern/‘universal’ theory stick? Only partly. The best Southerners make free use of powerful Northern theory, and in truth, they probably don’t see it as ‘belonging’ to anyone or any perspective, theirs for the taking. They may take it differently, but that is no different to the different ways that new technologies have been adapted in different circumstances, a staple insight of contemporary innovation theory. What Connell seems to expect is that the Northerners acknowledge this differential take up, and integrate it into their generalising conclusions, which is what I take it she means by ‘mutual learning... on a planetary scale’ (222). She also wants them to acknowledge the ethnocentrism of their theories,¹ which is a larger ask, and partly undercut by the accumulative force of the prior point. This is what I take her to mean when she says that there can only be one social science, that it is animated by the epistemic virtues of investigation, commitment to the growth of knowledge, generalisability, corrigibility and a commitment to truthfulness.

Do the Southern exemplars display ‘the same intellectual power’ as the more recognised Northern exemplars? On the evidence here, very rarely. Speaking for my own ex-colony, I can say with some confidence that the only real contribution to world social science has been the corpus produced by the extraordinarily fertile school of

social historians that formed the annual 'History Workshop' during apartheid's darkest days, and that retrieved the living experiences of the dispossessed with an exemplary commitment to scholarly rigour which saw their best students poached immediately by the best history schools worldwide. Perhaps some contribution to labour sociology. Not much more. We may ask, with Connell, why there seems to be such a paucity of genuinely original theory coming out of the South, but I take it that it is not only a matter of erasure and lack of recognition, but some other set of conditions for the production of novel theory we as a global community have yet properly to understand.

Neither do we understand, as Connell says, what gives the metropole the capacity to act as metropole. Connell calls for networks of cooperation across the South as well as between the North and the South, and these are indeed developing, as any search for 'South' or 'Southern' on Google will show. Above all, Connell's book provides a wake up call or heads up about the avoidable silences in our craft.

Notes

1. The reader may well notice that there is some measure of ambivalence here. For example, Connell has no hesitation in extolling the virtues of Gyorgy Lukács' *History and class consciousness*, a metropolitan classic if ever there was one, 'as virtually the origin of the modern sociology of knowledge' (222). (I am reminded that when Lukács once averred that even the worst form of socialism was preferable to the best form of capitalism, Leszek Kolakowski remarked drily, 'Ah yes, the advantages of Albania over Sweden are self-evident'.)

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