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Beyond Methodological Eurocentrism? Knowledge Making and the Universality Problem

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MINH SON TO, APR 15 2021

A Vietnamese with a non-Vietnamese university education, I cannot but look upon my country through a double perspective. One is banal and instinctual, as a born-and-raised Vietnamese native, to interact with my family, neighbors and navigate the labyrinthine streets of my city-home; the other is private and analytical, as an academic seeking to understand both the overlaying and underlying motions of this cityscape and its inhabitants. Benedict Anderson, borrowing from a Philippine nationalist novel, has a word for this when describing his intercultural experience: the specter of comparison. For both the novelist's protagonist and Anderson, they "can no longer matter-of-factly experience [their places of origin], but sees them simultaneously close up and afar."

Looking through an 'an inverted telescope', however, is not entirely liberating but can be constraining. There is a division of epistemic labor here: My Vietnamese guides through alleyways, order food, converses with residents, while my English does the thinking and the knowledge-making. It is a disconcerting realization that English – as both a literal and instructional language – dominates my capacity to know the world and the social sciences, its concepts, and theories. My Vietnamese becomes an informant to the Western academic and theoretician; for the Vietnamese to be understood and visible, they had to be translated into English, into consumers or rational individuals. (The irony is not lost in this English essay.) Though my observation bears a humanistic flavor, others in the social sciences have voiced a similar sentiment: "Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose," or "the analysis of social and political processes is itself inherently, irredeemably, and essentially political."

This essay, informed by postcolonial critiques, seeks to examine the methodological Eurocentrism in the social sciences, particularly political analysis. It first outlines methodological Eurocentrism – the tendency of contextually specific Western knowledge to universalize itself – as underpinned by postcolonial analysis, then moves beyond these critics' political paralysis and examines alternatives in Area Studies, particularly Asian Studies, as a field of study informed by political analysis.

The Coloniality of Knowledge

Postcolonial critiques of colonial epistemologies

An understanding of Eurocentrism (and its methodological variety) requires some background into the disparate scholarship that valorized it: Postcolonial studies. Despite its deliberate heterogeneity and refusal of definition, there are common elements that can be identified. Postcolonial studies have a deconstructionist mode of analysis that transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries, with traceable inspirations from poststructuralist and postmodern authors like Foucault and Derrida. At a cursory glance, postcolonial studies share with postmodernism what Colin Hay calls "an ontology of difference, an epistemological skepticism, and a deconstructionist methodology." It has a nonetheless more focused subject of analysis: The mutual imbrication of identity for both colonizer and colonized within a context of asymmetrical power in the colonial encounter, and the ambivalent and resistant existences resulted therefrom. It is highly skeptical of the project of European modernity and seeks to challenge its fundamental assumptions. It does so through a deconstruction of binary opposition of the colonizer/colonized, the West/Rest, North/South, by historicizing various universal precepts such as 'progress' or 'civilization' to demonstrate their

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socially constructed, temporally and culturally specific nature. Edward Said formulates Orientalism – a now fundamental concept in postcolonial studies – at length:

“It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts ... an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery ... not only creates but also maintains [itself] ... It is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power...”

Knowledge in Said’s Orientalism is a politicized concept and practice, embedded in and serving colonial interests by inferiorizing the Orient and justifying their *mission civilisatrice*. It has a veneer of objectivity or purity because its positional politics – in the West, to the East – require its social origins be erased and its existence thereby naturalized – becoming scientific and ‘universal’.

Later postcolonial scholarship goes further than Edward Said, questioning even the possibility of self-representation by the colonized. Gayatri Spivak begins in a revised edition of her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* on the self-immolation practice (sati) of indigenous Indian women:

“Women outside of the mode of production narrative mark the points of fadeout in the writing of disciplinary history even ... that efface as they disclose. If ... the [European, capitalist, or Marxist] mode of production narrative is the final reference, these women are insufficiently represented or representable in that narration. We can docket them, but we cannot grasp them at all.

[...]

Indeed, it is only in their death that they enter a narrative *for us*, they become figurable...”

For Spivak, these subalterns (women) can only be spoken for, either in the colonizer’s narrative of “white men are saving brown women from brown men” or the nativist/nationalist narrative that “the women actually wanted to die.” Her essay marked a poststructuralist turn for Subaltern Studies Group, an influential postcolonial studies group: “Now the question was not ‘What is the true form of the subaltern?’ The question had become ‘How is the subaltern represented?’.” Subalternity calls out the impossibility of speech (self-representation and knowledge) for those who lie beyond the ‘modes of production’, whose existences are only visible through the speech of others. Most crucial of those speeches are those of academics as legitimated producers of knowledge.

The analytical consequences of methodological Eurocentrism

Methodological Eurocentrism refers to the idea that social science remains deeply Eurocentric, in that concepts and theories developed in Western historical settings and by Western academics can be universally apply everywhere to produce value-free knowledge. Western scientific knowledge is understood as true, universal, and objective. Analytically, methodological Eurocentrism goes beyond the general/specific dichotomy and cuts across disciplinary debates of structure/agency or materialism/idealism.

Methodological Eurocentrism bears first an epistemological consequence as it suppresses alternative modes of knowledge – indigenous, local, or non-Western – thereby universalizing itself. On an institutional level, Western academia pool resources to the West and delegitimizes non-Western knowledge as ‘unscientific’. Non-Western students at home and abroad study ‘foundational texts’ from Plato to Max Weber without questioning their history and in turn look to their society through such ideas. Their incongruence with non-Western realities notwithstanding, their continued perpetuation could result in certain ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ wherein Western perceptions and theories are internalized by those with power to shape non-Western societies, thus reinforcing their ‘universal’ veneer. Whereas Western scholars before ‘Orientalized’ non-Western subjects, these subjects now Orientalize themselves: The (nationalistic) reaffirmation of a Chinese identity as Confucian or Indian identity as Hindu, despite their initial

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European construction through the texts of missionaries and ethnographers.

The universality of methodological Eurocentrism holds an implicit teleology and essentialism. Understanding concepts such as 'political modernity' inevitably invoke and engage the intellectual and theological traditions of Europe, while those beyond the West are often disregarded or treated only as secondary materials. Here, Dipesh Chakrabarty critiques the ascription of 'pre-political', 'archaic', and 'traditional' or the secularizing logic as a sign of modernity in Hobsbawm's analysis of Indian peasant revolts. In the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty: "Historicism converted history itself into a version of [the] waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination ... but some people were to arrive earlier than others." We see instances of this in such declarations of Western liberal democracy as "the end of history." In the process, methodological Eurocentrism essentializes both the West and the Rest, through time and space. One end of the spectrum is the West – with identifiers of civilization, developed, democracy, rule of law – while the other end is the Rest – with perennial uncivilization, *developing*, authoritarian, and lawlessness. This bears upon our analytical prowess when such terms do not capture the subjects' diverse and changing realities, yet still used by virtue of their 'convenience' in political rhetoric and analysis.

Methodological Eurocentrism fuels a disciplinary divide as well. While much of these critiques is most felt in the humanities and international relations, their impact is less in political *science*. The crisis of confidence brought by the end of the Cold War has affected the former, though not enough to supplant the hegemonic Eurocentrism in a study of politics with 'scientific' aspirations. Demarcation exists within the humanities as well. "History belongs to the colonizers", separated from the anthropological realm of tradition and 'other cultures'. Non-Western subjectivities are treated effectively as exhibits in museums without much bearing on the present realities. That the intimate relationship between anthropology and colonialism likely contributed to its appreciation of postmodern and postcolonial critiques. Yet these newfound cultural sensibilities by anthropology contributed to its marginality as a 'science', critiqued by more 'scientific' endeavors for being too particularistic and unscientific.

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Postcolonial analysis or paralysis: The dangers of reductionist particularism

Searing though postcolonial critiques are, they are not without own analytical tensions. Immediately we see an issue in its definition: *What exactly is the postcolonial?* The sheer heterogeneity of the colonial experience across the Latin America, Africa, Asia, even North America, brings into question the usefulness of the term 'postcolonial'. This is especially striking with the relative absence of the Asian experience and critics within a scholarship seemingly dominated by South Asian, Middle Eastern, and African scholars. Even the colonial enterprises themselves operated differently from each other – at times competing – rather than being monolithic (as 'The West'). As a conceptual framework, 'postcolonial' stands to ignore certain particularities of the colonial experience and more refined terminology (e.g., neocolonial, anti-colonial) to justify itself as a viable mode of critique.

This brings us to another paradox of postcolonialism: That it, too, essentializes, despite its anti-universalism and anti-essentialism. For one, the insistence on the colonial encounter seems to reify its totality in restructuring the global experience and the complete lack of agency on the part of the colonized. The prevalent themes of hybridity and ambivalence therein function almost like metanarrative of the human condition, much like the postmodern 'ironic metanarrative' that there is no metanarrative. Both postcolonial and postmodern thoughts appear to reify existing social, political, and temporal differences and forego agency (because agential capacity is conditioned by totalizing discourses). Their points of departure eventually arrive at a reductionist particularism: Everyone at every moment is fundamentally different from each other. This precludes any possibility of knowing and acting to affect the status quo, because all actions either inflict violence upon difference or are preconditioned by existing discourses.

By relativizing Western modernity and Eurocentrism, postcolonialism is silent on why Eurocentrism was able to achieve its universal status. By overemphasizing culture and discourse, postcolonialism reduces Eurocentrism to merely another ethnocentrism and ironically accepts Eurocentrism and its West/Rest binary as 'given' universals, without explaining why it became so universalistic. This problematically implies a superiority of Euro-American values without specifying the content of such values that led to their hegemony, ignoring capitalism (indeed a Marxist

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metanarrative) as constitutive element of the colonial encounter that has now globalized. These prevailing issues deprive postcolonialism of any meaningful praxis and render postcolonial authors complicit in the maintenance of global Western hegemony. Such an accusation is not unwarranted: The most prominent postcolonial authors are tenured within the most prestigious Western institutions (Columbia University, for example, houses already Spivak and Said, two out of three towering figures in the scholarship). As Arif Dirlik poignantly quipped:

“When exactly ... does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?” queries Ella Shohat in a recent discussion of the subject. Misreading the question deliberately I will supply here an answer that is only partially facetious: *When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe.*”

Postcolonial scholars take intellectual resources from postmodern and poststructuralist ideas, ideas specifically conceived within a Western context to critique Enlightenment reason. While they share a same goal of decentering the West, the larger issue is their overtly complex and deconstructionist ideas that lack immediate relevance to those who struggle daily on the ground, not paper. Postcolonial authors, though sharing the ethnic origins with native intellectuals, write without real consequences and attachment to native realities. As Colin Hay noted against the postmodernist vow of silence: “For those for whom life is often nasty, brutish and short, philosophical purity is likely to provide limited solace.”

Alternatively: Non-Eurocentric universals?

The challenge against methodological Eurocentrism has engaged in an active *deconstruction* of Eurocentric assumptions, without any prospects of an alternative *reconstruction*. What is needed is a re-engagement with the universal, but in a way that does not reduce the differences of the subjects within said universal. Instead of understanding the universal as teleological with a parochial and homogenizing content, we may reconceptualize it as open and heterogenous, recognizing its inevitable historical unevenness and combination of interactive differences. In other words, an alternative to Eurocentric capitalist modernity can only be conceived in a construction of holistic social theory. Spivak herself acknowledged this necessity before with the notion of strategic essentialism: That practical political resistance inevitably requires a degree of essentialized (universalized) identity around which one can mobilize, but with an awareness of its contextual limits and the identity as means, not goal. Her notion of subalterns is not to ‘protect’ them or for us to speak for them, but to in fact do away with it:

“...Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do a thing, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech.

[...] you don’t give the subaltern voice. You work *for* the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity...”

Postcolonial critiques furnished our awareness of our political dispositions in knowledge-making, but that extends as well to a position of indifference. Instead, heeding Bruno Latour’s argument, we should move beyond a mode of critique for the sake of critique, not to “get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism.” In this sense of ‘renewing empiricism’, there will be always be some form and degree of essentialism in our categorization, critical or analytical – the analytics of essentialism is almost synonymous with categorization, generalization, and induction, thus unavoidable in any sort of social analysis. Much as we are guarded against sweeping overgeneralization, we should similarly keep our anti-essentialism targeted.

Universalizability as Praxis: Area Studies and pluralizing modes of knowledge production

How do we move from a methodological Eurocentrism towards a constructive and non-Eurocentric methodology? Among the possible fields, I find area studies among the more promising, given its deliberately particular and bounded (areal) focus. To furnish constructive arguments, I address first the critiques: Its ulterior motives during the Cold War, the artificiality of its ‘areas’, and a secondary position to only test Eurocentric hypotheses. On the first critique, the end of the Cold War, much like the field of international relations, has compelled areas studies to reinvent itself and appreciate the critiques launched against it. Secondly, ‘areas’ (East Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa,

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etc.) are only geographical demarcation, which in away serves a practical rather than epistemological purpose. 'Areas' are arguably less artificial than, for example, the disciplinary demarcation between political science and sociology, which often overlaps. Conversely, area studies prioritize an interdisciplinary commitment and contextual understanding of a certain area, paying attention to both particularities but not precluding generalizations, to capture more fully the dynamics of said area. Areas themselves do not erase difference, but exist alongside subunits (nations, provinces, etc.), just as both Asian studies and Japan studies are co-constitutive. The notion of 'areas' furnish a capacity for regional analysis, which enables an account of, for example, a budding European identity as larger than the sum of its nations. The most enduring critique thus would be the relegation of area studies to particularism and empirical testing, unable to transcend towards universal theories – a methodological Eurocentrism at core.

Yet area studies can still overcome methodological Eurocentrism. This is not a recourse to methodological nationalism, producing as many 'indigenous' national schools of thoughts which are derivative of self-Orientalization in its aspirations to European capitalist modernity. Nor is this to carve out an exclusive space by-Asian-for-Asian theorizing which ultimately would produce particularistic knowledge applicable to only Asia. The point, precisely, is to produce knowledge with contextually-bound observations that is generalizable and useful elsewhere. As has been made clear by postcolonialism, all knowledge is preconditioned within their production. The next step, then, is to universalize knowledge produced within non-Eurocentric contexts. It is with a throughgoing engagement with universalizability that area studies can contest methodological Eurocentrism, decenter Western modes of knowledge production, not by destructive 'uprooting' Western tradition but elevating non-Western knowledge.

There are two concrete examples for universalizability-as-praxis. As Giovanni Sartori has pointed out, the expansion of 'politics' brings about the risk of 'conceptual stretching' that 'waters down' conceptual and analytical precision. There is thus a real need for theorization from non-Western empirical settings. One notable demonstration is the Murdoch School in Australia that theorizes from Southeast Asian state formation experience a more encompassing political economy theory that incorporates both structural and sociocultural factors. It finds that Weberian approaches, through focusing on ideal-types and bureaucratization, do not explain well the uneven and historically specific developments of Southeast Asian political economy. Historical institutionalism, on the other hand, by overemphasizing autonomy of institutions, is unable to explain why particular institutions exist or change, particularly Southeast Asian 'institutions' that are usually deeply wedded into sociocultural contexts, not quite rationalized or autonomous. In this sense, the Murdoch School challenges methodological Eurocentrism by providing a viable, generalizable competing alternative, while still paying attention to contextual specificity. It concurs with Charles Tilly that "history matters" but does not preclude the possibility of transhistorical explanations, such as Tilly's WUNC configuration.

Another example is the emerging practice of Inter-Asia referencing by Asian scholars that decenters Western frames of comparisons. Inter-Asia referencing refers to the rising academic practice of Asian scholars where they cite more than just Western scholarship and include Asian works, and critically approach Western theories. While methodological Eurocentrism, with its pooling of resources and hegemonic knowledge production, casts non-European realities as lesser versions of the West, inter-Asia referencing allows Asian scholarship to 'take itself seriously' and paves the ways for new universals. Inter-Asia referencing is most prominent in export-oriented industrialization, urban development, and regionalization of popular culture, wherein there are 'Asian' specificities in economics and cultures that require a supple Asian – beyond a strictly Western – perspective. Nonetheless, the concentration of inter-Asia referencing in what appears to be products of Asian capitalism casts certain doubts into whether it can meaningfully provide alternative to capitalist modernity. An observation by Arif Dirlik is relevant here: "Although the agencies that are located in EuroAmerica maybe the promoters of Eurocentrism, they are by now the not the only ones, and possibly not the most important ones." We might, instead, find viable alternatives beyond Asia, in Latin America with the indigenous experience and the outgrowing of rights-based discourse, for example. As such, area studies, with the promise of pluralized and complementary knowledge productions, is particularly promising.

Conclusion

This essay examines the idea of methodological Eurocentrism, where Western social sciences generate and universal theories and concepts purportedly applicable everywhere. It first traces the concept's background in

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postcolonial theory that by focusing on the colonial encounter, deconstructs the universality of West and the Rest binaries and expose their contextual specificity. Methodological Eurocentrism results from this entrenched colonial structuration of the world, whose consequences are threefold: A Western intellectual hegemony that concentrates intellectual labor in the West and delegitimizes non-Western knowledge productions; an implicit Western telos as 'the end of history' and essentialization of non-Western living as falling behind the West; and a disciplinary divide in social sciences between those that aspire to be scientific and those 'less scientific'.

The second part teases out the limits of postcolonialism: Its questionable academic rigor and consistency, an analytical paradox where it too essentializes and universalizes, a reductionist particularism that deprives postcolonialism of meaningful praxis, and its inability to explain how Eurocentrism was able to universalize itself. This essay then reframes essentialism and universality to be more targeted and productive, re-engages the capacity to create general theory that retains postcolonial respect for difference. This essay finally identifies area studies to be particularly promising to counter methodological Eurocentrism by virtue of its non-Western sites of analysis, and the universalizability-as-praxis wherein their non-Eurocentric knowledge is coeval to Western knowledge.

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