

Knowledge divides and other tales from social science

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Review Title:

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This remarkable 422-page account of social science, worldwide, deserves wide dissemination and extensive discussion. Its ten (well-signposted) separate chapters are organised to explore the subtheme of the title – the global division of access to, and interest in, social science. There are three annexures: an easily accessible list of 30 illustrative tables, a list of 27 figures and a list of side ‘boxes’. The back of the book carries 7 pages of ‘abbreviations and acronyms’ and a readily accessible 20-page index. Each of the ten chapters is well introduced and the reader is alerted to audio (and web) access to the papers that it carries – most of which were delivered at a conference in Bergen, Norway, in May 2009.

If these organisational features of the report suggest purposeful direction and user-friendliness, then the individual essays are in the same vein – each runs at between 300 and 3000 words, about the length of a magazine article, with the same comfortable style. So getting to the gist of what is under discussion is easy. But, please do not be misled, this is not a gargantuan version of the pulp fiction produced by weekly news magazines. Amongst the contributors are the weightiest thinkers in contemporary social science – luminaries like the social theorist, Craig Calhoun; the network theorist, Saskia Sassen; and David Apter, a political *scientist*, one of the original champions of modernisation theory. Thankfully though, northern-based heavy luminaries do not dominate the proceedings, as they do most of the social sciences. Happily, enumerable southern-based scholars (including several South Africans) have ensured that this report is not dominated by the rich and supposedly informed.

Scant justice can be done to the range and the sweep of the report in a limited review, so hopefully a brief discussion of three topics will illustrate its value, and a single quibble will satisfy the ever-critical readers of SAJS.

Firstly, inherent throughout the book is a single intriguing idea – economics is not all that social science can offer the world. The link between social theorising and the desire to understand (and manage society) is made in the preface by Gudmund Hernes, President of the International Social Science Council. The observation that the industrial revolution sparked a social interest ‘in how the economy works and what the guiding principles for economic policy should be’ (p. vii) is an old one. But throughout these pages the accepted modern inversion of this – namely, that the economy should tell us how society should work – is thoroughly scrutinised. The Marxist geographer, David Harvey, is particularly strong on making this point, but others – Frédéric Lebaron (a sociologist) and Jon Elster (a philosopher of science), in particular – drive it home.

Secondly, as the subtitle suggests, the report is interested in exploring the knowledge gap between rich and poor and, although it is not said in these pages, between White and Black. This is not only a question of resources but an issue in which multiple relations perpetuate established power divides. On this topic the report has much to say – global publication patterns and the regime of university rankings (to mention only two) seem intent on perpetuating the global knowledge divide. As, incidentally, does the marketisation of research, the power of the English language and the brain drain: these three are also discussed in these pages. Efforts to break this hold – open access to journals or the development of strong regional consortia around knowledge, which are discussed – seem powerless in the face of the primary divide between the north, which makes knowledge, and the south, which consumes it.

Thirdly, the report pays attention to the complex – no, Byzantine – interface between knowledge and policymaking. At one end of a rather narrow spectrum this shows how knowledge is abused by politicians – something that South Africans well understand. At one end are politicians; in the centre are knowledge-carriers, especially think-tanks (which are not very well understood by South Africans); and at the other end are academics at their benches and books. Surely the key to that much over-used (but poorly understood) term ‘service delivery’, is situated along a divide on which, as far as one can tell, few South Africans are working. Those that do, are located in the narrow conceptual channel offered by the discipline of public administration.



And so to the quibble: although many of the pieces here come from the Bergen gathering, some were culled from elsewhere – Harvey's, for example, was presented at a seminar in New York. So, in the sense that some arrived in the report by a different route, there is unevenness in the report, but not in its quality and texture.

Like much other scholarship, social science in South Africa is itself highly uneven. The richness of this report should help explain why this is so. This is reason enough why it should be compulsory reading in local academic departments, university research offices and in the corridors of the Department of Science and Technology.
