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Asymmetries of Knowledge in Latin America

“In the social studies of science and technology, we recognize that science has been, and continues to be, deeply elitist (...) But it can be democratized, and it can be helpful in disassembling negative patterns that are rooted in society (...) it can be used to help in dismantling the elitist and reductionist view that there is only one single and rightful knowledge, demonstrating that there can be different ways to obtain knowledge.” (Hebe Vessuri in interview for CROLAR, Vol. 3(2), 2014)

In 2012, CROLAR – Critical Reviews on Latin American Research – published its first volume. It highlighted the importance of the theme of inequalities in Latin America, understood there as a characteristic related to the configurations of the relations between the global North and South. This volume, entitled “Asymmetries of Knowledge in Latin America,” focuses on inequalities in relation to the process of knowledge production and circulation in/about/to/from Latin America. Our interest in this particular topic stems from the necessity for reflection and discussion regarding the relationship between inequalities and the production of knowledge from a perspective that puts asymmetries center stage.

In this context, we use the term “asymmetries of knowledge” to refer on the one hand to the asymmetries – ethno-racial, gender, and class, among others – produced, reproduced, and legitimized by the knowledge production and circulation processes in/about/to/from Latin America. On the other hand, we also

use it to address the axes of power crossing these processes – e.g., the tensions between the local and the global, the different types of knowledge and the subjects that sustain it –that contribute to the establishment of epistemic hierarchies. Both dimensions require uncovering the mechanisms, practices, beliefs, and discourses that are immersed in these processes and their implication in the exclusion processes.

The analysis of asymmetries of knowledge in Latin America is, of course, not a new topic. Nevertheless, scholarship about the issue is often dispersed. This is because there exists only limited interaction between various strands of literature and distinct disciplines manage diverging forms of analysis. In Latin America, a region that historically has been marked by the tensions between the local and the global, a strong scientific discourse prevails affirming the importance of science and technology in achieving higher levels of development. This volume is not trying to refute this view. Rather, it has the aim

of showing the complexity of science and technology in these development processes, thereby contributing to bridging the gap between different strands of literature and types of knowledge. Undoubtedly, the theoretical and empirical challenges, the nature of the asymmetries, and also the different forms of power that are embedded in the production of the asymmetries have influenced our motivation to dedicate a complete volume to the topic.

In this volume we include an exclusive interview with the prominent anthropologist Hebe Vessuri, who was invited to reflect on the topic of asymmetries of knowledge. Vessuri has dedicated her academic trajectory to examining this issue from the perspective of Science and Technology Studies. The interview revolves around four issues: the existence of global and local asymmetries; the specific processes and practices that refer to the notion of asymmetries of knowledge, and the contributions of the Social Studies of Science and Technology to exploring this matter; the role of scientific international organizations in reducing asymmetries; and, finally, the upcoming publication of the volume *Perspectivas latinoamericanas en el estudio de la ciencia, la tecnología y el conocimiento* (2014), organized by the ESOCITE network, in which she collaborates as an editor and author.

The section “Focus” of this volume presents a variety of reviews of books published between 2011 and 2014, which can be divided into four categories: First, we present four books referring to the relationship between knowing, knowledge, and power in the Latin

American context. Three of them treat issues related to institutions of higher education, such as Fernanda Beigel’s “The Politics of Academic Autonomy in Latin America”. She analyzes the false contradistinction between the original and autonomous knowledge produced at universities in the United States versus the politicized and dependent knowledge produced at Latin American universities. Examining a related issue in a different institutional realm, Arndt Brendecke’s *Imperio e información. Funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español* discusses the different types of knowledge and the generation of asymmetries and their meanings in the colonial social hierarchy.

The second category of reviews comprises four books that adopt a postcolonial perspective to reflect and analyze the discourses, practices, and mechanisms that knowledge legitimizes. Simultaneously, they contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries between countries, genders, and different types of knowledge. In this section we find books from classical authors like Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Walter D. Mignolo, Jean and John Comaroff, and Javier Sanjinés, but also a book coming forth out of Julia Roth’s doctoral thesis, “Decolonial Practices: Hemispheric Readings of Gender, Genre & Coloniality in Victoria Ocampo’s *Essay*, Frida Kahlo’s *Diary*, Rigoberta Menchu’s *Testimonio*”. Roth’s book undertakes a decolonial reflection by relating the gender category and its traditional East and West geographical coordinates.

The third part includes two collective contributions belonging to the field of Latin American Social Studies of Science and Technology. It presents the works of a group of scholars who have focused on stimulating its development from a critical and regional perspective during recent years.

The section closes with three books inviting us to approach asymmetries of knowledge from a local/regional perspective. These books include an anthropological contribution of the Mexican case and a contribution to the environmental history of the Amazon. Furthermore, the edited volume "Political Economy, Communication and Knowledge: A Latin American Perspective" (Bolaño et al.) encourages us to reflect on the role of new technologies in the expansion and concentration of capital, as well as on the process of commercialization of cultural activities and education in Latin America.

Meanwhile, the two reviews included in the section "Interventions" invite us to think about asymmetries of knowledge from the perspective of art and literary journalism. The section commences with the review of a book that explores the appearance of the female body in the work of creative visual workers in Costa Rica as a symbolic web making visible asymmetries that are derived from gender relations. The second review is of a travel account in which the journey of the main character can be considered a knowledge production process marked by asymmetries linked to nationality, religion, and the relation with others.

In the section "Classics Revisited" Edward Shills's "Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology" (1975) is presented as a key work for our understanding of the logic of the asymmetries of knowledge. Shills was one of the first scholars who proposed to discuss the concepts "center" and "periphery" in the Social Sciences, thus giving an important impetus to the scholarly debates that developed during the following decades. In Latin America, these concepts are once again becoming important today. Leandro Rodríguez, himself author of the review, discusses the same concepts in his work "Centers and Peripheries in Knowledge Production" in relation to the circulation of social knowledge between central and peripheral countries, and the carrier trajectories of academics in peripheral countries that is reviewed in the "Focus" section of this volume.

Ultimately, in the section "New Debates" we present the book *Incluyendo sin excluir. Género y movilidad en instituciones de educación superior* (Chan et al.), that deals with the topic of social inclusion at the university and proposals to further it. Here you will find, moreover, a review of the newest book of Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez, entitled "Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America. Emergence, Survival, and Fall", which adopts a comparative political perspective to explain the evolution of political regimes in Latin America from 1900 to 2010.

The different books that are brought together in this volume invite us to discuss, connect, and reflect on different perspectives

and realities in which asymmetries are manifested in Latin America: 1) The local and global policies of knowledge; 2) the process of legitimation of asymmetries in race, gender, ethnicity, and class through knowledge; 3) and the hierarchies between knowing, knowledge, and experiences, and their role in the construction of knowledge in “modernity”.

On a personal note, the editing of this volume has served as a challenging exercise to question the existing model of knowledge production in which we are immersed. From our reduced action radius and with our own limitations, we have tried to make visible the topic, but we are also conscious that we may not have been able to overcome the reproduction of these asymmetries ourselves. However, through the different sections of this volume we offer to the reader a reflection from different disciplines, perspectives, and interdisciplinary dialogues that allow us to analyze the power relations between race, ethnicity, gender and class, and also their intersections involved in the production of asymmetries legitimized by the actual knowledge itself.

We hope that we have awakened your interest in this topic and that this new volume of CROLAR serves as an invitation to start rethinking the production and circulation of knowledge from a critical point of view. At least for the editorial team of the journal this objective has turned out to be a constant challenge. Until now a very important criterion of CROLAR has been connecting academic fields, for example, through the publication of book reviews in languages different from

their original language of publication. We hope that this challenge will be in a growing compromise.

We wish you a very pleasant read!