

Book Review

Indigenous Knowledge in a Postcolonial Context

by

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Book Reviewed:

Catherine A. Odora Hoppers, editor.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation.

Claremont, South Africa: New Africa Education, 2002.

“If philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe.”

Michel Foucault¹

The Myth of Objectivity

Once upon a time, social scientists claimed that their effort to understand societies—their own and everyone else’s—was part of the modern project that had, since the Enlightenment, sought to replace emotion with reason, faith with science, and subjectivity with objective methods of inquiry.

Ideology and political prejudice were to be purged from scholarship and replaced by cool, disinterested and almost clinical approaches to the study of human ideas and actions. When addressing individuals and groups in both familiar and exotic cultures, the guiding theme was one of impartial analysis and not of partisanship. This, at least, was the cover story for investigations of domestic poor, marginalized and exploited people as well as comparative research into foreign poor, marginalized and exploited nations. It is no longer conveniently so. As well, it certainly did not jeopardize Western civilization and global power since scientific objectivity was considered co-extensive with Western values and Western expansionism. The ideology of empire and the quest for truth were in happy partnership.

The self-confidence of Western scholars has, however, recently been shaken. New self-examinations have been prompted by the increasingly articulate critiques of radical intellectuals with deep interests in class, race and gender. Neo-Marxist, feminist and postcolonial approaches, ably assisted by critical assessments of globalization, technology and ecological degradation, have generated abundant and diverse variations on the postmodern theme. They have generally affected and variously altered every aspect of human studies from anthropology and economics to political science and sociology. Despite a few enduring worries about the ethical implications of “cultural relativism” and the haughty reactions of a substantial cadre of neoliberal triumphalists—especially in neoclassical economics and logocentric history—modest reorientations are taking place. In the alternative (and with well-known exceptions from the imperial celebrations of Niall Ferguson to the spate of recent biographers of any number of contributors to American exceptionalism from the “founding fathers” to Abe Lincoln), large overdetermined and overwrought metanarratives portraying the heroics of reified movements of

capitalism, liberalism, scientism, democracy and, ultimately, complete modernization have fallen into disfavour. Each discipline has tales to tell, recantations and apologies to make, skeletons to “out” from various closets, and maybe even a paper trail revealing the research grants from military and “intelligence” agencies that have sustained more than a few academics and sometimes whole institutional departments for a lifetime.

Except for occasional public outbursts about the tyrannical consequences of “political correctness” or the unprofessional and antimeritocratic effects of “affirmative action” and “employment equity,” however, the essentially political struggles within private and public research and teaching facilities have been largely hidden from popular view. Only an occasional scandal has attracted the interest of ordinary citizens who can otherwise be forgiven for thinking of ideological quarrels among professional experts and university professors of this or that to be ever-so-slightly arcane. Thus, for example, the antique squabbles that surrounded such extraordinary investigators as Franz Boas and that were the result of his ethnological work on native societies in British Columbia and the American Pacific North-west (duly complicated by a pervasive prejudice against people of German origin before, during and after World War I) only occasionally intruded into the public press and were largely confined to institutional boards and university committees. From time to time, academics caught the public imagination as did Boas’ prize pupil Margaret Mead when she reported her now rather dubious interpretations of Melanesian tribal cultures and especially their allegedly uninhibited youthful sexual practices to North America. She thereby helped spark a significant shift toward “progressive education” in the United States and elsewhere. Likewise, Marshall McLuhan spawned a generation of media gurus masquerading as English teachers and won a cameo role playing himself in the Woody Allen movie “Annie Hall.” For the most part, however, the public remained cheerfully oblivious of the politics of academe.

Moreover, in those relatively rare instances when academic investigation became the stuff of extracurricular discussion, even academic antagonists did their best to display consensus upon the basic rules. It remained a central tenet of professional social studies—upon which all sides were compelled to agree—that social science research was to be judged according to professional methodological standards, the factual accuracy of evidence and the scientific validity of the resulting conclusions. In short, truth was deemed to be discoverable, and the truth would eventually tell.

Objectivity and Oppression

That was then; this is assuredly now. Currently, many a learned professor is persuaded that science is “socially constructed,” politically biased and quite possibly little more than an ideological prop for male-dominated Western power structures. As a result, a great deal of attention is being paid to the complicity of Western scholarship in the justificatory grand narratives and particular exploitative projects in the global inventory of oppression. The all-purpose term for interrogating the theory and methods of Western social inquiry is commonly said to be “deconstruction.” Imperialism and anthropology, capitalism and political economy, sexism and sociology are widely held to be the hard and soft sides of the coin of hegemony. They are on the block for analysis, their hidden agendas exposed.

The Consequences of Critique

What some (with a measure of justification) call pathetic liberal intellectual self-loathing is now common currency among the literate classes. This is a shame. I do not mean that Western social science is to be excused for its involvement in facilitating, for example, the self-righteous hoisting of the “white man’s burden” on to the shoulders of soldiers and venture capitalists. There are confessions to be made and penances to be performed. What I do mean is that it does no great good for privileged missionaries, public servants and scholars to recant and seek absolution for past sins if nothing follows from such rites and rituals than the temporary cleansing of the Western soul. Exercises amounting to profound and possibly sincere cries of “mea culpa” are, after all, still dominantly self-regarding. Speaking as a privileged Westerner, I am chilled to discover that even our acts of contrition are hopelessly “all about us!”

If, on the other hand, Western policy makers, administrators and analysts truly want to connect with the composite cross-cultural world, undo past damage and make constructive contributions to the amelioration of evident evils from genocide to pandemics and from starvation to tyranny, their best efforts must initially involve learning to shut up. Complexity, if explored and scrutinized only from the metropolitan perspective, remains confounding.

True, compassion can still appear to guide charitable non-governmental organizations and even bilateral and multilateral aid can be undertaken with the presumption of humane motives. Likewise, with practice, the language of domination may become more subtle and concepts of exploitation may become more nuanced. Both humanitarian assistance and the appearance of mutual respect, however, remain irredeemably and unalterably within the control of power confronting impotence.

True also, there has been a perceptible shift in the way in which privileged Westerners regard the so-called “Third World” of allegedly “developing” nations, at least since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). Alert to the resentments of the “other” and keen to promote effective cross-cultural engagement of a sort that would avoid the missteps of military adventurism and take effective strides toward solving problems of egregious economic inequity, devastating ecological degradation and monstrous medical crises in Asia, Africa and that part of America lying south of the American-Mexican border, new initiatives are being undertaken. What remains unclear is whether any practical measures will be taken that include non-Western perceptions and priorities. For the time being, the future looks a little grim, for massive global change requires more than free markets, broadband access, and AIDS programs advocating abstinence.

Authentic change requires authentic engagement with what Catherine Alum Odora-Hoppers calls “indigenous knowledge systems” if Westerners are to begin to comprehend the societies and cultures of the rest of the world, which is to say the majority of the world (including those who hate us because we don’t even know why they hate us).

To date, Western political, administrative and economic elites have taken one of two principal views. Either, in the hideous language of Kipling, they have thought that the majority of the Earth’s peoples are “half-devil and half-child,” and consequently fit only to be patiently and indulgently drawn out of sloth and petulance and, with eyes fixed upon some beacon on some hill, eventually to be “civilized” which, of course, is to be Westernized. Such assumptions lay behind even the “progressive” theories of development that trafficked in bold initiatives presumably intended to lead to mass literacy, urbanization, individualism, entrepreneurialism

and secularism while lamenting residual evidence of tribalism and communitarianism, especially in newly independent African states. Or, they have adopted the pugilistic neocrusading hyperbole of Samuel P. Huntington and other intellectual apologists for the current U. S. administration, and have insisted that the West is fated to endure a future of relentless enmity between grotesque, personalized cardboard cut-out renderings of mutually exclusive and hostile “civilizations,” of which it is evident that only one—the rational, scientific and market-driven West—is deemed genuinely and meaningfully civilized. Neither the first presumptuous and patronizing nor the second conceited and conflictual alternative will do.

Instead, if something bordering sanity is to prevail, the gaps that separate cultural understanding must be bridged. Competing epistemologies and practices must be resolved or at least mutually understood and an equal part in the global conversation must be granted to all whose intent is good faith communication.

Basic Assumptions for Change: Universal Problems

A fundamental, if understated, premise for meaningful improvement is that all human communities are inexorably confronted by the problem of winning survival within circumstances of real or potential scarcity—whether imposed by the natural environment or by external human conquest and occupation. Universal constants include satisfying at least the minimal requirements of subsistence. These consist of provisions for the production and distribution of material goods and social services (mode of production), the maintenance of appropriate populations (mode of reproduction), the domestic economy (kinship and family structures, age and sex roles, etc.) and the political economy (relations of production within and among communities—whether clans, tribes, states or empires).

Each society develops and adapts to internally generated innovation, externally imposed change or alterations in natural circumstances by making adjustments in pertinent social ideologies and structures. Thus, the emergence of private property accompanying the transformation from a subsistence economy to a surplus economy yields the admonition: “Thou shalt not steal”; the emergence of an industrial economy demands the reduction of family size; and so on.

Such cultural adaptations bear marked similarities among cultures at various stages of social evolution, but there are region-specific, sociosyncratic, and just downright quirky elements of specific communities that must be taken into account when interpreting disparate cultures even when some core elements might seem similar. Albertans and Arabs both depend on pumping oil, but economic or technological determinism is just as fruitless as biological reductionism when seeking to interpret cultural differences.

Instead of conflating circumstances and consequences, it is preferable to distinguish between those social elements that can be analyzed using comparative methods that produce measurable taxonomic comparisons to external observers and those that rely on the cultural understanding and signification of meaning among the participants.

Viewed from the outside, *etic* (objective, observable) characteristics can best be understood using the theoretical and methodological tools of cultural materialism as described and practiced by anthropologists such as Marvin Harris (1980, 51-75). Viewed from within, these *emic* (subjective, experienced) thoughts and practices require something more. The latter permits formulations of how people construe their own culture; the former brings those subjective formulations into a relationship with other forms of knowledge.

Basic Assumptions for Change: Particular Solutions

If Catherine Hoppers' *Indigenous Knowledge* does not take us to the place where a Habermasian "ideal speech situation" (cf. Habermas, 1998) can occur, she certainly points in the proper direction. The articles presented in *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems* reflect a commitment to democracy and social justice, but they do so in the context of a fundamental awareness that neither can be "given" to people shackled with economic poverty and political oppression. They must be won by people principally through their own efforts and on their own terms; after all, any freedom that is merely granted as a privilege by an authority/benefactor can as easily be taken away and any emancipation that is won according to externally defined experiential categories will remain alien.

Contrasting self-determination and full emancipation with piecemeal, other-directed reformism is, alone, an important political message; but, it is no mere sloganeering on behalf of national self-determination, much less an excuse to refrain from active support for non-Western societies on the principle that countries, like welfare recipients, should be condemned to a life of "self-improvement" in the absence of social assistance. It merely indicates that, in Dr. Odora-Hoppers' opinion, anyone providing help to promote self-determination must do so by coupling practical aid with an understanding of the need to shape political change in the language and experience of indigenous cultures and not simply within the conceptualizations of foreign patrons no matter how generous, well-meaning and altruistic. For this reason, she and the contributors to her anthology focus on the essential role of "indigenous knowledge systems" (IKS) in the process of creative and transformative change.

IKS refer to the complex mental processes that interpret and sustain the behavioural practices that constitute the accumulated store of successful cultural adaptations to environmental circumstances—both natural and social—that communities have made over their long histories of ecological interface. They include, *inter alia*, socio-economic relations, technologies, religion, political ideologies and philosophical epistemologies, plus educational, kinship, legal and governmental systems. IKS are concerned not merely with local crafts and folklore but with "exploring indigenous technological knowledge in agriculture, fishing, forest resource exploitation, atmospheric management techniques, knowledge transmission systems, architecture, medicine, pharmacology, and recasting the potentialities they represent in a context of democratic participation for community, national and global development in real time (Seepe, 19 October, 2001)."

IKS and Social Justice

The links among knowledge and "diversity," "democratic politics," "cognitive justice" and a kind of "empowerment" that is real and not just a slogan to disguise vacuous and ritualistic "participation" in asymmetrical power games cannot be overstated (Örebro, 2005). In Odora-Hoppers' anthology, empowerment is a suitably recurring theme. The theme is presented mainly by African, but also by Asian, Australian and European scholars and expert public officials. The language is professional and not polemical, but the message is no less clear for the restraint in expression.

Ms. Odora-Hoppers sets the tone and the tenor of argument eloquently in the opening chapter. She expresses the urgency of democratization and the importance of economic change, yet is painfully aware of the limitations of macropolitical and macroeconomic initiatives. Wholly pragmatic in her approach, she understands the subtleties of development and presents a realistic case for local initiatives as at least as important for prosperity as are national and international projects. She sees a “tremendous scope for complementarity between [indigenous and] mainstream [i.e., Western] knowledge systems . . . and for the reciprocal valorization of knowledge systems.” This is no frivolous concession to local sensitivities. Much innovation in agriculture, for instance, has been undertaken within an exclusively Western model and the results, in terms of biodiversity, have been disastrous. Hoppers points to indigenous herbalists, veterinary experts and pastoralists as a vital intellectual resource. “A major threat to the sustainability of natural resources,” she argues, “is the erosion of peoples knowledge, and the basic reason for this erosion is the low value attached to it.” (Hoppers, 2002: 7).

Hoppers then sets out a detailed conceptual framework, a list of immediate practical challenges, and an “integrated policy project” that works toward a “holistic knowledge framework for societal development. Noting the increasing disaffection with instrumental rationalism, even within Western societies and nodding appreciatively toward Western critics such as Gramsci, Foucault and Freire, she holds out the possibility of a critically reflective dialogue among Western and non-Western perspectives that would allow comparative analysis of ways of understanding at the ontological, epistemological and sociological levels. The ultimate result would be a “critical emancipatory pedagogy” that would result in learning systems of children and adults alike and would incorporate government, intellectuals and civil society. Adding that the pertinent effect of Western domination has been “achieved at the cost of tremendous silencing, parochial legitimation procedures and, most of all, the deterioration in social status for most of humanity, including women and non-Western cultures . . .” (Hoppers, 2002: 27).

From this promising introduction, Hoppers allocates her contributors to three thematic categories. First, there are extensions and elucidations of the theoretical foundation she has supplied. Second, the conceptual advances are applied to such specific disciplines as science and psychoanalysis. Finally, thorny questions of intellectual property or, more broadly, the ownership of culture is brought into focus as indigenous culture is read in the shadow of colonialism, science is explicated as a manifestation of Western conquest that effectively dispossessed indigenous epistemologies and silenced all of those who, early on, might have opted for dialogue, methodological exchanges and potentially rewarding syntheses of Western and non-Western thought. The fact that out of these stories of the denial of coexistence and much less fruitful interpenetration of insights, comes a plan for a “postmodern integrative paradigm shift” is as pleasing as it is unexpected.

Hoppers’ collaborators deliver a stern message, but one from which hope can be drawn. P. Pitika Ntuli, for example, begins with the “truism” that Africa’s problems must be solved by Africans and that the only way to do this is to reclaim, restore and revitalize indigenous knowledge. The colonization of Africa dispossessed Africans of their knowledge and their voice. It attributed to so-called “traditional” thought and practices the quality of superstition and irrationality. Ntuli insists that this prejudicial account must be deconstructed as part of the process of using IKS as a “counter-hegemonic tool.” (Hoppers, 2002: 53). Of lasting importance in this chapter is the recognition that the resuscitation of IKS is no more a step backward into some sort of barbarism than was the European renaissance. In fact, retrieving and repossessing indigenous knowledge that may have been suppressed but never lost is an emancipatory act both as politics and as pedagogy.

Drawing on Australian aboriginal experience with dynamic and diverse knowledge systems, Scott Fatnowna and Harry Pickett observe that any “new partnership” between aboriginals and non-aboriginals requires more than smiles and friendly gestures. Nothing less than formal protocols which establish firmly aboriginal ownership of cultural knowledge as a precondition for any worthwhile collaboration and critical discussion is required. Such collaboration and critical discussion, moreover, are prerequisites for the initiation of postcolonial discourse with pertinent policy consequences. Whether in the context of “internal colonialism” in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand or simple imperialism as in the balkanized African continent, postcolonial countries have seldom been able to make significant progress precisely because changing the flag over the court house or in the village square is merely a cosmetic change if it does not lead to a vibrant culture and political economy that reconnects with the past, encourages the reinstatement of IKS and encourages the capacity to move ahead based on what has been protected and liberated from what might otherwise be left behind.

Stewardship over IKS does not, of course, mean hermetically sealing indigenous culture off from the influences and vicissitudes of external knowledge systems. Isolation is not possible as a long-term strategy and it is not desirable even in the short run. The containment of exotic cultures as in a kind of cultural museum is merely imperialism in another form. IKS must come into contact with other systems and develop in what might pass for a contemporary dialectical process. The power to name the antithesis and the thesis, however, must be not just equitable (for equity is normally defined by the powerful) but equal.

Peter Crossman and René Devisch put the matter well when they insist upon “mutual decolonization” in which endogenous knowledge and “the endogenization of plural knowledge systems and practices entails a mental decolonization—that is, a fundamental shift, on two levels.” First, IKS must not be considered a valuable resource to be packaged and exported by anthropologists and pharmaceutical companies in a sort of “brain drain” both of knowledge and of knowledgeable prospective leaders. Second, there must be a concerted “effort at revalorisation, re-appropriation and partial re-invention of local paradigms” (Hoppers, 2002: 112).

Voices of Despair

All of this, of course, must be accomplished within the context of contemporary events. On the one hand, in light of potential pandemics, various genocides and the constant threat of social breakdown—not all of which can be exclusively attributed to current non-Western oppression, exploitation and militarism—it may seem giddy to speak of transformation, especially in terms that would seem to most people to be more appropriate in the Senior Common Rooms and Faculty Clubs at prestigious European and North American universities than on the ground in Africa. As one of the *literati* said half a century ago, to write poetry after Auschwitz is an abomination; likewise, to speak of “post-postmodern integrative paradigm shifts” in the wake of Rwanda and during Darfur could seem equally outrageous.

Such an assessment, however, is a double abandonment of the disenfranchised. Besides, there is much more to Africa and to all non-Western areas than can or will be presented on the sensationalist broadcasts of CNN. To accuse thinkers as proficient and profound as Hoppers and her contributors smacks of indignation at “uppity” minorities who should be home in their villages tending to family matters.

Catherine A. Odora-Hoppers is an international celebrity, it is true. She has been a United Nations commissioner, an advisor to the Organization of African Unity and is a member of the United Nations Group of Experts on Disarmament. She has been a consultant with the World Bank, the European Union and the World Intellectual Property Organization. Originally from Uganda, she is equally at home teaching at the University of Pretoria, sharing technical expertise in major world capitals and speaking to academics in Europe (she has a Ph.D. from the University of Stockholm). These ought, however, to be marks of accomplishment, lending credibility to her articulate alternatives to *realpolitik* and the Western synthesis of brutality and indifference that has dominated and continues to dominate relations with the non-Western world.

The Need for Innovation

Over a decade ago, the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro called forth experts from around the world to address environmental issues—both natural and human. It was a grand success; it was a potentially catastrophic failure.

Its success was in bringing to the world’s attention the critical issues of survival that face all societies and, indeed, all species on Earth. Its failure has been in failing to prompt nations to meet even the modest goals upon which participants agreed at the time. This is not unexpected. Ecological devastation, economic exploitation and human rights violations continue unabated, while governmental leaders rush off to make new commitments to objectives they have no intention of achieving. In the areas of IKS, failure has followed false rhetoric. At the Earth Summit, “government representatives pledged to protect and respect the knowledge and practices of indigenous and traditional communities through article 8 (j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity as well as Agenda 21.” As UNESCO softly puts it: “progress in this field has fallen short of expectation” (UNESCO, 2002).

Few fields of public policy cry out as strongly as this one for creativity in resolving the legacy of centuries of abuse. Catherine Odora-Hoppers’ call for innovation demands full support.

A Minor Caveat

Admiration for this volume notwithstanding, there is need for caution in the application of its valuable lessons. Hoppers has set out a persuasive case for a “philosophy of articulation”; however, as Sithole has pointed out, if there is any credibility to the claims of empirical science to what can be called universal knowledge, and if science is historically identified with Western civilization, how are we to reconcile the universality of scientific knowledge with what must be a “working hypothesis . . . that the West has its own indigenous knowledge and that when we conflate the West with science, we are committing perpetual alienation to the rest of the world from science,” unless, of course, we return to the idea that non-Western indigenous knowledge is inferior because it is context-specific and not universal (Sithole, 2004, 1). This is not to gainsay the approach in this book. It is, however, to recognize how easily the shifting paradigmatic statements of Western science and the always available power of Western corporate, diplomatic and military institutions can knock local initiatives and innovations off the very thin line they must walk.

The needed caution, of course, is offered only to stress the importance of saying that, although the West has done much to advance the scientific enterprise, there is no justification for positing an “absolute association” between Western civilization and science. To do so is to engage in an “exaggerated ‘othering’ of the rest of the world’s cultures ...” (Sithole, 1). The causal reasoning associated with Western science is not absent in other cultures. What is up for negotiation is the unacceptable assumption made by some Western authors (Sithole references Fukuyama 1992, and Horton, 1993) that scientific knowledge is inseparable from other Western values.

True, scientific knowledge is frequently entwined with Western political, economic and social norms, but that entanglement is by no means inevitable. Were we to articulate what we mean by science—and especially social science—we would help liberate both Western thought from its preoccupation with rational, analytical objectivity but also non-Western thought from its “entrapment in the uniqueness, mysticism and stagnation into which it is locked in the minds of most people” (Sithole, 3).

An important way to accomplish this is to recognize that science and reason are not identical, that science is inherently subjective in its methods (whether or not there is such a thing as a purely objective exterior world, we are never able to grasp it without the mediation of our technologies and our senses) and that science never finally proves anything but merely disproves falsehoods. By these lights, we can understand that while scientific methodology and mythology are largely—but by no means exclusively—Western inventions and conventions, reason is ubiquitous. As such, to give Sithole one last word, “science is an ideal that we can only approach from various points of indigeneity of our perspectives. There is no pure science; especially there is no pure social science” (Sithole, 3).

It is, of course, one thing to reach across cultural gaps and develop an abiding respect for alternative epistemologies. It is another to decide what to do with indigenous knowledge. On the one hand, research science within commercial institutions such as Western medical companies are actively seeking out traditional therapies and, in the process, ensuring that intellectual property lawyers will have an even brighter future than previously anticipated; on the other hand, there is great fear that openly embracing indigenous “knowledge” will open the door to “the spread of creationist ideas concerning human origins, especially in schools, to the detriment of evolutionary theory” and lead to the demand for inappropriate support for the pseudo-scientific approach of astrology at the expense of astronomy (UNESCO, 2002). The combination of greed and almost pathological paternalism is disconcerting.

Still, if the outline for impending development present by Hoppers and her colleagues is followed, however, little need be feared in terms of both scientific and rational understanding. As well, if the concept of indigenous knowledge is used as a cover for bootlegging pseudo-science into the West, we may be sure that the truly powerful global institutions—not least the international pharmaceutical corporations—will have none of it and, if current trends are reliable, such institutions will dictate intellectual patterns for the foreseeable future. The larger question whether the preservation and extension of indigenous knowledge can be parlayed into a successful strategy in support of postcolonial emancipation is, on the other hand, far from being answered.

Endnote:

1. See Jeremy R. Carrette, *Religion and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 113.

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