

Taking Science Studies Off the Boyle
Warwick Anderson, University of Sydney

In “Science Studies Elsewhere” (2014), Alexandra Hofmänner reveals the specters of otherness that both inform and haunt the philosophical programs of Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes. Or rather, she uncovers the strategic alterity lurking in the pages of Steven Shapin’s and Simon Schaffer’s *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, which she calls, somewhat enigmatically, a seminal book. In any case, Hofmänner gives us a useful deconstructive reading of the great book, making the case that “elsewhere” is working both to configure and to destabilize European modernity. While she chooses to invoke Michel-Rolph Trouillot, she might with equal plausibility have used postcolonial science studies to frame her argument. Instead, she casts postcolonial scholarship as a straw man, a convenience with which to claim unwarranted novelty. Although the lack of sympathetic engagement with postcolonial scholarship is regrettable, Hofmänner actually presents a serviceable postcolonial critique of canonical aspects of early-modern European science. It is a useful if slightly narcissistic exercise.

I think the major problem is that Hofmänner tries to reduce postcolonial critique to a facile version of traveling theory. It is true that postcolonial scholars have sought to understand how science, technology and medicine are contested, reshaped, and appropriated elsewhere, beyond Europe. They are concerned to challenge the colonial fantasies of sovereignty implicit in uncritical accounts of diffusion and globalization. They want to see what has happened to science, technology, and medicine — however defined — on the ground that Europeans and other imperialisms have worked over, and in different ways continue to till. That is, they are interested in examining historically and ethnographically the multiple uneven contact zones beyond Europe where people are making claims to be scientific and modern. What they are doing is treating skeptically the idea that Europe is always the sovereign figure of science. Already they are interrogating the binary logic implicit in oppositions of modern and primitive, scientific and superstitious, and so on. Theirs is not mere pluralizing rhetoric (see Anderson 2009, 2012). Just how such dispersed postcolonial inquiry means that “science studies” is left in the waiting room of history, as Hofmänner asserts, quite frankly escapes me. How looking at what constitutes science and modernity outside Europe necessarily implies European priority simply puzzles me. As an alternative, Hofmänner urges us to focus yet again on Europe — to pay attention once more to the really important science of some dead European males. Otherwise, it appears, we are not on the map of truly significant science scholarship. We are not seriously considering modernity. She stipulates: first Europe, then Europe, and then Europe again. For those of us elsewhere, such European *amour propre* seems rather old-fashioned, even tiresome.

Mind you, I’m not saying that Hofmänner’s project is completely antithetical to postcolonial studies of science. Indeed, it is a crucial *part* of efforts to provincialize Europe and its modernity. I can’t think of any manifesto or programmatic statement in postcolonial science studies that does not also recommend the postcolonial critique of science and modernity in Europe — that is, criticism of its binary logic and fantasies of absolute sovereignty in Europe as elsewhere. This sort of topic is a postcolonial staple. What troubles me, though, is that Hofmänner in taking this now rather conventional

approach chooses to disparage the critical study of science and modernity elsewhere. Rather than assert one's own novelty and sophistication, and others' (often non-European others') naiveté, some modest engagement with existing critique might produce a more palatable argument, or at least a nuanced thesis. Some, like Hofmänner, want to reveal the strategic alterity in Boyle and Hobbes, as recapitulated in Shapin and Schaffer; others seek to treat Boyle and Hobbes as alterity. These are both legitimate ways to release epistemology from European captivity. Surely we can all get along — here, there, and elsewhere?

Contact details: warwick.anderson@sydney.edu.au

References

- Anderson, Warwick. "From Subjugated Knowledge to Conjugated Subjects: Science and Globalisation, or Postcolonial Studies of Science?" *Postcolonial Studies* 12, no. 4 (2009): 389-400.
- Anderson, Warwick. "Asia as Method in Science and Technology Studies." *East Asia Science, Technology and Society Journal* 6, no. 4 (2012): 445-51.
- Hofmänner, Alexandra. "Science Studies Elsewhere: The Experimental Life and the Other Within." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-26.