

Interview - Julian Go

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AUG 10 2017

Julian Go is Professor of Sociology at Boston University. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago and was an Academy Scholar at Harvard University's Academy for International and Area Studies. He is former elected Chair of the American Sociological Association's Comparative-Historical Sociology Section and is upcoming elected Chair of the ASA's Global & Transnational Sociology Section. His most recent books include *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*, *Global Historical Sociology*, co-edited with George Lawson and *Fielding Transnationalism*, co-edited with Monika Krause. He is also the author of *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688-present* and *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in Puerto Rico and the Philippines during US Colonialism*.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in social theory?

I see at least two debates – or nascent debates – worth noting. The first is the critical rethinking of social theory's Eurocentrism and provinciality. Of course, it is not surprising that I think this is the most exciting debate: it is a debate that I have been trying to participate in. But objectively speaking, this is a novel turn in social theory. I liken it to the early days of French post-structuralism's impact upon the social sciences in the late 1980s, or perhaps the impact of feminist theory on the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s. A noteworthy debate within this larger debate, though, is exactly how to de-provincialize; how to best accomplish the "de-colonial" or "post-colonial" or "Southern" turn (whatever you want to call it). This debate, though, is just beginning. It is something I address in my recent book, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*.

The second debate, or rather series of debates, is about the very status of social theory as an enterprise. In IR I know there have been implicit or explicit debates about whether IR should draw from social theory at all, but among social theorists in, say, sociology, there is a debate about whether social theory is even viable anymore. Fewer and fewer sociology departments hire in "theory" (in literature too in the United States, there has been a reaction to "theory" generally). Fewer and fewer departments require long series of courses in "theory." And scholars are still debating what types of "theory" is even worth writing – viz. do we need 'theory' in the sense of abstract universalizing theory (i.e. 'grand theory') or do we really just need 'middle-range' theory? And is the latter worth calling "theory" at all? So at issue in these debates is not *which* different theory or school better grasps the world (Marxism vs. postcolonialism, Bourdieu vs. Latour, Realism vs. Constructivism) but the very status of "theory" in the first place. Is theory dead? What *kind* of theory is worthwhile? Is there any even new "theory" or are all theoretical innovations pretty much over?

Both of these sorts of debates are exciting to me because they intimate moments of intense critical self-reflection – and such moments of self-reflection. And as long as they do not degenerate into self-indulgence or narcissism, these moments of self-reflection are crucial for advancing discussion and knowledge; not least because they are beginning to yield new lines of questioning. The critique of social theory's Eurocentrism has led to the generative search for alternatives. The question about whether theory is dead has led to some new lines of research and thinking on what theoretical innovation actually means and the conditions under which it occurs (this is one of the issues I am pursuing in some aspects of my current work, for example).

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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One of the many crucial shifts began in graduate school at the University of Chicago, when I slowly shifted from a die-hard theoretical monist in the Marxist vein (inspired in part by the work of one of my early teachers there, Moishe Postone) towards a sort of theoretical pluralism. I transitioned, in short, from the belief that capitalism is the one and only important social logic to a view of the world that sees it as more contingent and multi-layered, as structured by multiple sometimes overlapping logics. Whereas the prior belief required theoretical monism (all we need is a rigorous theory of capitalism, and everything else is incomplete and should be thrown out), the latter requires a pluralism and a much wider repertoire of theory. This is where I am now, though I am still reeling from that intellectual change, and only recently (in my book *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* and in other related works) have I begun to formalize it intellectually – that is, to formulate epistemic warrant for theoretical pluralism. See my two pieces ‘Global Sociology, Turning South: Perspectival Realism and the Southern Standpoint’ and ‘In Defense of the Southern Standpoint: A friendly response to Beigel, Crothers, and Keim,’ as recent examples.

How exactly did that shift occur? There were two sources. The first was a course taught by Dipesh Chakrabarty which opened me up to postcolonial thought and its critique of universalism (or what I would now call, its unstated and undertheorized critique of theoretical monism). The other is my exposure to Critical Realism (CR) through one of my other Chicago advisors, George Steinmetz (now at Michigan). Of all the things about CR, Steinmetz emphasized to his students CR’s justification for multicausal, conjunctural explanation and hence its openness to theoretical pluralism (because conjunctural explanation involves referring to different social logics that converge to produce an event – and different theories capture each of those different social logics). An excellent early statement on CR’s relevance for historical sociology is George Steinmetz’s article ‘Critical Realism and Historical Sociology: A Review Article’.

So the shift happened a while ago, but I am still struggling with it; that is, trying to fully *realize* it. This is because the way social science is structured is that, too often, we are taught to and still try to insist upon theoretical monism or monocausal explanation. As we are forced to jostle for distinction in a crowded academic field, we are often pushed to privilege a new single “variable” and hence a new “theory” that we’ve discovered that supposedly explains things better than anything else (and hence anyone else and their particular theories or variables). We are forced to adopt a singular “brand” or theoretical identity that pledges allegiance to and promotes only one school of thought or theorist; all of which implies that we can only believe in that there is one social logic in the world worth analyzing. I find that frustrating.

In your most recent book *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* you argue in favour of a postcolonial social science. Can you describe how these two fields can be reconciled despite their apparent contradictions?

There is recent work in social science (from sociology to IR) that has tried to mobilize postcolonial thought for social science. But this work has not yet satisfactorily confronted the contradictions between the two bodies of thought head-on. To my mind, the contradictions are deep, and I discuss some of them in my book. They partly have to do with historical origins: social theory emerged as a body of thought that embeds the standpoint of empire, while postcolonial thought emerged as an anti-imperial project. They also have to do with current disciplinary differences, along with associated differences in philosophical bases. For instance, social theory as it is practiced in social science ultimately is a realist enterprise, while some strands of postcolonial theory in the humanities (the strands I associate with a certain type of poststructuralism and postmodernism) are radically constructivist.

One of the arguments in my book is that while these tensions are real and palpable, the two bodies of thought are not intrinsically or interminably opposed. Both bodies of thought are complex and multivocal, which means that different aspects of them can be articulated together. And more importantly, I strongly believe that there are implicit or often unstated commonalities that warrant systematization. The primary one I discuss in the book is that postcolonial thought – even in its more radically constructivist form in the humanities – is ontologically realist in the end and that it thus depends upon some baseline social theory. At the same time, social theory, though emerging from the culture of empire, contains within it deep strands of anticolonial thinking, even as those strands have been too often marginalized (think W.E.B. Dubois). The trick is make these similarities or shared terrain between the two bodies of thought visible; just as the divergences or differences need to be clarified.

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But that's just the first step. The next steps should involve specifying and being more conscious of the type of ontology and epistemology that can emerge from this shared ground, and then developing alternative theoretical and methodological approaches that follow from that ontology and epistemology. The steps I prefer to take to meet this challenge are discussed in the book.

Based on this, you stress the necessity of a third wave of postcolonial thought. What would such a third wave look like and what would be the consequences for social science?

The "third wave" I am envisioning would entail a substantive intellectual reorientation. It would mean different methods, theories and empirical studies. In the book, I suggest that those methods, theories and empirical studies could be oriented around two broad approaches: "postcolonial relationalism" and the "subaltern standpoint" rooted in perspectival realism.

To my mind, the consequences of such a reorientation for social science would be simple enough: social science would be *better*. I say this only half-jokingly. I also mean that, if the third wave were to happen, social science would be better in the sense that it would be more *open* and hence more *relevant*. By "open", I mean a social science that incorporates diverse voices; diverse voices from within imperial metropolises (i.e. incorporating more so-called "minority" voices) and voices from around the world, including the postcolonial world and the Global South. But I don't mean this in a demographic sense only. I am not an essentialist. I also mean that new *standpoints* would be incorporated; such that social science would not only bring in differently raced or sexed people, but also different experiences that it has typically occluded or marginalized. Social science would then embed these experiences in its very categories and theories. And I argue that there is an intellectual and philosophical warrant for such inclusion, not just a political or ethical one (hence my reliance upon what I am calling "perspectival realism").

Ultimately, it is my hope that such inclusion, in turn, would make social science more relevant for the world. For as of now, social science reflects, embeds, and speaks to (and for) the experiences of only a small handful of people; and hence a tiny fraction of the world. Social science can and should do better.

In your book *Patterns of Empire* you offer a comparative analysis of the US and British Empires, challenging the assumptions about 'American Exceptionalism'. What are the dangers of such narratives of 'exceptionalism'?

Exceptionalism is dangerous because it is an especially pernicious form of Anglo-Eurocentrism. Of course, exceptionalism means different things to different scholars, but in narratives of American exceptionalism (and probably in narratives of other forms of exceptionalism, such as German exceptionalism, Canadian exceptionalism, etc.), a common underlying notion is that everything that the United States does and everything that happens to it can be understood by reference to the United States – and its people – in isolation from wider transnational, imperial or global fields of action, and therefore separate from the actions of subjugated peoples around the world. Much of what I show in *Patterns of Empire* is that many things about US imperialism that we have assumed to be the product of the action, will, intention (or "national culture") of Americans in the metropole is actually the product of complex *relations* between the American state and the peoples whom that state has sought to subjugate. Exceptionalist thought covers up these relations. It marginalizes in its theory what the American state has tried to marginalize in practice: the agency of the dominated. Exceptionalism thus occludes, omits and obfuscates. Why, then, is exceptionalism dangerous? Because it is the product of the imperial standpoint and of imperial practice, and therefore does not explain very much about the world.

What patterns of empire do you identify and what are the theoretical implications for the study of empire(s)?

There are two main patterns, in the big picture. The first is what I'd call "the subaltern effect." I didn't call it that in *Patterns of Empire*, but in retrospect that's an appropriate label. The point here is that, while all empires are powerful, they are always strategizing and acting in broader fields that impact what they do. Colonized or neo-colonized peoples (or "subaltern" groups) populate those fields; hence their actions matter. I argue that much of what the

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British and American empires did was shaped by these fields and hence by these peripheral groups. The subaltern may or may not speak, but the subaltern does have a certain agency – an agency by effect. The problem is that our standard theories and narratives overlook that agency.

The other patterns I find are temporal. They have to do with the different phases of hegemony that the British and the American underwent. I find that when these hegemonies were on the ascendance or on the decline, they were more imperialistic. They were more aggressive and colonialist; more willing to resort to force. Alternatively, during their respective hegemonic phases, they were less openly aggressive. They also tried to legitimate their dominant global position through all kinds of symbolic work (i.e. symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's sense). Sometimes that involved actively denying imperial status.

The implications for studying empires follow directly. First, we need to be attentive to subaltern agency. Elsewhere I suggest that, analytically, field theory is most appropriate for rendering that agency visible, while many of our other theories (such as Realism or even variants of Constructivism) tend to occlude such agency. Second, we need to study empires historically – as in, analyze them for their processual, temporal and contingent character. I think many dominant conventional theories of the international system are not good for this. Historical IR is much better, of course, but even then, there are certain schools of Historical IR that don't actually take process and temporality as seriously as they should, and instead rely upon implicit developmental or quasi-evolutionary narratives. I claim that, for studying empires, theories and approaches that can properly absorb process, sequence, and contingency without teleology work best. Field theory and other relational theories offer much hope here, as Lawson and I suggest in the introduction to our new collection, *Global Historical Sociology*, and as suggests my other collection co-edited with Monika Krause, *Fielding Transnationalism*.

How do legacies of colonialism structure global sociopolitical relations today?

This is a fantastic question, and one that I am still grappling with. Of course, political-economic legacies of colonialism structure global sociopolitical relations today in the sense that colonialism created our current configuration of global socioeconomic hierarchy. I am also interested in other legacies, however; not least colonialism's epistemic legacies. Here I am a card-carrying postcolonialist: I firmly believe that colonialism has left cultural legacies that impact our knowledge formations just as it has left economic legacies. And those epistemic legacies pervade global relations today.

The instances are multiple; and they amount to an overarching hegemony that is difficult to disentangle. But one example is the very notion that global sociopolitical relations can be and should be regulated, managed or transformed – whether by the United Nations, global humanitarian organizations, a hegemonic nation or a neoimperial state. It seems to me that this governmentality – this imaginary of a space ('global society' or the 'global economy') that requires intervention from the top – is a lasting legacy of empire and its imperial standpoint. Is this to say that we should *not* make efforts to try to somehow manage and transform global sociopolitical relations? No. The analysis of imperial origins does not in itself dictate values. It *is* to say, however, that we should at least acknowledge the imperial standpoint behind such efforts and better understand that history.

How does Trump's 'America First' doctrine fit in these discussions about American Empire?

Excellent question, and it would take an entire book to cover everything that could be said about Trump and American empire. And much has been said already. Here, in brief, I'd just add two things. First, it is important to note that Trumpism, as articulated through his "America First" rhetoric, is not really about Trump. Trump's discourse resonates among comparably wide swaths of the American populace (though not necessarily a majority, it's still a formidable swath). Second, the discourse resonates at least in part because of American decline. Yes, decline is real, as I argue in *Patterns of Empire*; and as I also argue, that decline creates an overall climate and discursive field of threat.

What Trumpism has done is channel that general sense of decline into particular images and streams that wind up fashioning white straight males as threatened from all sides – from women, immigrants, so-called Islamic terrorists,

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minorities, LGBT communities and, globally, from Chinese capitalists and Islamic States. “America First” is thus a masculinist, hypernationalist, right-wing response to decline. It reflects a nostalgia for America’s global hegemony – a post-WWII period of global economic dominance which was concomitant with a hegemony of straight white male dominance at home. In my view, then, American decline is not a fiction. The fiction lies instead in who and what Trumpism *blames* for the decline and the types of policies Trumpism believes will halt the decline.

What is the most important advice you could give to young IR and sociology scholars?

I have two pieces of advice. First, scholarship is not about you. It’s about the research, the ideas, the arguments, and the knowledge that is supposed to result from those. I hate to see young scholars get overly concerned about how clever they seem to others; about what everyone is thinking of them; about whether they are able to demonstrate how bright they are. I mean I get *why* young scholars fall into this trap. The competitive environment of academia contributes to it, and being clever is part of our self-proclaimed identities and sense of self-worth. So I fell into the trap too. But the problem is that when we get consumed by it, we lose track of what is important, and our scholarship suffers. Rather than fretting about “how am I coming across?” or “do they think I’m clever or not?” we all should be obsessing over “Is my argument right? Is my research solid? Am I working hard enough to make it better? Am I asking the right questions about the world? Am I offering valid answers?”

The second piece of advice I’d give to younger scholars is partly related. It is simple enough: do your best to be kind, not just clever. Everyone in academia is clever. But not everyone is kind. Admittedly this is easier said than done. But imagine how much more wonderful academia would be if everyone just spent their time working hard on their scholarship while being kind to each other (and the world around them more generally)? And imagine how great our scholarship would be if we weren’t bogged down by all the bs that comes with academia, because everyone is just being kind?

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This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.