



Cartographies of epistemic expropriation: Critical reflections on learning from the south

Sam Halvorsen*

Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

There are increasing efforts within Anglophone geography to take seriously and learn from knowledges produced in the global south. Although this move is usually based on ethical and political motivations of Anglophone geographers, there are competing sets of pragmatic and parochial motivations that pose tensions. The value of learning from the south is often only implicitly made and few attempts have been made to map the evolving forms and distribution of values generated through engaging southern knowledges. Critically reflecting on my own engagements with Latin American, and particularly Argentine, knowledges, this paper argues that current enthusiasm with southern epistemologies may be paving the way for the intensification of epistemic expropriation: the extraction and valorisation of knowledge in a depoliticised context elsewhere. The paper develops the notion of epistemic expropriation to direct attention to how south-north circulations of academic knowledge may be complicit in the geographically uneven valorisation of academic labour and the depoliticisation of knowledge's concrete use-values. In the process of learning from Latin American knowledges, particularly around territory, I have generated clear value for my own career progression, and for Anglophone geographers, while it is less clear what my Argentine counterparts have gained. Moreover, in abstracting knowledges from their particular terrains of struggles, particularly the experiences of Greater Buenos Aires, I have facilitated a depoliticisation of grassroots ideas and practices. The final section argues that practices of epistemic expropriation are reinforced and sustained by Anglophone hegemony in “international” geography, posing dilemmas for those engaging with southern knowledges.

1. Introduction

I am a white, male, British geographer inspired by knowledges produced in Latin America. My research examines the relationship between territory and grassroots urban politics in the UK (London) and Argentina (Buenos Aires) and I have regularly moved between these two sites. My geographical understandings have been strongly informed by knowledges produced in Argentina and Latin America where the relationship between territory and activism has been extensively researched. As an Anglophone geographer my decision to engage and learn from Latin American knowledges has been facilitated by a broader disciplinary movement, instigated by feminist (Gibson-Graham, 1994; McDowell and Sharp, 1997; Rose, 1993) and postcolonial (McEwan, 2008; Raghuram and Madge, 2006; Slater, 1992; Townsend et al., 1995) scholars, towards the decentring of dominant (white, male) Anglo-American voices. Although the ongoing epistemological turn towards the global south is often based on explicit ethical and political motivations of Anglophone geographers (e.g. Jazeel, 2016; McFarlane,

2006; Radcliffe, 2017), there are competing sets of pragmatic and parochial motivations that pose tensions. As I have encountered in my research, the value of learning from Latin America appears self-evident and requires little justification. Yet the form and distribution of this value is unclear and demands greater scrutiny. Reflecting on my own experiences, this paper argues that current enthusiasm with southern epistemologies may, perhaps unwittingly, be paving the way for the intensification of epistemic expropriation: the extraction and valorisation of knowledge in a depoliticised context elsewhere.

This paper develops the notion of epistemic expropriation to direct attention to how south-north circulations of academic knowledge may be complicit in the geographically uneven valorisation of academic labour and the depoliticisation of knowledge's concrete use-values. While postcolonial scholars have long acknowledged, and lamented, the extractivist nature of much Anglophone research, particularly in development studies (Robbins, 2006; Townsend et al., 1995), relatively little attention has been given to mapping out the values of Anglophone engagements with southern knowledges and acknowledging the often

* Address: School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: s.halvorsen@qmul.ac.uk.

contradictory outcomes. In developing the notion of epistemic expropriation I add to, on the one hand, work on the political-economy of academic knowledge production (e.g. [Aalbers, 2004](#); [Beigel and Sabea, 2014](#); [Keim et al., 2014](#); [Paasi, 2015](#)) by considering the consequences of my attempts to import Latin American knowledges into Anglophone geography. In so doing I map out the exchange-values of knowledge across multi-scalar circuits of knowledge production. On the other hand, I interrogate knowledge's broader use-values thus adding to debates on the global geopolitics of knowledge ([Asher, 2013](#); [Gidwani, 2008](#); [Grosfoguel, 2002](#); [Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010](#)). I reflect on the relationship between the case studies I research and the political terrain of Latin American knowledges being drawn upon, highlighting the potentially violent nature of abstraction across north-south divides.

The paper provides a personal reflection on dilemmas faced as an Anglophone geographer closely engaging Latin American knowledges. Despite having established relationships with Latin American academics and activists in recent years (particularly via regular periods living and working in Buenos Aires) I find myself reproducing the sorts of colonial practices I have strived to disrupt. The paper is thus part of an uncomfortable process of me coming to terms with my positionality and accepting the limits to what I may hope to achieve, particularly as an early career scholar facing heightened structural-institutional demands. In what follows I begin by exploring recent attempts within Anglophone geography to re-envision the global south not only as a site of empirical data collection but as a valid, perhaps privileged, site of theory and knowledge production. In so doing I examine how the value of south-north epistemological circulations are framed. The remainder of the paper explores in more depth the values of learning from the south based on personal experiences. First, I explore the value of academic knowledge production in the context of south-north circulations, considering how my epistemic practices may impact scholars in Argentina and Latin America. Second, I grapple with the broader use-values of the Latin American knowledges I engage with and consider the depoliticising effect of my removing them from particular terrains of struggles. The final section argues that practices of epistemic expropriation are reinforced and sustained by Anglophone hegemony in “international” geography, posing core dilemmas for those engaging with southern knowledges as I go on to emphasise in the conclusion.

2. Learning from the south in Anglophone geography

That learning from the south is a popular refrain within Anglophone geography is an extraordinary sign of the discipline's historical impoverishment and demonstrates an incapacity and/or unwillingness to take its own geography seriously. Calls to engage with southern knowledges – led by postcolonial geographers (e.g. [McEwan, 2008](#); [Raghuram and Madge, 2006](#); [Slater, 1992](#); [Townsend et al., 1995](#)) alongside other Anglophone social scientists (e.g. [Connell, 2007](#); [Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011](#); [Keim et al., 2014](#)) and most recently gaining prominence in urban studies (e.g. [Leitner and Sheppard, 2015](#); [Robinson, 2016a, 2016b](#); [Roy, 2009](#)) – frequently rest on two assumptions. First, that it makes little empirical or epistemological sense to separate southern/northern experiences of the world(s) but, second, (post)colonial divides have produced unequal material conditions through which knowledges are produced and circulated. This raises a number of ethical and political challenges for scholars based in privileged institutions in the global north to reflect on how and why they engage with southern knowledges and consider potential strategies for undoing or reversing the colonial power relations that inform their epistemological practices. Anglophone disciplinary geographers are increasingly reflecting on how best to move beyond their ethnocentric and (neo)colonial tendencies and incorporate global knowledges (see [Slater, 1992](#); [Radcliffe, 2017](#)). Despite the nuanced nature of much of this debate the value of turning to southern knowledges is often only made implicitly as authors quickly turn to the sorts of tactics and strategies needed for doing so (e.g. [Jazeel, 2014, 2016](#); [Robinson, 2003](#);

[Raghuram and Madge, 2006](#)). This section aims to briefly elaborate on the value of south-north knowledge circulations in order to set up the subsequent discussion on epistemic expropriation.

Value is a loaded concept that contains normative assumptions over how we understand and relate to the world. These assumptions are constructed through geographically and historically specific experiences. My own use of the term builds on heterodox Marxist thought and exposes my reliance on particular sets of modern/Western epistemologies rooted in the Anglophone social sciences. With this caveat aside, I find value a useful concept for considering the material outcomes of knowledge circulation. I have been inspired by attempts to outline a global political-economy of knowledge production by geographers and social scientists ([Agnew, 2007](#); [Gidwani, 2008](#); [Keim et al., 2014](#); [Paasi, 2005](#)) including work on Anglophone hegemony ([Aalbers and Rossi, 2009](#); [Kitchin, 2005](#)) and academic dependency ([Beigel and Sabea, 2014](#); [Galassi, 2013](#); [Gareau, 1988](#)) alongside understandings of the “geopolitics of knowledge” ([Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2010](#); [Quijano, 2000](#); [Mignolo and Escobar, 2010](#)) in the context of what [Grosfoguel \(2010\)](#) terms the “modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world system”. The valorisation of my academic labour is not only disciplined by neoliberal practices of quantification and measurement ([Castree and Sparke, 2000](#)) but also structured by a global division of labour that is deeply entangled with racial/colonial hierarchies ([Grosfoguel, 2010](#)). An awareness of how the valorisation of my research may be complicit in the maintenance of colonial hierarchies provoked what [Gidwani \(2008: 237\)](#) terms an “ethicopolitical moment” that has led me to revisit the otherwise implicit value of learning from the south.

Postcolonial and feminist geographers have been grappling with the ethicopolitical implications of research for years and provide an initial guide on how to (re)assess the value of learning from the south. First, there has been a persistent argument that learning from and engaging with knowledges produced in the global south is a necessary and strategic means of re-orientating development discourse towards a grassroots agenda ([McEwan, 2008](#)). [Townsend et al. \(1995\)](#) provide an early argument on the importance of valuing insiders' perspectives with the case of land settlers in the Mexican rainforest, particularly those of women. Prioritising the voices of Mexican women led [Townsend et al. \(1995: 132\)](#) to call for ‘more responsive, locally informed, participatory planning’ against dominant top-down trends in international development. Indeed subsequent years saw growing critiques of the attempt by northern intellectuals to represent people and issues in the global south and a turn towards participatory and engaged approaches that prioritise subaltern agency ([McEwan, 2008](#)), often through attempts to foster solidarity with social movements and grassroots activism (see [Mohanty, 2003](#)). This was combined with reflections on postcolonial “methods” ([Raghuram and Madge, 2006](#)) or “tactics” ([Robinson, 2003](#)) for doing development geography that both reorient theory to urgent practical issues of social justice and seek to expose and confront the global political economy that structures academic labour. Despite these nuances, the value of southern knowledges as a means of re-orienting development as a participatory practice that empowers grassroots actors has come under critical scrutiny ([Briggs and Sharp, 2004](#); [Cooke and Kothari, 2001](#); [Mohan and Stokke, 2010](#)) while proving an insufficient challenge to colonial divides within the global political economy of knowledge production.

A second set of overlapping arguments has made the case for the intrinsic value of southern knowledges in a relational world that questions north-south oppositions ([Hart, 2018](#); [Robinson, 2016a, 2016b](#); [Slater, 1992](#)). Rather than attempt to revisit modes of development and solidarity with excluded others the emphasis has been on the need to take “other” knowledges seriously in the here and now. In an early critique of the ethnocentrism implicit in critical (Anglophone) geography [Slater \(1992\)](#) argued that learning from the south provides a crucial vantage point for better understanding the north and its colonial relations in/with the world. The value of “provincialising” northern knowledges, to borrow [Chakrabarty's \(2000\)](#) influential term, is

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