Southern Theory

Raewyn Connell argues that at its inception as a discipline there was no sense within sociology that ‘certain texts were discipline-defining “classics” demanding special study’ or that there was a particular ‘originating event’ around which scholarship need cohere. The approach was more encyclopaedic than canonical and, she suggests, the research focus of the early sociologists was organised around the theme of ‘global difference’ rather than understandings of modernity. Their understanding of ‘global difference’, Connell continues, came about as a consequence of ‘the process of economic and colonial expansion’ and thus was a concept bequeathed by empire, rather than ‘invented’ by those sociologists (1997: 1519). As such, Connell suggests that sociology needs to be understood as shaped by imperialism and as embodying ‘a cultural response to the colonized world’ (1997: 1519). It is this global sensibility, she argues, that then gets lost and requires recovery.

Her key text, Southern Theory, presents the thought of a variety of social theorists from formerly colonised and peripheral societies, including settler-colonial countries such as Australia. She argues that while data from the periphery have occasionally been included in the considerations of theorists at the metropole, it is rarer for them to make reference to the social thought or ‘social experiences generated in the majority world’ (2007: 64). Connell’s primary objective is recovering the ‘deep prior experience of subjection to globalizing powers’ (2007: 65), that is consequent of colonialism, and integrating the instances of social thought that emanate from this into more generally accepted genealogies of social theory. She argues
that ‘the only possible future for social science on a world scale involves a principle of unification’ (2007: 223); that is, connecting ‘different formations of knowledge in the periphery with each other’ and with knowledge from the metropole (2007: 213).

Essential Reading:


Further Reading:


Questions:

What is the significance and contribution of Southern theory to an understanding of the global?

What is the relationship of earlier Northern theory to contemporary theorisations of the global?

Are Connell’s arguments about Sociology’s earlier global sensibility mirrored within other disciplines?

What is the place of ‘learning’ within Connell’s understanding of global social theory?
Submitted by Gurminder K Bhambra