

Lost in Nowhere

Aalok Khandekar, Maastricht University

Höfmanner’s essay (2014) articulates a Programme for Science Studies Elsewhere — an often imaginary space inhabited by the Other — by drawing out how alterity (“elsewhere”) is always already entangled with identity (“here”) in the constitution of modern science (and of modernity more generally). She does so through a close reading of Shapin and Shafer’s canonical text, *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, as an exemplar of the Strong Programme in Science Studies and of Science Studies more generally. Through her deconstructive reading of *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, Höfmanner demonstrates how referents to Otherness (“New World,” “Savages,” and “Ignorant Strangers”) were necessary for Hobbes and Boyle to make their knowledge claims, and how these referents in turn also — unwittingly — structure Shapin and Shaffer’s text. As a response, Höfmanner postulates a Programme of Science Studies Elsewhere, as a complement to the Strong Programme in Science Studies, which helps to examine the modern foundations of Science Studies, which she claims, much of Science Studies has continued to reproduce. To the extent that the author calls attention to the constitutive role of alterities in the production of scientific knowledge, and the reproduction of such alterities in many Euro-American studies of science, Höfmanner’s essay is a valuable reminder. And yet, the essay in its present form misses some crucial elements.

My comments here focus on two critical absences. First, Höfmanner remains mute on what exactly constitutes ‘Science Studies’ as an object of inquiry. What genealogies converge and remain absent from the author’s understanding what Science Studies is? In positing a *Programme* of Science Studies (Elsewhere) no less, Höfmanner seems to ignore the many critiques of the Strong Programme formulated in the past several decades. In his response discussion, Warwick Anderson (2014) already notes Höfmanner’s misreading of postcolonial studies of technoscience as merely theories of travel from the West to the Rest, dismissing the significant work done in this tradition that already severely problematizes the founding binaries (modern/traditional, rational/irrational, public/private etc.) through which modernity is constituted.

A similar case can be made through early work in feminist science studies, notably through the works of, among others, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Marilyn Strathern (for a useful overview, see Franklin (1995)), an engagement with whom is conspicuous by its absence. What exactly is Höfmanner’s justification for allowing *Leviathan and the Air Pump* to stand in for all of Science Studies? The operational logic seems to be: Science Studies = Strong Programme = *Leviathan and the Air Pump*. Absent such simplification, Höfmanner couldn’t have made her case. Needless to say, the simplifications present an extremely narrow rendering of what counts as Science Studies; feminist (and postcolonial) critiques of science, it would seem, belong neither here nor elsewhere. This is not to deny the deconstructive value of Höfmanner’s essay in relation to *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, but such analysis can’t claim to stand in for a programmatic statement for — or against — all of Science Studies.

This, in turn, relates to a second critical absence. For an analysis—indeed, a Programme—that traces the constitutive role of Otherness in construction of modern

scientific knowledge, Höfmanner's essay is notably silent on the processes through which the Other is relegated to the marginalized, almost invisible, imaginary space of Elsewhere. Worse even, "Nowhere" — spaces inhabited by subalterns, and hence, outside of formalized systems of representation — remain as invisible in Science Studies Elsewhere as they do in Science Studies Here. I don't think that Höfmanner's analysis is antithetical to making visible the many fractures that characterize Here or Elsewhere. Yet, any noteworthy acknowledgment — let alone engagement — is entirely absent here as well.

As Anderson (2014) already notes in his response, the claim that postcolonial analysis of technoscience leaves the foundational schema of modernity intact is baffling. And nowhere in the analysis does Höfmanner seek to explicate that claim. By-and-large Höfmanner's essay treads territory familiar to many Science Studies scholars, and would benefit greatly from a conversation *with* them rather than a merely a critique *against* the Strong Programme. This isn't to dismiss Höfmanner's essay: to the extent that it refocuses interdisciplinary Science Studies to examine the foundational bases of its own knowledge claims, the essay is valuable. However, as Anderson (2014) also notes in his discussion, the novelty of Höfmanner's analysis — which would most definitely benefit from closer conversation with already existing critiques of Science Studies — is greatly overstated.

Contact details: aalok.khandekar@maastrichtuniversity.nl

References

- Anderson, Warwick. "Taking Science Studies Off the Boyle." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 6 (2014): 51-52.
- Franklin, Sarah. "Science as Culture, Cultures of Science." *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 163-184.
- Hofmänner, Alexandra. "Science Studies Elsewhere: The Experimental Life and the Other Within." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-26.