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A world of circuits: the shift from impact to circulation

KNOWLEDGE CIRCUITS

BY FERNANDA BEIGEL - 27 NOVEMBER, 2018

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For a long time, researchers all over the world have lived up to (or cursed) the parable “publish or perish”, but most of them have believed that publishing in “mainstream” journals was the golden door



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criteria. However, these entered belatedly but firmly into the new logics of the academic publishing industry, although relegated to a subaltern position in the whole process.

The Science Citation Index created in 1964 was critical in the increasing accumulation of “international” prestige by certain “centers of excellence”. The Impact Factor and the numerous bibliometrical indicators created afterwards converted “world science” into a matter of “impact” for the institutions. The University Rankings played a central role in the link between publishing performance and funding decisions, all of which had a direct influence in the evaluative cultures. Journal rankings and more recently the H-Index became dominant tools for defining tenure and promotion, therefore now a matter of “impact” for the individuals.

While mainstream publishing became synonymous of “international” science, everything published outside this indexing monopoly became marginalized as “local” science (Guédon, 2011). The institutions within the 10 top universities in World Rankings were from the US or the UK and the ones falling down the top 100 were mainly Southern. All this successfully “globalized” the mainstream-periphery dichotomy –being the first the autonomous and universalist and the latter the dependent and parochial. The critique to this dominant path began by the 1980s, mostly in the centers ([Gareau 1988](#), [Schott 1988](#); [Gaillard & Arvanitis 1992](#)), but also in the South where the concepts of periphery, academic dependency, scientific imperialism and coloniality of knowledge were developed ([Vessuri, 1984](#); [Lander, 2000](#); [Alatas, 2003](#)).

In previous works ([Beigel and Sabea, 2014](#); [Beigel, 2016](#)) I have discussed the frame of academic dependency and the sort of acculturation diagnosed by the idea of coloniality of knowledge. The international division of scientific labor has been declared in abstract, but hardly applies for current times –academic subordination is not that simple. Symbolic domination is not such a mechanical phenomenon. Academic asymmetries can't be reduced to inequalities between homogeneous national communities (centers, semi-peripheries and peripheries). Institutional affiliation, discipline and language must be addressed as part of the hierarchical principle at work for determining the position of a given individual (Beigel, 2014). An empirical glimpse to the academic regions outside the “centers of excellence” shows a different picture: structural heterogeneity is the main feature of academic development. There is, indeed, a symbolical domination of the mainstream circuit given its valorization in the evaluative culture of the institutions and the recognition given by the internationalized elites. But this is far from being homogeneous: diverse forms of production and alternative circuits have existed/resisted for a long time.

Accounting for this history of academic domination by the centers, even in the most critical perspectives, has often invisibilized other circuits of recognition that long ago called in question the “national” and pre-existed the “mainstream”. Mostly because of the scarce circulation of the empirical studies of peripheral science but also probably due to the limits established by the national perspective, typical of the dominant studies of science. For a long time I have been observing the Latin American academic circuit and the role played by publishing networks and regional institutions that evolved along with national fields in a complex and entangled history. This circuit goes back far ago. It emerged in a 200 year intellectual platform and it was consolidated by the 1960s through regional academic institutions such as CEPAL, CELADE, FLACSO and CLACSO –this latter playing a



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proceedings were the main way of scientific communication, along with personal contact and debates in congresses. Visibility appeared already as a goal but mainly for bibliotecarians who wanted their books, reports and journals to be available for researchers in every country in the region. CLASE and Periodica, along with other local initiatives pointed in this direction. Huge efforts in cataloguing and distribution were made. The main concern at this point was not the dialogue with the Euro-American intellectual world but within the region. During the 1990s LATININDEX was created, and later on SciELO and REDALYC, boosting a regional communication system broadly recognized for its relevant impact in the open access movement.

What happened with this collaborative, professionalized, academic circuit with its specific logic that could have challenged the “universalization” of the mainstream by proposing an alternative international recognition? In the 1990s this circuit resisted the ups and downs of the scientific policies during neoliberal times. During the recent leftist turn when the context was favorable, different perspectives, internal tensions and the alliance of SciELO with Clarivate aborted the project of a regional articulated communication space. Nowadays it has a double-sided position: dominated within the mainstream hierarchies but dominant within the region, particularly in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) as long as concerning knowledge published in Spanish and Portuguese. Compared quantitatively, papers from the exact and natural sciences written by LA affiliated authors are much higher within mainstream indexed journals than within SciELO, the data base more inclusive for these disciplines. This is not only due to external forces but the result of the increasing belief of LA scholars in the Impact Factor. Instead, much higher are papers from SSH published in the regional repositories than in the mainstream databases. This dominant position of the LA indexed journals becomes particularly strong in qualitative terms compared with non-indexed journals, given the fact that regional publishing circuits yield positive results in terms of accumulating scientific recognition in certain institutions and acquiring tenured research positions, while non-indexed journals are increasingly devaluated (Beigel, 2014).

With diverse scopes, the regional repositories became involved in the struggle for “impact” and the collections with citation indexes became more and more restrictive for entrance. Meanwhile, institutional accreditation and the regional science reports became more attached to mainstream indexes, accordingly the Latin American journals are depreciated in our own houses. Today, more than 10.000 active scientific journals are edited in Latin America. So, it is about time to ask ourselves: what type of knowledge is produced in the region? What kinds of journals do we have? How can we impulse their broad circulation and visibility if not changing evaluative cultures of the institutions and the repositories?

The shift from the paradigm of mainstream “internationalization” to multiple “circulation”

Far from being a homogeneously subjugated terrain, in previous studies (Beigel, 2017) I have observed that in the periphery occurred the development of double-headed elites: highly internationalized scientists producing knowledge under “universal” evaluation criteria, living together with strong “nationalist” academic groups with local power and recognition. These opposite styles of



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only linked to the opposite local and international habits but also oriented to a regional kind of circulation, based on Latin American journals.

There are very few studies beyond the available databases of the mainstream indexing systems, consequently, we know very little about the production outside that circuit that was consecrated as guardian and guarantor of the excellence of scientific production. There is a very dynamical science "not lost" but very visible in regional and alternative circuits, but these have been generally neglected in the global reports and only recently we are beginning to know their empirical dimensions. Regarding the journals, a dynamical diversity can be observed in Latin America, related to the diverse national scientific policies. 1) A relatively small number of journals oriented to mainstream indexation, highlighting a few that shifted to English. 2) A relevant group of journals indexed in alternative transnational directories and repositories such as DOAJ. 3) Thousands of journals indexed in the regional repositories such as LATINDEX, SciELO and REDALYC and 4) thousands of non-indexed journals mostly edited at public universities and specialized small publishing houses.

As mainstream and regional circuits have changed over time, the morphology of national circuits in LA has also been modified. This can partly be attributed to "internationalized" publishing standards for both individual promotion and university accreditation. National indexes have been developed in many LA countries, based on international or regional standards to provide lists of respected journals. Publishing in these journals does not bring high academic rewards but being included on these national indexes grants the journal a certain academic citizenship. On its part, local circuits made of non-indexed journals have usually been undervalued as endogamous and of low quality, a value judgment that has not yet been demonstrated, because there are very scarce studies on this topic (Beigel and Salatino, 2015). However, the number of active scientific journals that live in Latin American countries outside the world of indexation is striking, especially but not only in the social and human sciences. In our research program we have observed empirically these circuits with many journals still published on paper, which have a restricted circulation, but at the same time verifies the productivity of non-internationalized academic spaces.

According to Salatino (2018), of a total of 10,104 surveyed 3,654 active journals are not indexed, but are not necessarily featured by restricted visibility. Three types of local circuits were identified. First, a group of commercially oriented journals edited by specialized publishers of professionalized disciplines, a few with payment for their access. Second, a group of old existing journals settled in the bosom of non-governmental organizations or provincial universities with a long publishing tradition. Third, a group of great quantitative importance, that includes journals edited by the great national universities, with heavy institutional structures and established prestige that make possible their existence/resistance. To these local circuits we should add a great number of journals evaluated by Latindex Catalogue that are not part of indexed databases nor available in digital format. Why are these journals and all those that aspire to indexing, left out of our focus when we measure regional circulation in Latin America? The shift I am proposing from the traditional frame of "internationalization" to the paradigm of circulation intends to seize the complexity of knowledge production including all interactions that currently take part of scientific research.



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source to reinforce the prestige of a small group of universities, leading journals and oligopolistic publishers. Several authors have pointed out that these rankings are based only on bibliometric data and international awards because they are oriented by global competitiveness instead of actually observing research performance. Even in recent attempts to build multi-rankings, the research capabilities of universities located outside the traditional academic core are measured out of context and without considering the various publication circuits. Behind the university rankings there is a notion of descending hierarchy that is built on the basis of models from very specific universities, such as Harvard, Stanford or Cambridge, without considering different institutional styles, scientific cultures and much less, the social impact.

There is a relative consensus, at this point, that the idea of ranking in itself serves more as an instrument for commodification than as a tool for scientific policies. From Latin America, the Regional Conference for Higher Education pointed out the limitations of university rankings and advocated regional criteria for university accreditation. It affirmed the character of the university as a social and public good, pointing out the risks involved in prioritizing "global" criteria against regional / national / local features and needs. A relevant attempt to create a complete set of indicators for the countries of the region is the [Santiago Manual \(2010\)](#)². "Internationalization" is defined as a complex and polyhedral concept, although its unidirectional movement is not problematized. In addition to international awards and publications, it recommends observing a diverse set of interactions, such as academic mobility, international agreements, networks and other means for collaboration in research. However, the databases used to measure publications are the same as in the University Rankings, therefore, the data ends up being narrow to explain the different styles and directions of the circulation of production.

Regionalization is not considered a form of internationalization, however, internationalization through regionalization is not new phenomena in Latin America. Built on strong intellectual traditions and similar professionalization paths, the regional academic circuit has been consolidated through common guidelines on university accreditation, intra-regional academic mobility agreements and strong scientific networks. In addition to this potential, there is a general belief that public institutions are the main producers of scientific knowledge, a belief which has benefited the circuit (Babini, 2011). Strikingly, there is no way to measure the regional circulation because the three most relevant repositories are disconnected and the bibliometric indicators are only viable for the two collections that offer information at the level of the article (SciELO and REDALYC). This has a direct impact on the capacity of regional journals to provide academic recognition in institutional and individual accreditations. In part, this is due to the technical difficulties of this task. As Dominique Babini said, "We have spent more than two decades creating open access, but we have not yet been able to create regional indicators." Thus, our regional production does not influence national assessment systems because the mainstream circuit is still used as a benchmark for tenure and promotion. At the same time, all of this affects the researchers in our countries preventing them to submit their articles to our journals.

The laudable struggle that these regional systems faced against the general illusion of "excellence" in order to show that open access offers higher quality and visibility can be discussed in terms of effective success. In the meantime, our regional repositories have increased the difficulty of their



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mainstream with excellence, the regional with an exotic or subsidiary quality and the local with endogamy. From a technical point of view, it is necessary to reverse the usual process of building indicators, which normally feeds on "international" databases, to build them bottom up, through observation at the institutional level. The set of indicators of circulation that we are testing in three Argentine universities points in that direction (Beigel, 2018).

In truth, endogamy can be found in the mainstream and in the local, as well as creative knowledge can emerge from universities embedded in their environment and researchers connected with the local agenda. Accordingly, measurement of scientific production created at universities outside the core-mainstream circuit requires a transition not only technical, but conceptual from the paradigm of mainstream internationalization to diverse circulation, including all interactions (publications, collaborative research, networks and associations, academic mobility, transferences, extension) and all directions: local, national, regional, transnational and international.

I have no doubt that our journals in Latindex, Redalyc or SciELO are high quality and probably have more visibility than journals in Scopus or Clarivate. But how much time will we keep on throwing stones to Goliath? Maybe it is time to leave behind the battle with mainstream internationalization focusing on the regional, national and local scales of circulation, offering the world our regional, indigenous, path of internationalization. Latin American science has much to gain in regionalizing endogamy and localizing exogamy.

1. Part of this text was published in: Beigel, F (2018) "Las relaciones de poder en la ciencia mundial. Un anti-ranking para conocer la ciencia producida en la periferia". Nueva Sociedad, N°274, p.13-28.

2. Recently, the Manual de Valencia (2017) was published, a relevant attempt to measure research and development of universities in their social and economic environment. It includes indicators of technological transferences, scientific dissemination and extension, a long-existing tradition in Latin American universities.

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