

Review - Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory

Written by Sérgio Costa

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SÉRGIO COSTA, APR 3 2017

Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory
by Julian Go
Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, pp. 248

This book presents an encompassing discussion of the tensions and potentials observed in the relationship between social theory and postcolonial thought. Both fields, according to Julian Go's description, have developed not only separately but they even stand in opposition to each other in their very epistemological and institutional constitution. Accordingly, social theory as well as sociology and post-colonial thought belong to two antagonistic "histories and global processes – empire on the one hand and anticolonial resistance on the other [...]" (p. 10). With his book, Go endeavors to overcome this divorce. For him, social theory and sociology – urgently and irrevocably – need postcolonial thought in order to liberate themselves from their colonial past and imperial present. Accordingly, a postcolonial intervention in social theory and sociology should converge in a third wave of postcolonial thought, following a first wave represented by intellectuals involved in antiracist and anti-colonial movements, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral among others, and a second wave, initiated by Edward Said and continued by authors such as Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty who developed postcolonial ideas in the humanities.

This line of argument is elaborated throughout the book in a precise, accurate and captivating academic style. Inserting theoretical developments into their historical context, the author reconstructs the first and second waves of postcolonial thought in order to then distinguish two models of criticism postcolonialism addresses: the complicity critique, according to which social theory and sociology have historically cooperated with colonial and imperial enterprises, and the corruption critique which focuses on the colonial episteme of the social sciences. While both types of critique reveal "imprints of empire" in sociology and social theory, these critical assessments, if taken seriously by social scientists, could go further still and help the social sciences improve their "analytical power" (p. 102). More specifically, postcolonial thought lays bare three interrelated major blind spots in sociology and social theory. These are:

1. "metrocentrism", understood as "false universalism", referring to "any instance when the particular and parochial is unreflexively universalized" (p. 94);
2. "analytic bifurcation", which consists of systematically decoupling developments observed in metropolises and colonies (p. 104 ff.) and
3. "substantialism", understood as the assumption "that the basic units and actors of sociological inquiry are substances or essences: as in things, or even systems" (p. 118).

After elucidating these shortcomings, Go searches for resources to overcome them in the realm of a new approach he calls "postcolonial relationalism". To counter metrocentrism, postcolonial relationalism focuses on the "subaltern standpoint approach", which aims to recover points of views suppressed by colonialism and imperialism. In contrast to authors associated with indigenous sociology and Southern theories Go rejects the idea of an inherent epistemic superiority of subaltern loci of enunciation. Consequently, subaltern perspectives are not necessarily truer. However, they contribute, according to Go, to the multiplication of "theoretical truths" and bring to light subaltern agency occluded by colonialism and imperialism (p. 173 ff.). Against analytic bifurcation, Go, in line with G. Bhabha, insists

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on interconnectedness, i.e., the interdependent formation of modern societies in different world regions. Finally, to escape from substantialism, the author relies on relationalism. Relationalism means both that “relations are constitutive of supposed substances” and that units constituted through relations are fluid: “Relations shift and so do the identities they constitute” (p. 121).

In very brief and schematic terms, this is the powerful framework Go provides us to reform sociology and social theory from a postcolonial point of view. As is unavoidable in such encompassing enterprises, the book is not free of gaps and sorely missed references. Among contributions left unmentioned and unexplored in the book are both research carried out by social scientists identified with postcolonial thought as well as research developed by more “conventional” sociologists and social theorists who have long sought responses to the challenges enumerated by Julian Go. To start with, the claim for seriously taking into account multiple actors’ perspectives has been present in sociology since the appearance of Max Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie*, though Weber himself was not always loyal to his interpretative sociology and silenced “non-Western” subjects, too, as Go correctly notes (p. 177). However, social scientists around the world, drawing on classical sociology, could reconstruct meanings and agency articulated by anticolonial and postcolonial subjects beyond national borders as in the cases of third world women (Mohanty/Russo/Torres, 1991), indigenous peoples (e.g. Stavenhagen 1969), or African-Latin-Americans (e.g. Bastide 1967).

This oversight is also valid for debates on “analytic bifurcation”. The critique of influential macro-sociological theories, mainly modernization theory, for their national-endogenous, teleological and Euro-centered interpretations of modernity is, to a large extent, integrated into the sociological canon (e.g. Wallerstein 1996, Knöbl 2001, 2003) – not least because of previous work developed by pioneering postcolonial sociologists (e.g. Quijano 1992, Hall 1996a). Central here is also the work of Randeria (2000) who coined the concepts *entangled modernity* and *geteilte Geschichten* (divided histories) precisely to refer to the existence of a global interdependent modernity while national historiographies – both in the former metropolises and the post-colonies – have told us histories of endogenous modernizations driven by local heroes.

Similarly, the substantialism issue has been largely discussed and deconstructed by both “conventional” and postcolonial social theorists at least since the seminal contribution made by Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]) who, with their established-outsider figuration, taught us that “identities” and subjects, oppressed and oppressor, do not constitute fixed entities, they are contingently constructed along power relations. Later, contributions, among others in the field of British Black Cultural Studies (e.g. Hall 1996b, Gilroy 1994) and also intersectional studies (e.g. Anthias 2012), insisted on the relational and hierarchical character of individual and collective positionalities and identifications.

By mentioning these absences, my purpose is neither to criticize Go’s extraordinary book for being incomplete nor to affirm that the contribution postcolonial studies could make to sociology and social theory has already been made. To the contrary: The valuable mission to bring together postcolonial thought and social theory is by no means already accomplished; indeed, Go’s book helps us advance this. Instead, my intention is to discuss different strategies for decolonizing sociology and social theory. Go’s book explores the *epistemological way*. It first highlights the friction between postcolonial thought and social theory to subsequently discover interstices for a conciliation of both fields. However, to decolonize sociology and social theory, it is necessary to go beyond the epistemological dimension which has been exhaustively investigated by postcolonial social scientists in recent years. Now, concrete concepts, categories, instruments, and methods are required to produce sociological knowledge free from colonial and imperial imprints. The never-ending deconstruction of colonial vices in the social sciences does not converge in the articulation of these new resources.

Thus, it seems more promising to adopt a strategy in fact discarded in Go’s book: “enlist and remobilize” findings of previous scholarship (p. 117). Indeed, this is the path historically taken by postcolonial thought and postcolonial studies. Postcolonial thought is not the result of a program previously designed to support political struggles and then to conquer the humanities. As is generally known, postcolonial thought has collected and combined elements and contributions from local intellectuals, Marxism, and post-structuralism, among others, to respond to very concrete analytical and political challenges thinkers have faced within their academic or social engagement. How could the

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postcolonial intervention in social theory and sociology follow another pattern?

Rather than expecting a “third postcolonial wave” for starting an epistemological reform of the social sciences, it seems more productive to recollect and reconnect postcolonial moments of sociology and social theory in order to generate new knowledge about genuine sociological topics such as social inequality, state and citizenship, the construction of differences, the labor market, etc. This strategy, initiated by the first generation of postcolonial social scientists (Quijano 2000, Chatterjee 2004, Randeria 2003) and followed up since then, has proved to produce positive outcomes at the scholarly and institutional level (see among many others: Boatcă 2015, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010, Haritaworn 2015, Jelin/Motta/Costa 2017).

Both strategies to renew sociology and social theory, i.e. Go’s epistemological program and my own advocacy for critically recollecting and reconnecting existing scholarship, complement rather than compete with one another. After all, the reconstruction of social theory and sociology starting from existing scholarship requires deconstruction, that is, permanently questioning essentialist and imperial foundations of existing theories.

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About the author:

Sérgio Costa is a professor for Sociology at Freie Universität Berlin and the chair of the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila.net). He has vastly published in his areas of expertise which are: social inequalities, democracy and differences, postcolonial theories.