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The Rise of the Global South

Paper presented at FLACSO, Argentina, September 2008

Boike Rehbein

In my paper, I wish to make two related points. First, the rise of the global South is the most significant change in the social world since British industrialization. Second, this has implications for the social sciences. I wish to advance the two points in four steps. First, I outline some traits of our conventional social sciences. Then I explain why they don't fit the rise of the global South any more. In the third section, I will briefly sketch some elements of the social world after the rise of the global South. Finally, I will draw some conclusions for social theory.

Eurocentric theory

Our social sciences are based on a view of the social world that I would call Eurocentric. The view comprises, among others, the following characteristics: an ethnocentric writing of history, an evolutionism, a container model of society, an economism and an empirical focus on European societies. These characteristics are rooted in the development of the social sciences in the late eighteenth century. The social sciences grew out of economics and philosophy precisely at the time when Europe acquired dominance of the world. The rest of the world came under European rule and seemed obliged to follow the model of European development. Therefore, it was almost self-evident to look at the emergence of modern Europe in order to understand the social world.

The foundation of the Eurocentric view is an ethnocentric writing of history. Since European Enlightenment, history books start with a general prehistory and the rise of the early Oriental civilizations. The first civilizations then culminated in the first real culture that included science, democracy and freedom, that of Greece. From there the torch of civilization was passed on to Rome and the Dark Ages to the enlightened, capitalistic and democratic Northwestern Europe that came to dominate the whole world. That means, the entire history is interpreted as a prehistory of Europe, as can be seen in the writings of Hegel and Marx, Luhmann and Habermas.

Ethnocentric history went along with an evolutionism. As all history was a prehistory of Europe, it supposedly reached its fulfilment in modern Europe – later the “end of history” was reached in the perfection of European civilization in the United States. All social sciences presupposed that all non-European societies were underdeveloped,

lacked certain essential civilizational traits and had to imitate the European model in order to become developed.

According to European reality from the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first century, the social sciences looked at nation states as their units of analysis. Ulrich Beck has called this the “container model of society”. According to this model, society is contained within the borders of a nation state like rice in a bowl. And like the rice grains in the bowl every individual within the society has one and only one social position. We can draw lines between groups of individuals to arrive at classes or strata.

The basis of this classification of individuals is their economic standing. The criteria for determining the social position have been economic: We look at the profession, the wealth and/or the income. This again is linked to the development of the social sciences in line with European capitalism. Formally free wage-labour and income became fundamental criteria for social life only in modern European capitalism.

These four characteristics are linked to the empirical focus on modern European societies. Therefore, we might call our social sciences provincial and chauvinistic. We either don't care what the rest of the world looks like or we just apply the models derived from research on Europe to all other societies.

This game is over now. The domination of Northwestern Europe and subsequently of the United States has come to an end. That means that Western modernity cannot be the model for the entire world. Second, unilinear evolution towards the European model may not be the correct way of interpreting history. Third, the container model applies only to the very brief period of European domination. Fourth, the economism is linked to European capitalism, which also characterizes only a brief period of a small region. Finally, Europe and the United States are merely two regions among many today. Therefore, our social sciences could be viewed as area studies of Northwestern Europe and the United States.

The Rise of the Global South

To apply European and Northamerican area studies to the rest of the world seemed convincing as long as the entire world was a European colony and forced to comply would European models. The United States seemed to continue this civilizational programme. From this perspective, one could think that European modernity and capitalism could have developed only in Europe and had to be exported to the rest of the world. However, new research shows that virtually all traits of European modernity were developed

in China much earlier than in Europe, such as capitalistic economic behaviour, a free labour market, paper money, a monetarized tax system, competitive free markets, excess capital and heavy industry.

- If we look at the thirteenth or the sixteenth century or even at ancient times, we see large regions of the world trading with each other. In all of these regions, some people produced for the market and sold the products to capitalistic merchants who traded them over short and long distances. None of the regions dominated the world even though there were centres and peripheries. Europe entered the multicentric world as a latecomer in antiquity (Greece and Rome) and in modernity (especially England) to achieve dominance for a brief period. This dominance was dependent on the existing trade systems and their conjunctures. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a decline of the great Asian empires corresponded to a rise of Europe, which was partly due to the use of African slaves and American resources. On this basis, Europe was able to reach a dominant position in the world.
- It is very unlikely that Euro-American dominance continues. In many areas, the global South catches up or takes the lead. If we compare shares of global GDP, we see that they start getting back to normal.

The global South's share in world production is increasing dramatically, from five percent in 1950 to twenty percent in 1997 and almost thirty percent today. In many fields of production, China has become number one, especially in heavy industries. China is also the number one recipient of foreign direct investment. This rise of China also entails, as we all know, a rise in prices of primary goods and therefore an improvement in the financial and political position of the producers that are mainly in the global South. Financial markets in China and India are starting to attract capital volumes that are comparable to Western countries. Finally, IMF and World Bank have lost their influence on the global South. There are just too many dollars in Caracas and Beijing. These dollars are used to invest in the global South and to finance the US economy.

Beyond the economy, the global South is gaining political ground. Without Mercosur and ASEAN or G20 and BRICSA, no international agreement can be reached. The global South is forging alliances against the North. Furthermore, education in the global South is becoming competitive – as we can see here at FLACSO. States like India and China and Argentina are raising their educational budgets while the US and Europe are decreasing it. The result is an increasing number of Nobel prize winners, IT specialists and high-ranking universities, especially from India. Finally, in terms of demography

the global South has an advantage that will have an increasing impact. Populations in the global South do not only enjoy an increasing level of education – for example, the percentage of people holding a university degree is higher in Argentina than in Germany – but they are also much younger.

For the time being, the global South continues to emulate models from the global North. And it does not form a powerful opposition yet. States in the South are still too weak to come up with true alternatives – even though the Olympic Games in Beijing were meant to precisely prove the opposite. Furthermore, states in the South are encountering huge problems, such as inequality, low per-capita incomes, political fragmentation, weak financial markets and resource constraints. Finally, military dominance of the US (that spends half of the world's defence budget) remains undisputed.

Return of the Multicentric World

In spite of the South's problems, Euro-American dominance and unilateralism belong to the past. We are seeing the return of the multicentric world that has characterized most of world history. In many regards, our contemporary world has more resemblances with the thirteenth than with the twentieth century. But what does it look like exactly? We don't know yet but we can see tendencies and contours. Let me briefly describe some of them.

First, the rise of the global South has an impact on the global division of labour. The young populations, especially in India and China, will contribute as much to the global labour force as the entire West. As they continue to work for comparatively low wages, outsourcing from the West will continue. Along with labour-intensive production, high-end production will also increase in the global South as populations enjoy increasing levels of education and investment. The rise of India's IT sector is well-known and speaks for itself.

In production, trade and politics we see an increasing cooperation between countries of the global South. It may not be very efficient yet – as indicated by the fact that our Indian colleague did not get a visa for this conference in time – but it is real and it is developing. The G-20 has grown to include most countries of the global South.

- The interaction between the countries of the global South beyond the Indian and Pacific Oceans is historically new.

At the same time, old ties are being revitalized, such as the silk route and the links across the Indian Ocean. The West doesn't play a role in these.

Contemporary division of labour and political interaction only partly fit the container model of society. Even the large nation states of the global South have very little in common with twentieth century Europe and with each other. India and China are old civilizations comparable with regions like the Middle East and the whole of Europe, while South Africa and Brazil are artificial creations of slave-exploiters. If we go beyond states, we see large transnational corporations playing a leading role on the global stage.

- Wal-Mart is China's number eight trading partner, while General Motors' turnover exceeds the entire GDP of South Africa. Furthermore, states are highly uneven. The GDP of the city of Shanghai is half of South Africa's and bigger than Chile's, while a couple of hundred kilometres from Shanghai, peasants are starving. Within and beyond states, movements and organizations play an increasing role. Along with them, new forms and structures of the division of labour are emerging, from informal labour associations to subcultural networks to the Chinese diaspora. They have little in common with European capitalism. The container model was applicable only to part of Europe's populations but on a global scale, it grasps very little. Today, there are officially about 200 million unemployed persons, and there are 500 million underemployed, maybe another 500 million housewives and around 3 billion seniors and juniors. Finally, the number of people working in the so-called informal sector by far exceeds formal wage labour. In India for example, three percent of the population works in the formal sector.

What we are seeing is not the emergence of a world society with one integrated structure. We are rather seeing a complex configuration of flows and scapes, some of which are organized as national or global divisions of formal wage labour. With regard to this realm of society, we might speak of a functional division of labour in Luhmann's sense and a possible world society. This division of labour is increasingly separated from local and national cultures and social structures. In relation to the functional division of labour, social structure becomes capitalistic in Bourdieu's broad sense. People have access to labour in relation to their economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. This division of labour is spreading to include an increasing number of types of labour and to commodify an increasing number of objects.

Therefore, Wallerstein has argued that we are seeing the emergence of a capitalist world system, which he defined as an all-encompassing division of labour. However, at the same time that we can observe a spread of this division of labour, we are seeing the per-

sistence and even resurgence of older cultures and social structures that I call sociocultures. Especially in the global South sociocultures like patrimonialism, kinship ties or absolutism persist and play an important role in the organization of the social world beyond the functional division of labour. Even a country like Germany is not intelligible independently of the persistence of feudal corporations and family connections. This is all the more true for new phenomena of global importance like the Chinese diaspora or the ASEAN.

On the basis of increasing global integration and the persistence of sociocultures, we may discern four tendencies of contemporary globalization. First, the number and quality of inclusions into networks becomes increasingly important, as Castells has argued. This entails an increasing importance of fluid resources like mobility and internet access and social connections and a decreasing importance of cultural and fixed capital. Second, social groups become particularized. This has nothing to do with individualization but with the organization of groups in large, anonymous societies with a highly specialized division of labour. Durkheim suggested the emergence of labour associations but with the relatively decreasing importance of formal labour other criteria become more important for the organization of groups that can basically correspond to any social division. Third, alternative forms of a division of labour arise that correspond either to resurging sociocultures or to hybrids of sociocultures and global tendencies. Fourth, as social groups and divisions of labour are increasingly organized according to particularized differences, entirely new sociocultures are arising, such as the Pentecostal movement or the techno-scene.

Theoretical Consequences

It is evident that the world is growing together, that transnational links are gaining importance and that the container model is outdated. But what consequences do we draw from this? Wallerstein has attacked Eurocentrism and tried to overcome it by analyzing society as a world system. However, according to Wallerstein this world system comprises exactly three classes that are defined by their position in the global division of labour. Hereby, Wallerstein merely enlarges the container model to a global scale.

This is a theoretical problem. According to Hegel and Marx, Wallerstein and Luhmann the social world is a totality that either follows one logic or is assimilated to the European logic. If this is the case, all parts of the totality have to follow the same logic. Most Eurocentric theories have actually made this claim. According to Hegel and Marx,

Wallerstein and Luhmann all phenomena that cannot be subsumed under their theories do not play a role for understanding the social world. This was convincing as long as Europe dominated the world. From this perspective, the rise of the global South would either be short-lived or in the end reproduce the entire Eurocentric picture. Both is unlikely. And even if it were the case, we already saw that at least most of history did not function according to the Eurocentric picture.

In my opinion, there are two theoretical problems about the overarching Eurocentric theories that are more serious than their inadequacy to the past and the future. First, they are so abstract that they cannot grasp the majority of the social world. The different sociocultures, new social movements, migration, diasporas, multiculturalism, regional configurations and global cities are all phenomena that fall through the grid of these theories. We could say that precisely that which we consider characteristic of contemporary globalization cannot be seen from this perspective. And it is even worse if we look at local social phenomena.

I would like to put the emphasis on the other theoretical problem however. Thinking in terms of a totality comprising one logic is nineteenth century science to me. In the natural sciences, nobody talks about the container of the universe containing solid bodies in certain positions any more. One talks about various space-time-systems that are relative to each other and that each have their proper time- and space-structures. I think it is very similar with regard to social phenomena. It depends on the purpose and the relation where a certain phenomenon, such as a society, begins and ends, how its history relates to other histories and which concepts are important. In Wittgenstein's terms, all societies merely bear family resemblances and not one overarching logic explained in universal concepts.

To exemplify this, we could look at religion. We think this is a clear concept but nobody has come up with a clear definition and a clear boundary of the concept yet. Is animism a religion and if not, do all the animistic or pagan elements within religion such as Christmas belong to the religion or not? Is the Pentecostal movement part of the church or not? And so on. The point is that phenomena that we classify as religion have some traits in common but no trait is common to all and no two phenomena have all traits in common. Like the members of a family. This is why Wittgenstein used the term family resemblance.

If we apply this argument to the social world, we will still use universal concepts like religion, institution or division of labour, but in each case the concept will have a differ-

ent meaning. It can only be explicated and used in relation to a historically and socially specific configuration. We may come up with general categories like action, inequality or domination to apply to all phenomena alike. This is what the theory of systems is trying to do. But without any link to empirical concepts, these categories do not only remain void but are also arbitrary. As soon as we use empirical concepts, we have to refer to empirical material, which is singular or particular but not universal. Categories may be universal. They are important, can be used in different contexts and frame the scientific endeavour. But they are useless in themselves. Empirical concepts on the other hand can be translated into other contexts but cannot be applied indifferently to them.

To conclude

The rise of the global South teaches us that our Eurocentric concepts and stories are not universal. They apply to a specific time and place. In my opinion, it would be the wrong conclusion to say that by the end of this century we will be doing an Indian or a Chinese science. And it would also be a wrong conclusion to say that anything goes. We rather need to relate empirically saturated analyses using different concepts, contexts and propositions to each other in something that I call a configuration or a kaleidoscope. Differing stories about different empirical cases may not fit nicely but they do not necessarily have to fit because the cases actually do not match. If you wish, they are different time-space-systems. The only thing we have to agree on is the general theory of science. Some aspects of it I have just tried to lay out. The core of this theory of science might be that we should continue to talk and teach but should start to learn and listen as well. This will be especially important since more and more voices will try to make themselves heard and some of them will also claim universal truth.