

**About the workshop on “Cultural elements in social sciences and in academic labor - Epistemological and educational challenges constructing a scientific multi-versalism”.
Buenos Aires, 28-30 October 2010.**

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The newly established “World Social Sciences and Humanities Network” (World SSH Net) in cooperation with, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) and the Science Council of Argentina (CONICET) held a three-day workshop on “Cultural elements in social sciences and in academic labor - Epistemological and educational challenges constructing a scientific multi-versalism” in the Latin American School of Social Sciences (Buenos Aires, Argentina) (FLACSO) on 28-30 October 2010. This workshop gathered sociologists, anthropologists, historians and biologists from Latin America (Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico), Europe (UK and Germany), South East and East Asia (Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea), Middle East (Lebanon and Turkey) and Australia.

A sort of inauguration of World SSH Net, this workshop (like the previous workshops of the network) that reflected on current international scientific collaborations in the era of globalization, showed, in the words of the network mission statement, the paradox of “a growing need for globally shared knowledge and at the same time of exclusive knowledge concepts and discourse structures that make many forms of conceptualization and theorizing as well as social knowledge practices invisible.”

In an opening note, Michel Kuhn, President of the World SSH Net, pointed out the necessity of globalizing societies to understand the peculiar social and cultural prerequisites of social thought in all societies in order to allow for a discourse of a diversity of interpretations of the global replacing the universalisation of the European interpretation of the world. Since this Western knowledge has become the universally shared world knowledge, he discussed the question what constitutes the hegemonic nature of Western knowledge and argued that it is the politicized categories and theories of Western social thinking, their theoretical abstractions consisting of theoretical re-constructions of the social reality and subjects, through which they 1) *transform their historical nature into the nature of humans* that are though only created through the particular context of the Western society model, which 2) interpret the social through the *views of the ruling political bodies on the social* and, by doing so, 3) *theoretically subjugate their subjects* under the ruling view of the governing politics. He concludes that these politicized categories are the epistemological subjugative substance of the Western social science knowledge, may this knowledge be universal or not. He argues that the key social science discipline, sociology, already indicates through its name this politicized perspective, the abstraction of “the society” historically established and executed by the Western society model and exported across the world as the nature of human civilisation. Fuelling this subjugating knowledge with the missionary spirit that is implied in interpreting any social phenomenon as the nature of humans creates the hegemonic substance and the imperial energy to hegemonize this politicized knowledge as universal knowledge. He concludes that applying such concepts and theories constructed through a politicized perspective interpreting the social as the nature of humans to any international context is only the consequent implication of interpreting the nation state perspective of the Western society model as if it was the nature of any social on the world. As perspectives of the future work of the World SSH Net he suggested to 1) disclose the epistemological assumptions of the multiple concepts of social science knowledge, to 2) trace the society models incorporated in

the politicized categories and theories and to 3) develop a world approach to social science thinking that liberates social sciences from the particularisms of politicized thoughts.

Questioning the explanatory hegemony of the Western politically particularized knowledge and, instead, creating a world view on the world's societies he suggested as the mission of the World SSH Net in general and of the World SSH Net workshop series in particular.

Raising the question if culture is an element in the generation of social science knowledge on this first World SSH Net workshop in Buenos Aires thus questions nothing less but the epistemological basis of the Western knowledge imperialism.

Hebe Vessuri (Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research) urged the participants to frame the discussion in terms of a transition from the culture of "science" to the culture of "research", following Bruno Latour, because whereas "science is supposed to be cold, straight and detached, research is warm, involving, and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes, research creates controversies; science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passion, and emotions." For Vessuri, research and society today are entangled to the point where they cannot be separated any longer. She argued that social science research is also experiencing some interesting changes. Dialogue, comparison, and translation are the *mots d'ordre* at this time. "A permanent dialogue between schools, trends of thought, disciplines and theories require platforms for exchange of views that can only be gradually built, as trust and solidarity grow through deepening the practices of intercultural translations. These should search for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world without destroying the identity of that is translated."

Participants insisted on the importance of recognizing the diversity of human experience. Chris Caswill (University of Oxford) particularly theorized what he called 'social science practice and everyday knowledge', by bringing three voices from three Continents: Charles Lindblom from the USA, Bent Flyvbjerg from Denmark in Europe and Catherine Odora Hoppers from South Africa. Each is concerned with the interrelationships between the practice of social science research, the knowledge which that research generates and the use which is made of it. For Flyvbjerg, *phronesis* is what the social sciences have to offer that the natural sciences cannot, with their emphasis on *episteme* and *techne*. This Aristotelian tripartite distinction is critical for Flyvbjerg in highlighting the comparative advantage of social science. Phronetic science focuses less on abstraction, theories and causality and more on context, praxis, experience and practical wisdom.

The other participants provided case studies based on their fieldwork. Han Sang-Jin (Seoul National University) provided an excellent example of a how risk society studied in South Korea provides a bottom-up interpretation of cultural tradition. He pays special attention to the cultural transformation under way in Korea, which is more complex than a functional equivalent for capitalist development. He argues that given the risks South Koreans face, which are linked to the collapse of the moral fabric of rapidly-modernizing societies, they can no longer contend with "Confucian capitalism" as it has been conventionally understood. He raised many questions pertaining to what Confucianism means to them today. He argued that a researcher should not discard Confucianism as a whole, but should pay attention to normative layers within Confucianism which are still valid, and which can be reconstructed as to overcome negative past legacies while opening up new development.

Nestor T. Castro (University of the Philippines) argued that the Filipino educational system privileges western concepts that do not necessarily match Filipino realities. He brings some relevant examples: in social statistics, the concept of population density (i.e. total population over land area) is meaningless when applied to the Badjaos who do not live on land but on house-boats that move about in the Sulu Sea. In social psychology, students are taught about

the concept of the “self” in contrast with the “other”, echoing the binary opposition in structuralist interpretations in anthropology. But how could one account for the Tagalog word *kapwa*, which roughly means “the self-in-the-other” that refers to complementary pairs, ie. the value of solidarity towards a fellowman. He thus argues for multi-versalist approach in the teaching of the social sciences, that is, that social science concepts need not come from one culture source, whether from the West or the East, but may be generated from various culture sources. The hegemony of Western science also discussed by Kazumi Okamoto (Knowwhy Global Research) who pointed out how problematic the British ‘standard way’ of writing a Master thesis (such as citing only English sources) for the non-Western students. She also examine difficulties which Japanese researchers encounter in communicating with foreign scholars, especially in cases of disagreement in academic debates. Based in her interviews with Japanese academics, she found that their communication strategies contradicted some paradigmatic studies carried out by Western scholars on Japanese communication styles and culture.

The same problematic hegemony was highlighted by Tania Pérez Bustos (National Institute of Advanced Studies, Colombia) about education in science and technology and its andocentric northern problems from feminist perspectives. Nese Karahasan (Middle East Technical University) talked about how cultural elements influence academic sociological research in Turkey in the last 20 years; Turkey has been going through a radical transformation with the increasing effects of globalization and the heightened criticism of modernization. I Ketut Ardhana (Udayana University, Bali) presented about the cultural studies in Indonesia and Carmen Bueno Castellanos (Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad De México) discussed the field of social anthropology in a Mexican context. Castellanos urges for more equitable collaboration between the north and the south and between academics from one side and NGO’s, business and international organizations, from the other.

Based on concrete cases, participants also debated how scientific knowledge can include indigenous knowledge, without falling into trap of the ideological defensive dimension of the debate. Michael Christie (Charles Darwin University, Australia) reported positively upon a collective examination of the knowledge practices of an Australian Aboriginal society, and an Australian university. For several years, a group of researchers (including aborigine co-researchers) associated with his University have been working on a research program which links digital technology to remote community sustainability, the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, and the authentic engagement of remote traditional knowledge authorities in university teaching and research. In the same vein, César Carrillo Trueba (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) provided an interesting example about the relevance of indigenous agriculture and medical knowledge in Mexico and urged for equitable collaborations to achieve practical ends and to move from a closed ‘Universe’ to an infinite ‘Pluriverse’.

Participants also echoed the power-knowledge critique of the idea of value neutrality advanced by Foucault. I demonstrated how the university system and the system of social knowledge production greatly influence elite formation in the Arab East. Many elements are at play, namely, the admission system, new processes, such as accreditation, curriculum updating, community services, and fundraising skills, but also publication that allows scholars to compete for academic and institutional promotion. Universities have often produced compartmentalized elites inside each nation-state they don’t talk with each other: either elite that publish globally and perish locally or elite that publish locally and perish globally. I, as well as Hebe Vessuri, argued for dialogue and intercultural translation in order to bridge between the global and local: social research production then becomes universal by its dialogue with international peers and relevant by its conversation with the local community. Pablo Kreimer (Quilmes National University, Argentina) also elaborated in this dilemma,

based on his study of science, technology and society in Latin America. In ‘peripheral but globalized’ societies, he demonstrated many tensions between first, international issues become to be considered relevant, versus local issues affecting actors without the capacity to formulate them in the public arena; between scientific cultures embedded in internationalized élites who validate their agendas inside transnational knowledge fields, versus local policies based upon the magic thought ‘production-use’ of knowledge (relevant, robust, whatever), but with a lack of the concrete industrializing conditions; and finally between Laboratory practices (instrumentation, negotiations, representations) that operate “as if” they were autonomous of their context, versus actors of the civil society who only question the effects of scientific development, but not the epistemic basis that supports it.

Working the nexus between power and knowledge in the case of Brazil, Cláudio Costa Pinheiro (The School of Social Sciences and History, Rio de Janeiro) brought two compelling examples: first, the French demographer Alfred Sauvy’s idea of the “Third World”, was developed in Brazil and published first in 1951 in a prestigious Brazilian academic journal but it became ‘universal’ concept only when it was published the following year in the French magazine *Observateur*. “Third World” theory was obliterated from the debate in Brazil. For Costa Pinheiro, the development of social theories reproduce cleavage between the North (theory developer) and the South (theory consumer) and the memories of this debate were erased from the wider narrative of the concept – “Third World” – and its consequences. However, in contrast with the transitivity of “Third World” theory Pinheiro gave an example of dependency theory that was able to directly travel from Brazil to the global south and north. Yet, for the North, this theory has had its image associated with an “ideology” when it was truly an intellectual movement with a problematic in common.

Finally, this workshop was not a sort of lofty theoretical discussion, but very well embedded in grounded case studies that stem from different contexts. It explored multi-versalism, not as a hard-line concept but as a working concept that opposes the way universality has repressed voiceless scholars in the global south. Multi-versalism is a way of thinking the limitations of universalism. It is not occidentalism opposing orientalism but a way to think dialogue and intercultural translation between northern and southern researchers. Multi-versalism is a way of working out structural dependency but also of highlighting the optional dependency. Workshop participants are aware of the internationalization of social sciences and were preoccupied with how this internationalization will be culturally sensitive, acknowledging the pluralism of resources of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge.