

13 What we still do not know about South–North technoscientific exchange

North-centrism, scientific diffusion, and
the social studies of science

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Introduction

In July 2001, the 21st Congress of History of Science took place in Mexico City. The title of this meeting was provocative and relevant: science and cultural diversity. It was particularly significant that, for the first time, this traditional gathering took place in Latin America. Mexico—cradle to some of the most complex and interesting American cultures, a vivid example of every excess of imperialism, and a proud example of the survival of an autochthonous culture—seemed an appropriate place to discuss cultural diversity. Fifty-two different countries and hundreds of historians attended the meeting. The opening lecture was delivered in the spectacular Palacio de Bellas Artes, whose enormous murals conveyed a clear sense of national pride. With the aid of simultaneous translation to various languages, we listened to the opening protocol remarks, all of which predicted that this was going to be a very special occasion.

The opening lecture was delivered by a philosopher and historian of science, the Cairo-born Professor Roshdi Rashed. His Southern origin was congruent with the spirit of the Congress and hinted that from the outset we were taking part in a stimulating renewal. Rashed, who had taught at the University of Mansoura in Egypt, highlighted the fact, “It is the first colloquium held in a country of ancient culture which is neither Mediterranean nor Asiatic” and “It is also the first colloquium on the history of science which is not hosted by an industrial country of the North.”¹

Yet soon we were dismayed. Instead of showing us the richness of questions about cultural diversity and science, Professor Rashed seemed to go out of his way to discourage anyone interested in such a problem. Our distinguished lecturer indeed expressed his concern about the diversity, “not to say dispersion,” of the discipline of history of science, and his fear of the “flourishing temptation to extend social history to the conceptual tradition.”² Throughout his presentation, he clearly stated what he conceived was history of science’s true path: an internal history of ideas. According to Rashed, not only was it important to establish the difference between external social elements and genuinely scientific ones, it was also necessary “to ask ourselves what distinguishes it [science] from all other production of cultural works.”³ For Professor Rashed, the diffusion of knowledge is different from its production.