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Julian Go | Essay | 25.10.2018

Taking Empire Seriously

Postcolonial Theory and Disciplinary Sociology

This text is an only slightly revised version of Julian Go's Keynote Address delivered to the 39th Congress of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS), held in Göttingen from September 24–28, 2018. We kindly thank the author for his friendly permission to publish the text on "Soziopolis". — The editors

The title of my talk¹ is "Taking empire seriously" and I've titled my talk this way because essentially, the larger question I want to ponder in my lecture is this: what if we as sociologists do take empire seriously? What would taking empire seriously mean—if anything—for our social theories, our concepts and methods, our research generally? My overarching argument will be that, taking empire seriously should force us to critique sociology. It should force us to reflect critically on the questions we ask and the concepts or theories that we employ. In turn, taking empire seriously means that we will have to ask new questions and deploy or perhaps generate new concepts and theories.

Another way to put my argument is this: taking empire seriously means that we would fare well to take postcolonial theory seriously, and that we should think harder about generating what I would call a "postcolonial" (or perhaps a "decolonial") sociology.

In this talk, I will first address the question of empire. Why talk about empire at all? Aren't empires over? And if they are over, why should we take them seriously? Here, one of my arguments will be that taking empire seriously means that we must question sociology's relationship to empire and hence social theory's epistemic limits. Finally, after addressing these matters I will turn to postcolonial theory.

On Empire

Part of the problem with discussing empire today is that, by today, we tend to forget the importance of empires for modern history. And as many sociologists know little about history in the first place, empire is even more elusive. But anyone who has read the work of historians, at least since the 1990s with the "imperial turn" in history, understands just how important empire has been.

After all, empire has been the dominant sociopolitical formation of modernity. It is the worst kind of naïve presentism to assume that nation-states are the natural form for societies. In fact, up until the last few decades, the world was organized in terms of empires and colonies. For centuries, societies were not bounded as nation-states, but rather as parts of empires. And by the early twentieth-century, nine-tenths of the globe had been occupied by imperial powers and their colonies. Nearly every society in the world today, therefore, is either a former colony of another society or a former imperial power.

Empires were massive social systems that touched everyone. Of course, empires were economic systems, predicated upon dispossession, extraction, and various forms of forced labor (not least slavery). But more than just economic systems, empires were also sociopolitical, ideological and cultural systems, generating new racial ideologies and all kinds of governmentalities and techniques of rule. Furthermore, empires were not just about brute political domination and economic extraction. They also generated entire systems of representation and knowledge—an entire culture and episteme of empire by which its participants came to view the world. Empire was about knowledge as much as it was about economic, political, and racial domination.

Empires were not just things that existed “out there,” somehow separate from modern European societies. They were constitutive of European modernity too. It is not only that the industrial wealth of Anglo-European societies was made possible through imperial expansion and accumulation overseas; it is also the case that other crucial aspects of the “modern”—techniques of value extraction, labor control, discipline, policing and surveillance, modern systems of sanitation, health and imprisonment, notions of race and ethnicity, and the very idea of the “modern” itself—were initially deployed and developed (if not invented) in overseas colonies or through imperial relations.

My claim is that sociology needs to take empire seriously. If sociology is the so-called “science of modernity,” then surely it must incorporate empire, colonialism, and slavery into its accounts, into its conceptual arsenal, and into its theories.

The problem is that sociology has not been very good about understanding empire. Empire and its correlates—such as colonialism and slavery—have been for too long a blind spot of sociology. Except for Marx, none of our classical sociological theories took empire and colonialism seriously. Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and through Parsons and Luhmann—none of them made colonialism a central part of their accounts of modernity. And even when early theorists did talk about empire and colonialism, they talked about it

in a very specific way: they did so in a way that minimized its importance for modernity. When Marx theorized colonialism as a matter of primitive accumulation for instance, he saw that as a passing phase, not as something that remained constitutive of Western capitalism. When S.N. Eisenstadt wrote his award-winning book on empires in the 1960s, he theorized empires as something that happened before modernity or outside of European modernity—not in modernity.

The Epistemic Implications of Empire

So, what to do? Well, the matter is not as simple as “bringing empire back in.” That is, taking empire seriously does not mean only making empire and its correlates an object of analysis where it has been ignored before. It cannot just mean using existing sociological tools to study empire and colonialism. Why not? Because this attempt to “bring empire back in” would not deal with the epistemic implication of taking empire seriously: that sociology itself has been disabled if not contaminated by its origins in empire. We can’t just understand empire from the standpoint of sociology, because, historically, disciplinary sociology from its founding has expressed, manifested, and reflected the culture, habitus, and standpoint of empire. It has not critically reflected upon empire.

What I am speaking of here, more precisely, is the connection between empire and sociology. George Steinmetz among others has been doing some research on sociologists and their institutional connections with colonial states and imperial projects. In my previous work I have researched such connections in the North American case. But I am speaking here today on a different level. I am not speaking about the direct institutional connections between sociology and empire but rather about epistemic connections. And on this point I am actually just relying upon a rudimentary sociology of knowledge; precisely the sort of sociology of knowledge advocated by Karl Mannheim when he first articulated his sociology of knowledge at the 6th Congress in Zürich in 1928. “The principal thesis of the sociology of knowledge,” Mannheim wrote in *Ideology and Utopia*, “is that there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscure.”

This is not the time to go into Mannheim’s thought in any great detail, but what I take from him is the basic point that knowledge is always generated within certain social and historical contexts, and that therefore those contexts influence that knowledge. They do not determine, it but they influence it in all kinds of complex ways.

And so let us ask: what was the social context in which sociology as a mode of thought and discipline first emerged? The answer is that it was a context of empires: disciplinary sociology emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exactly when the European empires and the American empire consolidated their control over the globe. And what was the social structure of this imperial world? On the one hand, there was an economic, racial, and gendered structure within the European metropolises—and sociology occupied one place in that structure. As R.W. Connell points out in *Southern Theory*, disciplinary sociology emerged in, of, and for the white middle to upper middle class males of the imperial metropolises. But, on the other hand, sociology also occupied a place in a global structure of empires. This was a geopolitical and socioeconomic global hierarchy and the European imperial metropolises were at the top. Sociology emerged in this particular context, in this particular place within the larger global social hierarchy: at the top. And if we take Mannheim and the sociology of knowledge seriously, we have to acknowledge that disciplinary sociology was influenced by this social position. It first emerged in the context of empire and, therefore, like all knowledges at the time, it was influenced by that context. It was part and parcel of the culture of empire.

Remember that the very notion of the “social”—as a space between nature and the spiritual realm—first emerged and resonated in the nineteenth century among European male elites to make sense of and to try to manage social upheaval and resistance from workers, women, and from colonized natives. Or, remember that in the United States, one of the first books with the word “sociology” in the title was published in 1854 by George Fitzhugh. It was called, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* and it deployed the social concept to vindicate the slave system in the American South. And remember that the questions that were asked by sociology in the early twentieth century reflected the concerns and categories of imperial power. From its concerns over social disorder, to its attachment to Social Darwinism, to its focus upon the so-called “Negro problem” in the US, or questions of how to assimilate immigrants, or early sociology’s promulgation of race theory; to Weber or Durkheim’s Orientalist and essentialist lenses for discussing other cultures—in all of these respects and more, sociology reflected the questions of interest to imperial centers and promulgated the worldview of those metropolises. It is not important, then, that some sociologists supported empire or were employed by colonial states. The point is that sociology as an intellectual project was part and parcel of the imperial episteme, expressing the culture, habitus, and standpoint of Europe and America’s imperial metropolises.

And so my argument is that taking empire seriously means we have to take sociology’s

imperial origins seriously. We have to recognize sociology's embeddedness within the episteme of empire. And this in turn means we can't just use existing sociological tools to think critically about the world. Instead, we need to think harder about the epistemic legacies of empire upon sociology and then consider how we might equip sociology differently. And we must do this not to be politically correct but because we want to fulfill sociology's mission of critically understanding the modern world.

It is here where postcolonial theory can help.

Postcolonial Theory

In discussing postcolonial theory, I am joining sociologists who have already begun to discuss it. Gurinder Bhambra in the UK, or Manuela Boatca in Germany; Raewyn Connell in Australia; Zine Magubane in the United States—these and others have incorporated some of the insights of postcolonial theory into their work. There are others like Webke Keim whose work relates to postcolonial theory but who might not label their work as such. What I want to do here is offer own thoughts on postcolonial theory.

First, what do I mean by “postcolonial theory”? I think the concept is fraught with confusion, and the sociologists I just mentioned probably define it differently. When I speak of “postcolonial theory” or “postcolonial thought,” I am thinking of a body of writing and thought that has come in the form of two main waves—at least in the North American context in which I operate.

The first wave is the body of writing that proliferated in the early to mid-twentieth century amidst anticolonial movements around the world. It included thinkers like Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Aime Cesaire, Albert Memmi, and earlier, CLR James and in the US, W.E.B. DuBois among others. The “second wave” is the wave that emerged within the academic humanities in the US starting roughly in the 1980s. This is often called “postcolonial studies,” and it includes Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and, in history and subaltern studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others.

There other lineages and traditions that are related or adjacent to what I am calling “postcolonial theory.” For instance, there is a tradition called “Black Marxism” which I think is connected. There's also a Latin American tradition of “decolonial thought” from Quijano and more recently with Mignolo, and I'd add them to the second wave. But I don't really want to quibble with these labels, because what's important here is what all of these

seemingly diverse thinkers share. They share these basic elements:

(1) unlike traditional sociology, there's a focus upon empire and its importance in the making of modernity;

(2) a critique of empire, its correlates (like racialization, colonialism and slavery), and its legacies; and

(3) an attempt to transcend empire's legacies, including its epistemic legacies.

To clarify, there are other intellectual traditions that also take empire seriously and critique it, like Marxism, dependency theory, and world-systems theory. But I do think postcolonial theory has a distinct focus. One distinct focus is upon racialization. It was through empire and colonialism that “race” was invented, mobilized, and institutionalized; and so postcolonial theory, unlike some other intellectual traditions, sees racialization as central. W.E.B. Dubois's claim that the problem of the twentieth century is the “color line” is a good example. Similarly, thinkers like Aimé Césaire or Fanon were members of the Communist Party but criticized the Party's failure—and Marxism's failure more broadly—to recognize the specificity of racial domination and their insistence on reducing race and colonialism to secondary importance. As Césaire wrote in his resignation from the Communist Party:

“...we, men of color...have come to grasp, in our consciousness, the full breadth of our singularity... which cannot be confused with any other [...] our struggle—the struggle of colonial peoples against colonialism, the struggle of peoples of color against racism—is more complex, or better yet, of a completely different nature than the fight of the French worker against French capitalism, and it cannot in any way be considered a part, a fragment, of that struggle.”

The other thing about postcolonial theory is that it uniquely focuses upon empire's culture and episteme. That includes racism, of course, but also all of the Eurocentric meaning systems, representations, ideas, and knowledge formations that empire wrought and which persist in various forms today—including in the humanities and social sciences. This is seen in the early anticolonial thinkers like Fanon and up through the second wave (in the work of Said, Chakrabarty, and others). Key to all of their writings is this notion that empire not only involved the spread of capitalism but also certain cultural and epistemic logics. This I think is why Edward Said's book *Orientalism* was so seminal, for it unearthed how epistemic structures representing the Orient (as regressive, static, singular) were not

epiphenomenal or a sideshow to imperialism, but rather facilitated and enabled it in the first place. It showed how entire formations of knowledge helped to create this conceptual tool of empire, and also suggested that we still live with these epistemic structures whenever we talk about the Orient or “Islam.” Similarly, Fanon criticized how psychiatry and psychology were part of and reflected the imperial episteme. Subaltern studies critiqued how history as a mode of knowledge expressed the imperial standpoint. And so on.

Finally, while postcolonial theory examines the racial and epistemic aspects of empire, it is not concerned only with the past. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, the political decolonization of Asia and Africa or other parts of the world in the twentieth century was a monumental disappointment. It did not bring equality between metropolitan and ex-colonial countries; nor did it bring a decolonization of consciousness or culture; it did not bring epistemic decolonization. “We live,” says Gayatri Spivak, “in a post-colonial neo-colonized world.” This means that the culture and episteme of empire persists today; it is a culture and episteme that contributes to and helps sustain inequalities between the global South and North; and a culture and episteme that continue to obfuscate our understanding of the world.

And so it is here, then, where the postcolonial project comes to the fore. For if the cultures of imperialism persist into the presumed postcolonial era, new and different sorts of knowledge must be created to help decolonize consciousness. And this is what the overarching goal of postcolonial studies is: it grapples with colonialism’s legacies and seeks alternative representations or knowledge that do not fall prey to colonialist knowledge’s misrepresentations and epistemic violence. That’s why it’s labeled post-colonial theory: it is not “post-colonial” in the sense of referring to a historical moment after decolonization. Rather, it is “post-colonial” in the sense of “decolonial”: it seeks theories, ways of representing the world, and narratives that escape the confines of the imperial episteme and can generate new knowledge that casts off the epistemic legacies of empire. As Fanon put it: “Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well.”

This is exactly why postcolonial theory is helpful for us as sociologists. While sociology was born from and operated within the culture of empire, postcolonial theory was born from the imperial margins, from the colonies and subjugated areas of empire. While sociology has been part and parcel of the imperial episteme, representing the imperial standpoint; postcolonial theory seeks to go beyond that episteme and beyond that standpoint.

Postcolonial theory, then, can help us sociologists take empire seriously and perhaps offer ways for sociology to go beyond its own imperial origins.

Lessons of Postcolonial Theory

But let me be more precise; what exactly might we take from postcolonial theory? In short, postcolonial theory invites us to make two moves:

The first is self-critique. I mentioned already that sociology was initially born within the culture of empire. But what postcolonial theory can help us see is how sociology today still manifests some of those legacies of empire. Now, I am not meaning to say that postcolonial theory can help us criticize sociology for being racist. That's not the issue. It's rather that postcolonial theory can help identify certain analytic tendencies in sociology that bear the imprint of the imperial episteme; it can help us better see the legacies of empire upon social theory.

For example, one of the problematic analytic tendencies that postcolonial theory would alert us to is sociology's Orientalism. Classic thinkers like Weber and Durkheim portrayed non-Western societies as homogeneous essences, as static and backwards, thereby reserving dynamism, social creativity, and energy and enlightenment for European societies alone. It is telling that the most common term Weber used to describe India is "absence." These are exactly the sorts of categories and classificatory schemes that postcolonial scholars like Edward Said located as part of the imperial episteme. They mark a will to essentialize that is exactly the will of imperial power, and it persists in various forms today, from Neo-Weberian studies that presume homogenous religious or national cultures to certain global sociologies that attempt to divide up the world into distinct "civilizations" that are presumably pristine and homogenous and essential.

A second problematic analytic tendency is the occlusion of colonial or subaltern agency. By this I mean the Eurocentric assumption that only the activities of metropolitan actors matter, and the associated treatment of colonized or postcolonial peoples as passive receptors of modernity; as subjects rather than as agents. When we talk about the origins of capitalism, for instance, we refer to Weber and talk about the discipline imposed by the Protestant ethic. We less often refer to the discipline of the slaves on Caribbean plantations that helped spawn capitalism. When we talk about the origins of liberal modernity, we refer to the French revolutionaries in Paris, not the Haitian revolutionaries who Bhabha and others suggest are the true originators of the modern notion of human rights. We could

proliferate examples; all of which would point to the fact that this analytic treatment of peoples as subjects rather than actors merely reproduces how imperialists themselves saw colonized peoples. It enacts in our theory how empires treated colonized peoples in actual practice.

A third legacy of the imperial episteme is what I would call “analytic bifurcation.” By this I mean the analytic abstraction or separation of social objects from their wider constitutive relations, creating a false separation. This is what Edward Said might call the “law of division” which is inscribed in the imperial episteme. It is an artificial separation between metropole and colony, between the so-called “West” and “the East”; of “Europe” from “non-Europe”—and variants thereof, such as the bifurcation between the “inside” of nations vs. the “outside” of nations; or “the domestic” from the “foreign.” When Durkheim, for instance, famously theorizes societies based upon organic solidarity—by which he meant modern Western societies—and when he differentiated them from societies based upon mechanical solidarity—by which he meant so-called “primitive societies”, he analytically bifurcates these societies. He treats them as completely separate and autonomous from each other. The problem is that in reality no such separate societies existed. Precisely at the time Durkheim was writing, European societies of organic solidarity were able to have that form of organic solidarity because of colonialism; that is, because they were ruling societies based upon mechanical solidarity. In fact, in many cases, European imperial societies were deliberately maintaining tribal social structures for the purposes of colonial rule, trying to create mechanical solidarity. So these societies were always intimately connected, and yet Durkheim’s very theory of solidarity disconnects them analytically, thereby presuming them to be separate and autonomous societies with their own internal logics. This too, postcolonial theorists would point out, is a legacy of the imperial episteme—it reflects the viewpoint of European empires that valorized their own agency and autonomy and failed to recognize their dependence upon colonized peoples.

Fourth and finally, I think postcolonial theory would help critique sociology’s Eurocentric universalism, or what I would also call “metrocentrism.” This is the tendency to transpose provincial categories from one site to another, under the assumption of their universality. Fanon, for example, famously criticized the use of psychoanalysis by French doctors to treat Algerians during colonialism. Why, he opined, should we assume that a theory that embedded the specific experiences and concerns of the white upper middle class in Austria has anything to say about the experience and hence the psyche of black Algerian peasants subjected to French colonial violence?

Fanon here was pointing out the metrocentric assumptions of French psychiatry, and much of sociology operates the same way. We all know that sociology's early theories posited a presumably universal template of development based upon Europe's experience and then applied them to the rest of the world. Theories about rationalization or "organic solidarity" or modernization theory, theories about society as an integrated, cohesive "system" from Parsons or Luhmann, the wage relation between white worker and white employer in Marx's theory—all of these were based upon the singular experience and empirics of Anglo-European societies, but we then apply them to all other societies unproblematically, reducing spatial or geographical or cultural difference to temporal difference and all the while presuming the analytic primacy of the Anglo-European experience.

Rawyn Connell's critique of "Northern" theory is appropriate here. Connell argues that sociology is "Northern" in that it "embeds the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society, while presenting itself as universal knowledge." In other words, we take a very specific and arguably limited parochial experience—that of European societies—and universalize that to the entire world. And in so doing, we fail to recognize the situatedness and hence the provinciality of these theories. For, after all, these theories do not come from nowhere. They are not universal. They emerge from particular times and places by social actors shaped by the social context of their thought. Yet, by metrocentrism, we assume universality. By metrocentrism, we try to pull the "god trick", presuming a view from nowhere when in fact the view is from somewhere, from a particular location, and driven by particular interests: in this case, from the imperial center. Again, this is a legacy of the imperial episteme structuring contemporary sociological logic. Just as imperialists treated the world as an empty space that they could colonize in their own image, so does metrocentric sociology treat the world as a blank canvas upon which it paints its Eurocentric theories.

To be clear, the problem is not that metrocentrism is politically incorrect. The problem is that it is unscientific. Sociologists always complain about generalizability. But northern theory is everything but generalizable. The United States has 4 percent of the world's population and Europe has 12 percent. And yet we model our theories upon just this tiny 16 percent of the world, and assume it applies to the other 84 percent. This, I would argue, gives credence to the claim that sociology is a highly provincial and narrow science.

The same goes for all of the analytic tendencies I'm discussing here. The point is not that Orientalism, the occlusion of agency, analytic bifurcation or metrocentrism are problematic because they are distasteful or that they reproduce the logic of the imperial episteme. The

point is that, because of this fact, they render sociology analytically limited. They only lead, I would argue, to impoverished sociological accounts and explanations; they force us,—simply put—to do bad sociology. Sociology can and should do better.

Towards a Postcolonial Sociology

So, given these critiques, the question is: how? How can sociology truly take empire seriously and cast off the baggage of its imperial origins?

Well, first and foremost, it should be clear what I do not believe. And that is the postmodern position that some postcolonial scholars in the humanities have adopted. According to this perspective, sociology, because of its imperial origins and positivist character, is intrinsically problematic; it can never truly be a critical tool. This is a view that I vehemently reject. Not only is it wrong, it also underestimates the fact that postcolonial theory itself depends upon a sort of implicit sociology. So the goal should not and cannot be throwing out sociology entirely. The challenge rather is to work within the terms of sociology to overcome its limitations. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in a different context: we must recognize both the inadequacy and the indispensability of social science.

So, the question remains: how might we do a sociology that is attentive to the postcolonial critique? For lack of time, I cannot delve into this too much. What I can do here is draw from my book *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* and highlight two approaches for generating new sociologies that do not fall prey to the confines of the imperial episteme.

The first is postcolonial relationalism. By “relationalism”, I’m referring to the social ontology that goes back to Ernst Cassirer and continues through American sociologists like George Herbert Mead up to more recent theories like Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory. Relationalism is important for us here because it exposes the poverty of essentialism. With a relational ontology, social entities can only be thought of as constituted by a series of relations that are external to them and that constitute them as entities in the first place. As such, relationalism aligns with the postcolonial critique of Orientalism. By using a relational approach, we can no longer essentialize other cultures or societies as static and homogeneous. And more importantly, with relationalism we can throw off the imperial episteme’s assumptions of metropolitan agency and its occlusion of colonial agency. By the principles of relationalism, Europe’s identity and standing cannot be narrated as the result of European agency and autonomy, but rather must be seen as always-already constituted by its relations with others—not least those whom Europe had colonized and subjugated.

In sum, postcolonial relationalism overcomes analytic bifurcation and what Said called the imperial episteme's "law of division." It opens our eyes to how the center is always constituted by the periphery, never isolated from it, precisely by its relations with the periphery. And I'm not just talking about economic relations. I'm also referring to identities, social forms, and social practices of all sorts. Postcolonial relationalism invites us to track how, on all of these registers, entities that we had previously taken to be separate and autonomous are in fact always constituted by their presumed others. It would also, by the same token, have us interrogate why and how these entities have taken on the appearance of autonomy and essentialism, and it would enable us to see how such an appearance is an epistemic effect of the imperial standpoint.

So that's one approach. Another is the subaltern standpoint. I take this approach from postcolonial theorists but also from work in science and technology studies and feminist theory.

By "subaltern" I mean a social position of knowing rooted in geopolitical and global social hierarchy. It is the position of—and hence embeds—the activities, experiences, concerns, and perspectives of globally peripheral (e.g. colonized and postcolonized) populations. This is a geopolitical and social position that is constituted historically within broader relations of power. And my proposal is that, by starting our sociologies from this position—from this subaltern standpoint - we can ask new questions, and craft new concepts that escape metrocentrism and the imperial standpoint of conventional social theory. Rather than grounded in the particular concerns, categories, and context of imperial metropolises, a sociology that starts from the subaltern standpoint is grounded in the concerns, categories, and contexts of globally-subjugated groups. Close to what Connell calls Southern theory as opposed to Northern theory, this approach seeks to replace the imperial episteme with the insight of subjugated or repressed knowledges.

This is exactly how postcolonial thinkers themselves operated. Take, for instance, the work of Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a revolutionary and writer but also was a sort of social theorist, and in fact innovated on many fronts. He theorized race in a way that was different from the dominant discourse of the time. Fanon claimed that race was not a biological essence but the product of what he called "sociogenesis"; that is, it was a social construction and specifically constructed through the colonial relationship. Blackness was something constructed by the colonizer—who in turn constituted their own identity in opposition.

But, more than just race, Fanon also offered a new theory of colonialism itself. You have to

understand that, at the time of his writing, “colonialism” was not a theorized object; at most it was seen in colonial ethnographies or political discourse as a neutral expression of benevolent governance; not an object with its own logics. But Fanon innovated. He theorized colonialism as a system in its own right; a racialized and intrinsically violent system connected to the wider imperial economy and generating the identities of colonizer and colonized alike. And not only was this a radically new theory, positing an entirely new social object that had been more or less ignored in existing social science; and it also ended up being widely influential. Immanuel Wallerstein notes that when he first came up with world-systems theory he was inspired by Fanon’s work and tried to make it more amenable to sociology through his concept of the world-system.

So Fanon’s work was innovative and influential. But this is the question: how did Fanon begin? What enabled him to innovate? What was his method? Fanon did not begin by transposing, say, the categories of Parsons’ structural functionalism to colonial Algeria; or Luhmann’s system theory; nor did he even begin with Marxist categories. Fanon first drew from his own experiences and observations as a black subject of the French colonial empire; as a young black man from Martinique living in France and then as a Martinican working as a psychiatrist in Algeria where he witnessed the violence of French colonialism first-hand. Of course, in his writings, Fanon indeed engaged with existing theoretical systems. He engaged with Marxist categories as well as those of Freud and Sartre. But he did not begin with these categories. He instead started from the standpoint of the racialized colonial subject: he started with their activities, experiences, and perceptions. Fanon famously starts his book *Black Skin, White Masks* with the question: “What does a black man want?”. And from that starting point, he generated important insights on race and colonialism.

Fanon is only one example; we could also look to others like W.E.B. Dubois. In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois begins his own novel approach to race relations in the US with a question that is not entirely different from Fanon’s: that is, “how does it feel to be a problem?” And Dubois too, from that beginning point, articulates his own theory of racial subjugation.

This is what I mean by a subaltern standpoint approach: the questions asked, the concepts employed, the theories developed—these are not metrocentrically deduced from dominant theories but rather created first from the experiences and concerns of subaltern subjects.

As I approach a conclusion, let me clarify some things here because this approach can be

easily misunderstood. First of all, by this approach, I am not saying that sociology is just about reporting on the experiences of individual subaltern subjects. I am not saying we look at the experiences and concerns of subaltern groups and that's the end of it. I am saying that we start from the subaltern standpoint approach and generate concepts or theories from that perspective. Fanon, for instance, started with the experiences of colonized subjects to ask new questions that Marx, Freud, or Parsons were not asking and from there he built a set of concepts and excavated logics that modeled wider systemic relations and institutions. So this is not just about reporting on individuals' experiences. It is about creating sociologies from the ground up.

Second, by this approach, I am not implying a reverse essentialism. I am not saying that just because a theorist is from the Global South or is of a particular race that they necessarily offer better knowledge. I am referring to a social position in a hierarchy that is the starting point for analysis. I am not referring to an essential identity. And it's a social position that anyone, regardless of their identity, can access if done properly. So this is not about just trying to find thinkers from the Global South and automatically assuming that, because of their origin or identity, they offer important insights. This is not just about looking for these theories from the Global South and "adding to the canon." In other words, it's not about whether the sociologist or theorist themselves are subaltern. It's about whether the questions, concepts, and theories were generated initially from the subaltern standpoint.

Finally, by this subaltern standpoint approach, I am not trying to suggest that our sociologies should be subjectivist; nor am I insinuating an epistemic relativism. Instead, I am operating from a view of knowledge that comes in part from postcolonial theory but also realist philosophies of science called "scientific perspectivism" or what I would call "perspectival realism." I don't have time to go into this here, but the point is that perspectival realism insists that all knowledge is perspectival but "still true"; that knowledge is always partial and objective at the same time.

A good metaphor for this epistemology has to do with maps. Maps are like theories in that they offer knowledge of a place. A map of London offers knowledge of London. But no map can represent all of London. Each map has to be partial, even if can be objectively valid. For instance, a map of London's subway allows us to see the Tube of London. But the map is partial, because it only gives one representation of London's transport system. It does not, for instance, tell us anything about London's streets. To know about streets—i.e. to create a street map—you have to have to walk upstairs and start seeing London from the street-level. You have to adopt a different standpoint; you have to see London from a different

perspective. And in turn, the map of London's streets is also partial yet objective: it tells us about the streets but not about the subway or about, say, the water or sewage lines. For a map of those things you have to adopt a different standpoint.

So our sociological theories are the same: they are each like maps. They come from certain standpoints and offer us some knowledge but always partial knowledge. And taking empire seriously—and thus taking postcolonial theory seriously - means that we can recognize that the problem with much of sociology is that it has offered us only limited kinds of maps: maps that come from the imperial episteme, maps that reflect the standpoint of imperial metropolises—while nonetheless insisting that those maps are universal; that those maps are the only maps that matter.

A subaltern standpoint approach might help us overcome this limitation. Starting our sociologies from the subaltern standpoint is one way to overcome the hubris of sociology's imperial standpoint and generate new knowledge that escapes the limitations and legacies of empire.

And to conclude, I'd say that this is exactly what we need today. All of our countries continue to grapple with the legacies of empire, colonialism, and slavery: from persistent racism in the face of immigration—racism that draws upon colonial discourses—to continued inequality between the Global North and Global South, to the persistence of the imperial episteme in our social sciences. Given all of this, we need to take empire seriously; and doing so means we need new programs, questions, concepts, and theories. We need new maps—new maps to better understand, and confront, the dilemmas of our ex-colonial world in which the legacies of empire persist.

Endnoten

1. Portions of this talk have been published in Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*, Oxford / New York 2016.

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