
Book Review

Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia

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Maria do Mar Pereira's book can be seen as several different books all very cogently rolled into one. It manages to be, at once, a book about the role of feminism in academia, about the dynamics of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) as an academic activity, about feminist critiques of scientific epistemology, about the situatedness (geographical and temporal) of knowledge production within a very anglo-centric academic ecosystem, about the neoliberalisation of academia, about the embodied experience (and harm) of academic work, and about the self-reflexiveness of writing an academic book about people who write academic books. At no point are all these layers confused or confusing, and they flow consistently and methodically, demonstrating a superb command of the literature involved, both in depth and in breadth – as many references are from outside the anglosphere of most-cited authors.

From here, it follows that this book has several target audiences – people focusing on WGFS, on mental health, on academic praxis, on epistemology, on postcolonial studies, on guides for self-reflexive writing, on cultural studies, on ethnography, on neoliberalism and precarious work, among others, will find here plenty of interesting material, and an absolutely impressive literature review from which to draw. The author is quite aware that this, too, is a way for her to perform academic status – that she is not outside of the dynamics that she is studying – and it shows how familiar she is with the field of sociology and WGFS.

The main idea behind the book is that, in order to understand the processes of power and knowledge at work in academia, an ethnographic analysis is necessary – one that combines structural aspects (funding, politics, marketing) with situated events, even those that are often seen as unremarkable, such as 'corridor talk', or back-and-forth conversations in classes. To do this, Maria do Mar Pereira creates a new conceptual tool - a feminist theory of epistemic status:

the degree to which, and the terms in which, a knowledge claim, or entire field, is recognized as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge, however those criteria are defined in specific spaces, communities and moments (p. 1).

This concept was created through the interweaving of three perspectives on the relationship between power and knowledge: Foucault, Code and Gieryn.

From Foucault, the idea of the "*production of effects* of scientificity requires examining the *episteme*" (p. 48) of that context, which means considering which discourses are validated and productive in that context; from Code, Maria do Mar Pereira focuses on the everyday life of academia, the spaces and territories where discourses are uttered,

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and who can enter them with credibility; from Gieryn, the author mobilises several cartographical and geographical metaphors which allow insight into the “*processual* character of demarcations of scientificity” (p. 53), rendering the discourses, the interlocutors and the locutory spaces mobile, flexible, and highly contextual. The articulation of these three references allows Maria do Mar Pereira to talk about maps, climates and negotiations when analysing how, when, by whom and with what goals WGFS establishes itself or, as Maria do Mar Pereira puts it, “the *maps* and *boundary-work* produced in *negotiations* of the *epistemic status* of WGFS within changing *epistemic climates*.” (p. 62).

Having laid the foundations for her work, Maria do Mar Pereira presents her findings from her fieldwork, based mostly in Portugal. The main source of material is a set of 36 interviews during 2008/2009, with 12 follow-up interviews in 2015/2016. The interviewees had various positions and relations to and towards WGFS, as well as varying degrees of seniority (including students). All of this was complemented by a decade of *ad hoc* ethnographic observation in the UK and Portugal, Sweden (one year), and multiple academic conferences, PhD viva presentations, and many other events related to academic life. This allowed Maria do Mar Pereira to draw from very rich and diverse material and to provide an integrated look into many different layers and modes of producing epistemic status.

The longitudinal aspect of her work also allowed her to track the changes created by the developing climate of international neoliberalisation within all quarters of academia. Rather than take this as an outside process that is imposed on academia, Maria do Mar Pereira picks up on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity and looks at the “rise of the performative university” (p. 70), one based on a connection between productivity and profitability, and a subsequent structure of audits and rankings. The performative university is not simply an economic phenomenon – it is the *epistemic* facet of this process that interests Maria do Mar Pereira:

It becomes necessary to do and re-do epistemic status every day, to continuously constitute oneself as a proper scholar by recurrently and incessantly producing the products seen to count as appropriate displays of scholarly competence, authority and achievement. (p. 73)

Ambiguity and paradoxes are an integral part of Maria do Mar Pereira’s analysis, and the performative university’s relation to WGFS is an especially poignant example of this. The author concluded that, during the 2008/09 fieldwork, the epistemic climate that surrounded WGFS was changing, and so too was WGFS’s epistemic status: the institutions’ need to expand and show themselves as more productive made them conditionally embrace the productivity that came from WGFS. She writes that, “WGFS is recognized as proper knowledge *if* it leads to publications, and *as long as* scholars *«produce and keep producing»*” (p. 79, emphasis in original). The institutional constitutes one space, and the corridors where informal talks and remarks between colleagues happen is another, and there the othering of WGFS scholars continues, keeping the field in ambiguity (“not generally considered a *fundamental* and *indispensable* component of education and research in the SSH [Social Sciences and Humanities]” – p. 82), and dependent on “*individualized institutionalization*”, where “WGFS’ presence is attached to, and contingent on, the presence and work of those [senior, productive] individuals” (p. 82).

The fact that processes of institutionalisation happened through specific people meshes particularly well with the current performative, neoliberal, climate of academia. The dynamics this created are not linear – it served as “a basis for demarcating epistemic status, and doing exclusionary boundary-work, *within* WGFS” (p. 85), and, as ten years passed, “openings and closures for WGFS not only coexist, but are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive” (p. 183), and individual gains often do not translate into gains for WGFS as a field. On top of that, Maria do Mar Pereira delves into the biopolitical impact of the precarisation of academic work: “This *«state of exhaustion»* and *«alienation»* is [...] a *«sick climate»* that *«makes us all ill»*, and determines the collective atmosphere”, which is marked by “physical exhaustion, intellectual depletion and emotional despondency” (p. 186). As before, this is important for economic and ethical reasons, but especially, in the context of Pereira’s work, for epistemic reasons. WGFS is performed and negotiated when there is no time to read, think or organise (pp. 190-2), and thus the logic of productivity is turned against itself, making it harder to produce knowledge, or even to “have the working (and living) conditions to be able, individually and collectively, to do ‘significant, creative or critical work’ in the first place” (p. 192). The resistive anger of the end of the noughties is turned into depressive despondency in the mid-2010s, and the fundamental value of community-building in a feminist framework becomes increasingly harder to do, while simultaneously some noted scholars in Portugal make significant institutional strides in WGFS.

Another main contribution of Pereira’s book – one which directly connects to this toxic climate within the ossification of the performative university – is the typification of five different maps that WGFS and non-WGFS scholars draw (i.e., perform) when negotiating the epistemic status of WGFS vis-à-vis itself, other scientific areas, and the area of the non-scientific. These five maps do not intend to constitute a full categorisation of how this demarcation is made in institutional and everyday interactions, but rather make clear the most often used strategies observed in Pereira’s fieldwork.

The maps are: “WGFS is closer to proper science”, where mainstream science is given specific traits, and it is argued that WGFS is already very close to those traits; “Proper science should be like WGFS”, where the place of

proper science is put into question and through which it is argued that it is proper science that should move closer to the space occupied by WGFS; “Mainstream science is just like WGFS”, whereby its users argue that “mainstream science is just as (if not more) subjective, political or partial than WGFS” (p. 125), thus invalidating those arguments as ways of dismissing WGFS; “WGFS is just like mainstream science”, which performs its claim by also not contesting the hegemonic meaning of scientificity, and by arguing something similar to the previous map, but with its direction reversed; “WGFS can help mainstream science get closer to proper science”, this map more clearly separates proper science from mainstream science, and portrays WGFS as having instrumental value to mainstream science, since the latter needs to learn from WGFS how to uphold and expand the reach of science.

As Pereira makes explicit, these aren't maps that are internal or intrinsic to specific people, they aren't ontological positionings, but rather strategic games of pushing and pulling on the borders of certain epistemic terrains. Thus, their deployment is contextual in several different ways: it depends on the audience, and the objectives the map-maker intends to perform on or with the audience; elements of one map can be combined with other maps; mapping efforts “are structured on the basis of what is intelligible in particular climates, persuasive for specific audiences and hence more likely to produce the desired effects” (p. 131). Depending on the kind of person or academic doing the mapping, these maps might also simply not work:

Epistemic (micro)climates are contextual and diverse; academic negotiations are not only epistemic, but also professional, financial and personal; structural and fortuitous influences interact in often unpredictable ways. (p. 144)

The map-performing – the constant work of bringing WGFS into being, and bringing its epistemic status into being – might happen in very formal and very informal settings, but it is also contingent on historical, geographical, political and economic constraints. This is where the situatedness of Maria do Mar Pereira's work really shines through – not because of how uniquely ‘Portuguese’ her results are, but because of how she manages to anchor her results in a dynamic and comparative analysis of how the Portuguese results are co-created by realities that extend far beyond Portugal.

On the one hand, Pereira does an excellent analysis of situating WGFS within the broader field of academia, showing that WGFS has been

gradually, though not linearly, institutionalized in two distinct but related senses [...] [since] a more or less large and stable space for it has been, and is being, created or extended [...] [and] WGFS has become also an academic institution in itself. (p. 28)

The non-linearity of this process means that the epistemic status associated with this double institutionalisation is not a given, but a performance, and that there is also no direct causal link between institutionalisation and epistemic status; furthermore, “negotiations of epistemic status [...] are also internal contestations that play a central and generative role in the life of the field” (p. 36), serving sometimes to create boundaries between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ WGFS, as Pereira demonstrates so vividly, and setting up a climate of “*dismissive recognition* of feminist scholarship” (p. 114) by mainstream scholars. So even though there is a constant question mark about the validity, existence or epistemic status of WGFS within the field of academia as a whole, this question mark is not and cannot be, according to Pereira, uniform or universal.

On the other hand, Pereira argues that the epistemic status of WGFS must also be considered geopolitically. The history of WGFS in academia is linked to the history of Western colonialism, since “the academic hegemony of particular countries constrains the growth, diversity and local relevance of WGFS” (p. 149). Yet, even this narrative is complicated by Pereira's analysis of the figure of the ‘modern foreign’ in Portugal, framed as a semi-peripheral country. The ‘foreign’, according to Pereira, can be used to increase the legitimacy of WGFS as it is done ‘out there’, to draw attention to funding from international institutions, to legitimise the national work of a given scholar by aligning it with foreigners' work, to bemoan the state of WGFS in Portugal as compared to other countries, and so on. Like in other aspects of her analysis, Pereira brings to the fore the fundamental role of ambiguity:

we must consider both what gets silenced because of these hegemonies, *and* what becomes possible and speakable for WGFS scholars in (semi-)peripheral contexts through the invocation of a hegemonic modern foreign [...] [;] those asymmetries produce both losses *and* gains for WGFS, and that the two interact with each other. (p. 168)

The book is built around a praxis of challenging dichotomies, as I hope to have made clear by this review, and so there are no easy stances of for/against WGFS, or of WGFS being more/less than. Maria do Mar Pereira's analysis is not focused on finding the best strategy to increase the epistemic status of WGFS – because her entire work renders that line of thinking moot and unintelligible (if framed as a grand unitary plan). More so, epistemic

work around WGFS is also done through the pushing away and out of certain perspectives, seen as ‘too much’ or ‘not enough’ – an epistemic, rather than theoretical, disavowal of feminist work, that Pereira rightly criticises for its redeployment of toxic hegemonic strategies. But the book is also a powerful reminder of the toll that academic work – epistemic or otherwise – takes on all of us, and how it impacts WGFS scholars specifically, and it tries to offer some strategies on how to deal with that.

Pereira is keenly aware of the irony involved in her research and her work, as she writes “I am checking the final proofs for this page in absolute silence at 4.56 am on a dark night in November, desperate to go to bed” (p. 218), and that is perhaps why she closes with a few pointed questions, the first being: “As for you... why are you still reading?” (p. 218).

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