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## Constructing the Pluriverse: Lessons Learned thus Far

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## **Constructing the Pluriverse: Lessons Learned thus Far** **Bernd Reiter, 2019**

### **Introduction**

“Critical reflection” and maybe “deeper insight” is what we expect from any academic work. Deeper insight, it turns out, takes time and the production rhythm of an edited volume does not necessarily allow for the time and space for much critical reflection. At the same time, similar to a good novel, books like *Constructing the Pluriverse* plant themes in the readers’ mind – and some themes lay dormant for months, maybe years, until another reading, or a discussion, resonates with them, thus activating their heuristic potential and leading to new ideas and hitherto unseen connections and insights. This is certainly true for me – and it took some time, some distance, and a graduate seminar on this topic to awaken some new meaning and to detect some previously hidden themes in some of the contributions of this book.

I am certain that more themes will eventually resonate and become salient as times goes by and as graduate students dissect the different arguments presented in this book, so that there is a potential for never-ending follow-ups, based on new insights and new understanding. In the best case scenario, there should be an ongoing academic dialogue for efforts like the one attempted in this book, namely to move beyond narrow Western heuristic and analytical frameworks and propose new ones, as this endeavor is open ended and potentially endless. The way academic knowledge production is institutionalized, however, is not contributive to such an open-ended process. Books and articles need to be wrapped up and published; tenure needs to be earned; careers are at stake.

Furthermore, peer review and academic publishing in disciplinary journals has, in my experience, restricted circulation and creativity by having to submit work to the judgment of precisely those authors who have been able to establish the very standards they now uphold. There clearly are no broadly shared standards of what rigor, reliability, validity, let alone relevance constitute in the social sciences and humanities, at least not if the whole spectrum of academic production is included. Instead, the editors and reviewers for such disciplinary core journals as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *American Political Science Review*, *International Organization*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, and the like have universalized their own academic standards, exercising a gate-keeping function whose main result has been to keep unorthodox work out of the inner circles of academic power and prestige and protect the Western bias that dominates the social sciences and humanities world wide. Orthodoxy, in the social sciences and humanities, *is* Western bias.

Similar to the strategies to ‘take back the economy,’ described by Gibson-Graham, (2013), I want to suggest that it is high time to ‘take back knowledge production’ from zealous disciplinary journals and instead circulate it through such open source channels as Scholar Commons, or Academia.edu – at least where such an approach is possible, given the very understandable real life pressures of tenure and promotion most academic writers can hardly afford to ignore. Still: Peer review of an unorthodox, non-Western article by an all-Western group of scholars, trained and obedient to the Western standards of academic knowledge recognition and validation,

comes closest to being a black defendant judged by an all-White jury in the American judicial system.

The fact that these peer review juries are double blind makes the recognition of bias even more difficult and a lot more effective and consequential, as judgment is supposedly “neutral” and “merit-based.” Bias sneaks in, inevitably, by the very composition of editorial boards and staff, as the most prestigious journals only rely on graduates and professionals from the most prestigious universities, where ‘prestige’ is defined by their strict adherence to disciplinary norms and standards. Given the extreme Western bias of the social science and humanities disciplines, the more prestigious the journal, the more biased against unorthodoxies it will be, as the *doxa* of the Social Science and Humanities worldwide are colonial, forced onto the world through conquest and colonization.

We either need to change the juries or, in the case of academic publishing, publish outside of the established system of knowledge validation. This essay is thus not a peer-reviewed article, but a paper, self-published on Scholar Commons. I will offer some new learning and insight on pluriversality. I see this paper as contributing to a new way of institutionalizing academic knowledge production and dialogue – one without a deadline, operating outside of the centers that have enforced discipline and established biased standards long enough.

I want to explicitly encourage all those reading this article to think of ways how to keep this process going and how to keep on introducing non-Western ontologies, epistemologies and their related analytical frameworks so they can be “sutured” into the already existing, dominant, hegemonic, and exclusive frameworks produced in the metropolitan global north, along the lines Sandra Harding suggests in her contribution to *Constructing the Pluriverse*.

### **Constructing the Pluriverse one Step at a Time: Lessons learned a year later**

I spent some years collecting the different contributions for my edited volume *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, which finally appeared in 2018. The book contains 15 chapters, plus a foreword, an introduction and a conclusion, bringing together 15 different authors, from very different backgrounds and writing from very different locations and standpoints. There are contributions by anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, education specialists, religious study scholars, sociologists, and a literary scholar assembled in this book, covering a wide array of topics and themes.

The first line of the introduction reads: “This book seeks to move beyond the critique of colonialism and Western (thought) hegemony towards the construction of what Raewyn Connell calls a ‘mosaic epistemology’.” (Reiter, 2018:1) Indeed, I had asked all participating scholars to explain to me, in their chapter, what an “Indian / West African / Colombian / Brazilian / Islamic / Malaysian / Iranian political philosophy look like? What sort of questions would it ask? What kinds of ontologies and epistemologies would it be based on? What kinds of research questions could be developed from it and what sorts of research programs or designs? How could it be operationalized?” (Reiter, 2018:7) While perhaps formulated in a rather clumsy way that keeps referencing colonial national and territorial frameworks, I tried to elicit, from the authors I approached,

different, non-Western, non-metropolitan, non-Northern and anti-colonial approaches applicable to the social sciences and humanities.

The essays I received covered, not surprisingly, a very broad spectrum of topics. Hans-Jürgen Burchardt writes about the attempts to move beyond Western rationality as the only modus of approaching reality and constructing science – by re-reading two Western authors: Baruch Spinoza and Norbert Elias, thus questioning, even if not explicitly, if “the West” is truly as monolithic as it is treated and maybe even if such a thing as “the West” really exists. Manuela Boatcă, another scholar writing from Germany, pursues this question even more explicitly by pondering about the consequences of including the European overseas territories into the mapping, imagining, and representing of Europe. Once all of the European territories located in Caribbean, the Pacific, and even the Indian Ocean are included in the mapping of Europe, an entirely different geography emerges – with different borders and different European populations. Decentering and destabilizing Europe thus emerged as an important theme in this book.

Eurocentrism and its derivatives, logocentrism, androcentrism, and an exclusive focus on rational discourse, have inspired many of the authors contributing to this book. It was also central to a contribution that the enforcers of disciplinary power – anonymous “peers” reviewing the initial manuscript - forced me to cut out: a chapter entitled “The Emotional Turn and the Potential to Transform International Relations,” by Ben Luongo. In it, Luongo argues that emotions play a large role in politics and international relations. After pointing out the limits of rational choice theories, Luongo proceeds in debating ‘emotion as a source of values and interests.’ He concludes that,

Our sense of interests and values cannot be understood solely through frames of rationality but, rather, are intimately tied to human emotion. Again, there are cases when an individual’s pursuit of self-interest can be understood in rationalist terms but the realization of interests and values requires an emotional understanding of one’s humanity. More importantly, emotions should reengage scholars with the normative pursuit of discovering ways to overcome strategic self-interest. Emotions are deeply implicated in empathy and a better understanding of the emotional processes that lead to empathetic behavior should be a welcomed pursuit in a discipline that studies international conflict. (Luongo, unpublished manuscript, page 21)

Luongo’s conclusions are thus very close to the ones espoused by Walter D. Mignolo, in *Constructing the Pluriverse*. Building on the work of Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, Mignolo argues that the Colonial Matrix of Power and the western hegemony it has birthed cannot be overcome by states and state agents, but from below, by communal actors who are driven not by profit or instrumental rationality, but by love. Quoting Maturana, Mignolo argues that, “Love is the outcome of communal praxis and, therefore, noncompetitive relationality among all living organisms.” (Mignolo, 2018:109) Love, for Maturana, is the central driving force motivating all organisms to nurture and protect life and thus guarantee survival.

This theme, proposed by Maturana (2004), elaborated by Mignolo in *Constructing the Pluriverse*, and applied to international politics by Luongo (2018) resonates with the latest work of Antonio Damasio (2018), who has argued that feelings provide the basic motivational force driving life, or homeostasis, in his terms. His book *The Strange Order*

*of Things* (2018) is in fact subtitled: *Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures*. Damasio is no ordinary author. He is one of the leading authorities in Neuroscience.

One theme clearly emerging from *Constructing the Pluriverse* thus is to write against Eurocentrism and the content Eurocentrism has violently transported to the whole world: an exclusive focus on rationality. For many authors writing on this topic, Eurocentrism is linked to patriarchy and it comes vested in state power. Constructing the pluriverse requires recognition of other knowledges and the inclusion of emotional dimensions into our attempts to understand and explain the world – physical and social. These other knowledges can be found today among many indigenous or First People of the Americas – and they are based on praxis. Praxis, according to Wikipedia, “is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, embodied, or realized. "Praxis" may also refer to the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing ideas.” Praxis thus stands in opposition to theoretical knowledge, acquired in reflection alone. It also stands in opposition to the idea that knowledge is produced by individuals, in solitary acts of contemplation or reflection – which represents the typical way how Eurocentric knowledge production is represented: as an act of genius by such ‘thinkers’ as Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and so many other Western thinkers.

The importance of praxis in the process of knowledge production was already stressed by Paula Freire, the Brazilian educator, who focused his life’s work on adult education and liberation. In the accounts by many counter-Eurocentric authors, knowledge production is the result of collective, communal action, dialogue, and cooperation. It operates outside of the very conceptualization of the “individual” so precious to Western thought.

Praxis also resonates with the chapter in *Constructing the Pluriverse* written by Manu Samnotra about the life and work of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. As Samnotra explains, Gandhi believed, and practiced, *experimentation* as a heuristic tool. Gandhi, who termed his autobiography *Story of my Experiments with Truth*, “has learned that he cannot fully trust the results of any one experiment. Every experiment needs further validation when circumstances change; with each successive experiment, personal truth comes closer to Truth.” (Samnotra, 2018:178) As opposed to the contemplative thinking of the European philosopher, Gandhi proposes a more praxis-oriented “trying out,” thus destabilizing a whole genealogy of European knowledge production, supposedly based on individual geniuses, operating in isolation. At a minimum, stressing the communal, dialogical, and praxis-dimension of knowledge production reveals the arrogance of all those who claim that the knowledge they have produced is theirs alone and can attributed only to themselves. This, then, is the European modus operandi of knowledge production unveiled and actively contrasted by a more reflective, communal, and humble way of producing knowledge.

In addition, Gandhi reveals himself as what is now called a “radical constructivist” by modern, Eurocentric science in yet another attempt to claim individual ownership of terms while ignoring the much older praxis by such Third World thinkers as Gandhi. Gandhi already proposed in 1909, in his book *Hind Swaraj*, that achieving true independence from British colonialism demands independence from desires and wants. Explains Samnotra, “The political actor learns to channel his resolve and acquires swaraj by constantly experimenting with forms of living that enable the highest attainment of self-control and humility.” (Samnotra, 2018:178) Thus, according to Gandhi, change

starts with each person and the way to change the world is to change yourself.

This is, of course, the central tenant of constructivist thought as developed by such Western authors as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), who in turn rely on the work of Alfred Schütz (1899-1959) their Austrian teacher. Alexander Wendt (1992), who is credited with the invention of constructivism in International Relations in his 1992 article “Anarchy is what Stats make of it,” discusses the work of Berger and Luckmann, but already does not mention Alfred Schütz and certainly does not bother to look beyond the narrow confines of European and North American political science and sociology to develop his approach, thus bolstering the claim that it is indeed he himself who introduces the concept. Constructivism can look back at a much older pedigree, as Gandhi’s work and thought indicates.

Finally, Gandhi also discusses the topic of development, so hotly debated by contemporary critics of European modernization (e.g. Esteva and Prakash, 2014). For Gandhi, *swaraj* requires self-discipline and freedom from imported, British, models of consumerism. By proposing a frugal life-style and negating consumerism, Gandhi must thus also be seen as an early critic of developmentalism and a proponent of de-development, as described by Aram Ziai in his chapter in *Constructing the Pluriverse*. In this approach, Gandhi is also in accordance not just with indigenous conceptualizations of *Buen Vivir*, as described by Katherine Walsh in her chapter of *Constructing the Pluriverse*, but also with the thinking of Ibn Khaldun, as explained by Zaid Ahmad, in his contribution to the book. Ahmad explains that for Ibn Khaldun, “The culture of consumerism, luxury, leisure and pleasure (or hedonism), opulence and indulgence among city dwellers will be the reason for the city’s downfall.” (Ahmad, 2018:253)

This strain of thought falls under the header of alternatives to European ways of thinking about and claiming ownership, truth, and certainty and the ways all of these relate to a broader European lifestyle, one that arrogantly claims knowledge, innovation, and truth without bothering to inquire about any non-European sources and origins. The Western civilizational model is revealed as a “Cannibal disease” (my chapter on Native American Thought in *Constructing the Pluriverse*) or as “Westoxification,” so poignantly characterized by Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush, the Iranian intellectuals discussed by Ehsan Kashfi in chapter 15 in the book.

Venu Mehta, in her contribution to *Constructing the Pluriverse*, reveals that Feminist Standpoint Theory, as proposed by such pioneering California-based feminist authors as Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding in the 1970s, can indeed look back at a millennial tradition among the Jain. Mehta quotes Mardia and Rankin, who argue: “Jaina theory of knowledge has three major components. Naya (standpoint); [and] *anekāntavāda* (holistic principle of many-sidedness), of which *syādvāda* (conditional precondition) forms an essential part” (2013, 48–49).” Furthermore, she relies on the work of Gopalan, who explained that, “Jainism does not merely maintain that there are many reals but also accepts that each of the reals, in its turn is complex reals and the numbers of relations into which they enter point to the fact that Reality many be comprehend[ed] from different angles. The attempt at comprehending from [a] particular standpoint is known as *naya*—a view arrived at from one angle” (1973, 145).” In Jainism, “*Syādvāda*, the principle of conditional predictions, is a method of inspecting inferences of an object by examining it from seven different standpoints.” (Mehta, 2018:266f)

This is the very essence of feminist epistemology and feminist standpoint theory

in particular – but it is not acknowledged and most likely not known by Western feminist “pioneers.” They certainly did not integrate Jainism into their own work and failed to credit it.

Another theme emerging in the pages of *Constructing the Pluriverse* is that of the status of knowledge and the legitimate ownership of it. This domain, in Western colonizing practice, has been captured almost exclusively by academics working in Western-type universities. The chapter by Issiaka Ouattara, however, points out another type of knowledge bearers, producers, and retainers: the West African Griots. Griots are, according to Ouattara, oral historians, genealogists, legal experts, experts on warfare, food, protocol, and the appropriate norms and values of their communities. As such, they fulfill very similar functions to those of professional historians, lawyers, and judges in Western societies. Griots are scholars. And yet again, Western science, in its boundless arrogance and ignorance, has not just ignored the knowledge produced and retained by Griots. It has failed to integrate it, or “suture it” (Harding, in *Constructing the Pluriverse*) into the fabric of Western knowledge. The same is true for the knowledge of the Wintukua Mamos I describe in my chapter. Here we learn that the Wintukua have holy people who train their whole life to better understand and read the laws of nature and the connections uniting us humans to the planet – and we, Western scientists, completely ignore their existence and knowledge – simply because we lack the humility and the conceptual tools to listen and to understand what they are saying. Most Native American tribes count on the advice of tribal Elders who are equally trained to better understand the complexities of life, and here, too, Western science simply ignores their knowledge, their experience, and their message.

Griots, Mamos, and Elders have acquired and retained important knowledge that is in no way inferior to the kind of knowledge produced in Western-type universities. It might be of more relevance to our survival as a species than the work of a lot of modern biologists – but we simply ignore it.

### **Suturing in Non-Western Knowledges**

Sandra Harding explains that to take the knowledge of others seriously, we must evaluate it on our terms, not theirs. This is partially true, I would content, as simply recognizing that different knowledge systems exist parallel to the Western knowledge is not enough to value it. Valuing the knowledge of others means testing it, examining it, entering in critical dialogue with it and about it. If other knowledges are not actively engaged, then they become “anthropologized” and frozen museum pieces, exposed to the risks of relativism and romanticism. Proceeding in this way is not respectful and it is not tolerant. It is instead cowardly, allowing others and their knowledge to exist at the margins of the tremendous Western knowledge producing machines without truly acknowledging their contributions and using them for the active production of knowledge. Serious and committed scholars need to find ways to “suture” different knowledges into their own conceptual frameworks and scientific endeavors so they can practice and apply it, thus giving it academic currency.

There is, however, a risk in this process, as it first requires first humility to let go of exclusive, universal claims to the truth and it requires the conceptual tools to comprehend these other knowledges, so they can be operationalized and integrated into routine research activities. “Routine” here is crucial, as a pushing of “other knowledges”

into ethnic departments and marginalized fields of knowledge production risks achieving the opposite of what I am proposing here. It threatens to anchor other knowledge systems permanently into the outer spheres of Western knowledge producing machines – relegated to place where all sorts of non-conformist knowledges are tolerated and allowed to survive, even if only barely.

“Suturing in” thus requires humility and the conceptual tools able to capture, understand, and validate other knowledges – all things that are currently not readily available in Western-type universities.

A year after handing in the manuscript of *Constructing the Pluriverse*, new themes and possibilities have emerged – and I have discussed them in this essay. I hope that the chapters of *Constructing the Pluriverse* lead to more and similar efforts by those reading, and digesting, the proposals advanced by the fifteen different authors who joined this effort in 2016 and 2017, when I edited this book. I hope this essay also inspires the reader to take an active stance against the disciplinary power of those mainstream academic journals and publishers who keep excluding the contributions of Non-Western authors based on their supposed lack of academic rigor. Academic rigor in the social sciences and humanities, as already stated above, is a very thin veil barely hiding the arrogance of those who have been able to elevate their own standards and declare them to be universal. The most effective way of destabilizing and dismantling the disciplinary power of Western science is by ignoring and circumventing those who hold and control it.

#### **Note**

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