

IALS Changes in Light: Premiere
IALS Lecture Theatre, 6.30-8pm, 9 December 2024
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COMMENTS

I'd like to begin by saying how much I enjoyed this film: it was a delight to see how Anna had given permission to the librarians, to give themselves permission to interact with the materials of their everyday working lives (the books and the library building) in such unusual ways.

In my comments today, I'd like to focus on how the material influences and determines the conceptual and changes scholarship. What work do legal academics and others do with the material holdings of a library such as the IALS Library?

In the first IALS prospectus in 1948, the institute of advanced research was imagined as a home for both intellectual and material development of legal studies. Librarianship practice, collections and curatorial practice has changed enormously since 1948; as has the nature of legal research. But there is a lot to be said about how the texts we draw upon as sources, the material form in which they exist, how they are catalogued, where they are located.

The link between the film and changes in legal scholarship centres on the idea of knowledge production: representation of ideas, arguments, evidence, ways of knowing etc which do not solely follow a traditional European/Eurocentric/Anglo-American 'cannon' of what is appropriate or real or genuine knowledge; representation of ideas etc which emerge from the 'global South' as opposed to the 'global North'.

The work of the Library, led by Marilyn Clarke, has been to move certain materials 'From the basement to the centre; from darkness to light'; moving Commonwealth law materials from the basement to the more central parts of the Library This sums up in really fantastically literal as well as metaphorical way, the process of decolonial work.

It also mirrors quite remarkably the more metaphorical process of moving away from Euro-centrism in substantive (legal) scholarship. Many scholars have made a similar observation, but I find the formulation by Bhambra and de Sousa Santos helpful:

in recent years, social scientists, often based in the global South but also in the global North, have been calling for recognition of the epistemic and cultural diversity of the world and, concomitantly, for the need to 'provincialize' the epistemic and cultural premises of Eurocentred knowledge, in general, and of the social sciences, in particular.¹

Two examples of what they are referring to is the way in which ways of knowing from the global South are classed as merely the local instantiation or application of a more general and generalisable framework developed in the global North.

¹ Gurminder K Bhambra and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Introduction: Global Challenges for Sociology' (2017) 51: 1 *Sociology*, 3-10, 4.

So, for instance, a preoccupation with reconfiguring employment contract doctrine by reference to the characteristics and changing patterns of work within the global North will always struggle to locate or 'see' informal work in the global South or identify the most appropriate 'tools and institutions for regulating work that falls outside the traditional regulatory repertoire of labour law'.² Example from my own research project: *Reconceptualising Labour Law: Race, Legal Form and the Legacies of Colonialism*; tracing continuities/legacies/resonances between legal form in the most extreme forms of unfree labour (slavery and post-slavery forms such as indenture and apprenticeship) to notionally more 'free' forms of labour such as Master and Servant, and modern contract of employment.

A second example from Ambreena Manji and John Harrington: they are both on the editorial board of the journal *Social and Legal Studies*, they have reflected upon how editorial boards approach how to respond to submission of articles about, say, divorce / family law in a particular jurisdiction. How a standard response from an editorial board which was unreflective about the Eurocentrism of the research it was publishing, might be to say an article on divorce / family law in Nigeria was 'niche' in comparison to one submitted on the same legal questions in Ireland. The assumption which Manji and Harrington are inviting us to question is that of knowledge production and north / south hierarchies: who gets to determine which scholarship is 'generalisable' or capable of 'setting the research agenda' or constructing a conceptual or theoretical framework which can then be followed by scholars globally. The assumption often being, that scholarship from global south jurisdictions such as Nigeria can only have value or validity as specific local instantiations of broader theories or concepts developed in the global north. Hence, the assumption to be challenged that the submission on Nigeria would not have the same value as that on Ireland.

The main observation I wish to make is to note the parallels between decolonising work in libraries, and the decolonising work in legal scholarship.

² Judy Fudge, 2011