

Are we eating the cannibal? Provincializing STS from Latin America

Pablo Kreimer

CONICET

Centro CTS (Universidad Maimónides)

Postcolonial STS discovered “failures” in the hegemonic paradigm

- Constructivists approaches (in a wider sense) noted that despite thinking of knowledge as “locally situated”, only a part of the universe was observed (“Euro-America”)
- The basic assumption betrayed their own perspective:
 - If all contexts matter, why some are considered as ‘marginal’? (Latour, 1988: “Normal science, yes; marginal science, no”)
 - The hegemonic contexts don’t need to be explained: they are ‘natural’
 - On the other hand, some theoretical and methodological assumptions were extrapolated (and applied) to any context (ANT, Third wave, coproductionism, etc.)

Meanwhile, in Gotham City (that is, in LA and in other regions) ... some questions arose

-The tools often used for the study of "Euroamerican technoscience" were useful but insufficient to understand S&T in Latin America. (However, a large part of scholars, fascinated by the 'modern' approaches, applied them in an uncritical way)

But: It is not about "refusing to be constrained by the northern science and technology studies (STS) conceptual frameworks" as pinpointed Sandra Harding (2016).

This could lead to an infant anti-imperialism

Indeed, the problem is more complex: the contrast between research agendas

Some examples of topics important for Latin American STS that are ignored in the mainstream:

- South-North scientific migrations (and the so-called 'brain drain') (Oteiza, in the 60's)
- The structural asymmetry in the process of international scientific co-operation (Vessuri, Kreimer, 90's and 2000's)
- Circulation and importation of Research policy frameworks and institutions (from the 'National Councils' in the 60's to National Systems of Innovation in the 90's, among others) (Velho, Casas, Feld, etc. 90's - present)
- The hybridation of 'Western' and indigenous knowledge (Olivé, Vessuri, 80's -90's)
- The subordinated integration of research agendas and the role of scientific publishing (Kreimer, Rodriguez Medina, 2000's)
- The blackbox of 'imported' regulatory knowledge (several authors)
- The role of English in the production of scientific knowledge (Ortiz, 2000's)

Postcolonial STSs have pros and cons:

- On the one hand, it is a real advance suggesting to “provincialize STS” and to explore a “new postcolonial principle of symmetry” (Law & Li, 2015, 2017), to pay attention to the “sciences from below” (Harding, 2008) , or a proposal to develop postcolonial STS (Anderson, 2009)
- These approaches helped to ‘make visible the invisible’ and to show ‘what’s going on in other regions’
- They challenge the ‘natural view’ of ‘Western technoscience” as simply ‘technoscience’
- They could also help to decentralize STS hegemonic models and to enlarge the research agendas...

But...

Dissolving asymmetries?

- This implies smoothing down asymmetries, as suggested by W. Anderson (2000, 2008):

“If we are especially fortunate, these histories will creatively complicate conventional distinctions between center and periphery, modern and traditional, dominant and subordinate, civilized and primitive, global and local”

- Or, as stated more directly by R. Macleod (2000):

“it is necessary to dissolve the 'center-periphery' models [and go towards] a more complete understanding, often nourished by anthropological perspectives. And replace the divisions of center and periphery with new patterns of mutual interdependence”

THIS OPERATION OPENS THE DOORS TO DISSOLVING ASYMMETRIES.
IS IT A GOOD THING?

New problems emerge:

It is not about discovering new (provincial) “localities”, in a play of “assembling by addition” or some kind of “federal globalization” ..

Instead, it might be about understanding the dynamics of different “localities” that sometimes are autonomous, but more often are inter-connected (and then, what happens in “peripheries” affects -or may affect- what happens in “centres” !)

The topic of the language (a theme almost completely ignored in the “North”)

“The lingua franca is imposed, even if it is inconsistent with the patterns of social sciences” (Ortiz, 2009, La supremacía del inglés en las ciencias sociales). [The Supremacy of English in the Social Sciences]

And we can confirm this:

Law and Li (2015): “We cannot read Spanish or Portuguese, but the English language publications of authors such...”

Jurists say “When there's a confession, you need no proof”

What are the linguistic challenges for a “global STS”? (example of 4S 2014)

And talking about language... “Northern and Western” science?

- What does it mean “North” and “South”?

Mexico, Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Lethonia, etc. are in the geographical North but in the peripheral South?

South Africa, Australia are in the geographical South but in the ‘central North’?

Latin America is not a part of “Western societies”? (See “The extreme West”, by French historian Alain Rouquié)

Taking reflexivity seriously:

Hypothesis:

1. We have shown an international division of scientific work for the natural sciences:
 - Theoretical questions are concentrated in 'central' labs and institutions, while peripheral groups focus on empirical work;
 - In large consortia, research agendas are driven by hegemonic groups;
 - The industrialization of knowledge usually take place in 'central' countries, often using knowledge produced in developing countries

Is it possible to think that there is an analogous situation regarding STS?

Is it possible to think that there is an analogous situation regarding STS?

- The 'central' locality need not to be explained, while peripheral locality has to be justified (e. g. Pasteur versus Carlos Chagas, or La Jolla versus Ushuaia);
- Theoretical innovations based upon 'peripheral objects' have less visibility (or none) compared to theoretical innovations based upon 'central' research;
- Peripheral STS researchers have to know all the international literature, even if it is not relevant to their studies;
- If they wish to publish in mainstream journals, they have to concentrate on empirical findings, focusing on "their cases" (applying hegemonic frameworks), rather than producing theory or general analysis;

Noblesse oblige: We have to acknowledge that the *provincializing movement* succeed in slightly integrate some 'peripheral' scholars and to be more open to what happens (in technoscience) and what is investigated in non hegemonic contexts. However:

- Sometimes it is viewed as something "exotic"; and
- Most mainstream journals (SSS, STHV, S&PP, PUS, Minerva) are driven by hegemonic scholars, while several other journals are devoted to "other regions" (STS, EASTS, Tapuya, etc.)

Until today, we lack an integrated paradigm. Some questions:

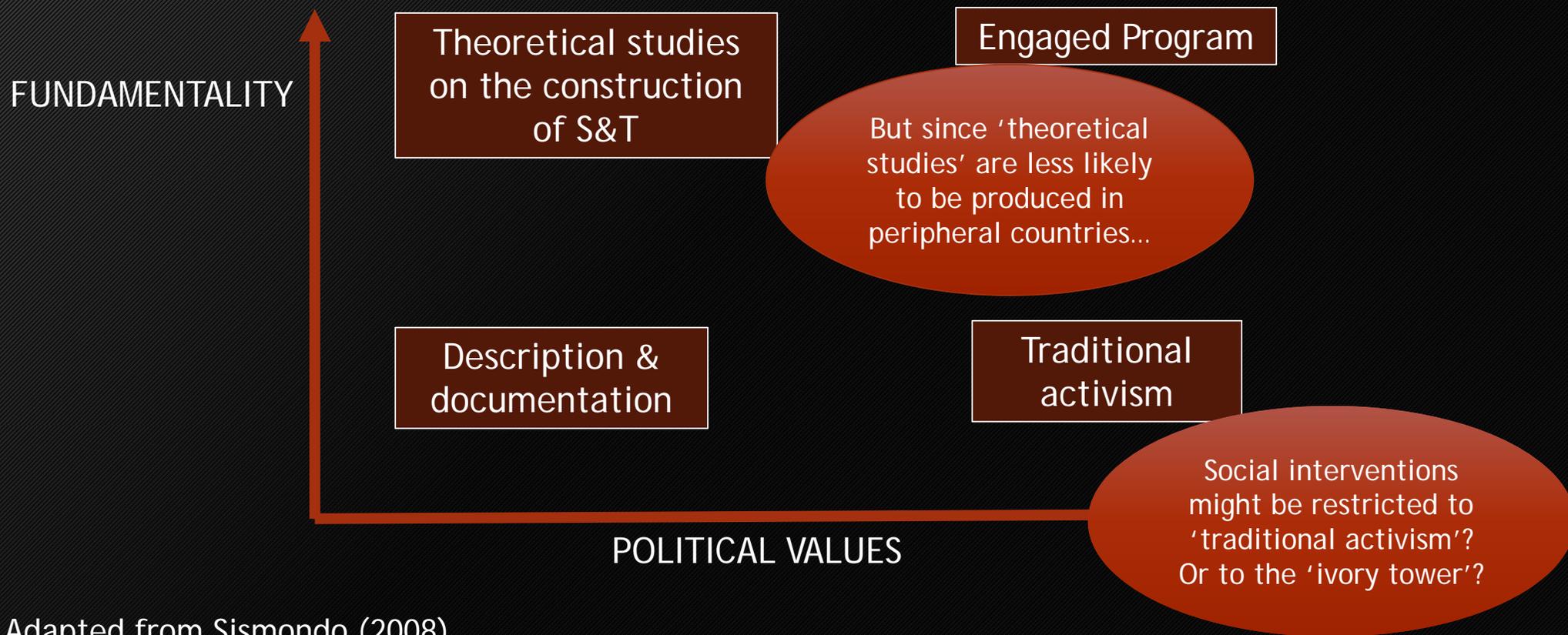
- How hegemonic science was affected by South-North migrations? (there is a large amount of literature investigating the opposite, with an approach close to philanthropy...);
- If we take the challenge seriously, we have to ask for the appropriate level of analysis to understand the “new globalities/localities” (this is the opposite to “provincialize”)
- Between laboratories and local networks (ANT) on the one hand, and a very global aggregation (on the other): we have fields, specialities or knowledge regimes exceeding the local, that allow us to observe the complexity and, over all, the asymmetries..

A re-situated STS field should not work by addition, but investigating the complexities.

Here I do meet John Law: “if we do succeed, then we will have created a plurality of intersecting STSs and sensibilities, and we will be able to say that we have undone the provincialism of STS”.

ON THE CONDITION THAT THE ASYMMETRIES ARE NOT FORGOTTEN OR SMOOTHED DOWN

STS: an 'Engaged Program' in peripheral contexts?



We have never been symmetrical?

Thank you!