Postcolonial Critique and the Idea of Sociology

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Abstract:

This paper characterizes and critically engages with recent currents of postcolonial thought that pose significant challenges to conventional academic discourses, in particular sociology. The principal postcolonial charge is that even critical variants of disciplines like sociology are irremediably Eurocentric and must consequently - as a minimum - be thoroughly 'provincialised'. These postcolonial challenges are important, necessarily disruptive and salutary, but the analysis offered here points up a number of difficulties and warns against simplistic polemics. This is because it is no easy matter to decide what exactly Eurocentrism is, or by what logic sociology is definitively damned by association with it. Indeed, some of the tropes and strategies noted by postcolonial theorists as characteristically Eurocentric - for example, universalism, 'structural' analysis, and holistic secular understandings of the historical process - remain present within the fabric of postcolonial thought itself. Overall, the argument is an ironic one: that postcolonial thought gains much of its critical force from the sociological mode of comprehension and critique that is embedded within it.
1. Sociology’s Postcolonial Predicament

It is now routinely observed that sociology has come rather late to embrace issues around postcoloniality, at least when compared with anthropology, cultural and literary studies, and history. Yet it is not often explained why this should be the case, and the question arises even more sharply now, given the extent to which, once caught up in the postcolonial, de-colonial maelstrom, sociologists appear, if anything, even more engulfed by conceptual and ethical dilemmas than scholars in those other fields of study. After all, it was back in the mid-90s that postcolonial scholars were concluding that their field had reached something of an ‘impasse’ (eg. Slemon 1994: 29, Young 1995: 163, Moore-Gilbert 1997: 186), and in the following decade thinkers as central to multiculturalism, anti-orientalism, and anti-racist cultural studies, respectively, as Bhikhu Parekh (2008), Edward Said (2004) and Paul Gilroy (2004) were openly recovering an expansive humanism in response to the difficulties entailed by the strictly observed politics of identity and difference that drove many postcolonial assaults on the various mainstreams. Thus, it is slightly curious at a time when the – undoubtedly forceful – charge is made within the discipline to the effect that sociologists have still to grasp that the recognition of difference must truly make a difference to our entire self-understanding (Bhambra 2007), that less sociology-centred discussants appear more willing to include the difference sameness makes within the postcolonial ‘predicament of difference’ (Ang and St. Louis 2005). Interesting too that a full decade on from literary theorist Terry Eagleton’s unabashed characterization of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discourse as a ‘garrulous hotch-potch’ in which the whole notion of postcolonial reason is simultaneously exhibited and exploded (Eagleton 1999), Spivak is summoned up with hushed reverence as the overture to a plea for sociologists to redress their dire lack of postcolonial listening skills (Back 2009).
One explanation for sociology’s lateness and difficulty with postcolonial critique is that sociological thinking is what critics in other discourses have in mind as standing at the heart of the intellectual Eurocentrism that in turn constitutes the main obstacle to full-scale postcolonialization. Just because non-sociological postcolonialists feel less bound up with sociology as a part of their own identity, and because it is correspondingly easier for them to deploy potent caricatures of the sociological tradition and its (allegedly) unitary ‘project’, they can proceed without ado to pinpoint or insinuate sociology as the thought-style that is most in need of anti-Eurocentric dismantling. For example, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha grounds his influential ‘dislocation’ of conventional Western cultural thinking (including its radical variants) by bringing out its deepest tacit assumption, namely that the social can be totalized and represented. Bhabha argues that the postcolonial trope of difference simply does not operate with the aid of such characteristically sociological concepts, whether in pluralistic form couched in terms of the patterned diversity of cultural groups, or in hierarchical form in the manner of the sociology of (under)development. This is because the ‘traditional sociological alignment’ between self and society, whereby the interests and positions of all persons and peoples are rendered comprehensible under a ‘paradigm of social action’ held against a ‘background of social and historical facts’, exemplifies the sort of ‘sententious and exegetical’ mode of apprehension that contrasts strongly with the ‘affective and iterative’ register required for disruptive postcolonial reflection (Bhabha 1994: 42, 181-3, 193).

Another striking articulation comes from historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose terminology of ‘deprovincialising Europe’ has been adopted across the disciplines. In order responsively to attest the gamut of non-western, non-modern past and present societies and imaginings,
such that their ‘irreducible plurality’ can (if only in principle) be openly affirmed, it is above all ‘sociological’ understanding that, for Chakrabarty, must be ‘deliberately eschewed’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 16, 78, 81). Finally, in his important postsecular inflection of postcolonial genealogical scholarship, anthropologist Talal Asad insists that in order to comprehend the specificity of cultures, and specifically religious ways of being, it is necessary to jettison, in one of his interlocutors’ phrase, ‘the secular self-understanding of modernity that is constitutive of the social sciences’ (Casanova 2006: 20). That self-understanding is crucially sustained, Asad maintains, via the ‘coercive constraints of Sociological Truth’ (Asad 2006: 206), in terms of which the apparently irrational is repositioned as part of the real-rational, and the apparently transcendent is encoded into a this-worldly profile.

With such heavyweights waiting to pounce – not to mention the persistently unsettling work of Stuart Hall over the years – no wonder it has taken some effort for sociologists to respond to postcolonialism, and to display considerable discomfort in the process. The present contribution emphasises two things. First, despite increasing familiarity with the postcolonial challenge, and making all due allowance for the inescapable investment of political and moral energies in the topic, sociologists need to be yet more explicit about the stakes and positions in play. That there has been progress in this regard is indicated by two refreshingly direct questions posed in one recent ‘research agenda’ statement: ‘why postcolonial sociology?’ and ‘why postcolonial sociology?’ (Boatca and Costa 2010: 14-17). Symptomatically, though, the points raised under the second enquiry turn out to be answers only to the first: that sociology must fully own up to and auto-critique its institutionalized location, from the very start, in the western world; its ‘suppression of the colonial and imperial dynamics from the terminological toolkit of classical sociology’; its investment in the outmoded frame of the
European nation state; and its prescriptive constitution of binary categories such as tradition-modernity, West-Rest, First-Third worlds, and so on.

On that basis, it becomes hard to see what differentiates the project of postcolonial sociology from that of the openly anti-sociological critics. Many writings seeking fully to involve sociologists in the postcolonial question do seem to go quite a long way to avoid stating what might make a postcolonial analysis specifically and valuably sociological. The prevailing mood remains, therefore, that sociology appears to be so imbued with Eurocentrism as to be almost completely unusable for postcolonial understanding, with an attendant reluctance on critics’ part to being seen to be in any way ‘defensive’ about sociology’s adaptability to the new terrain. Feeling that this prevailing intellectual mood is a little too moralistic and reductive, I have tried in previous writings on Eurocentrism to open up the terrain of discussion a little, for example by identifying definite problems within the anti-sociological arguments of the three authors summarized above (see McLennan 2003, 2010a, 2010b). I have also made the case that the best of cultural studies, which has proved to be the most significant umbrella for the development of postcolonial critique, is not finally able to relinquish its paradigmatically sociological dimension, even as it seeks to secure its status as a successor discourse (McLennan 2006). The second purpose of this paper, then, is to continue that line of thought in relation to some more recent expressions of postcolonial discourse. Across this range, I draw out some common threads of contention, and assess their implications for sociological thinking as I understand it. I then go on to reflect on what, in the light of that, we are now to make of a ‘founding’ figures such as John Millar and the ‘stageist’ or stadial historical sociology to which he and other luminaries of the European Enlightenment were committed, now entirely wrecked, it seems, by postcolonial critique.
Before proceeding, I need to say something, albeit schematically, about the conception of sociological thinking that underlies it. I couch this in terms of a basic ‘idea of sociology’ (McLennan 2006), summoning up a generic mind-set that has to do with the viability of notions of structured social totalities, and the possibility of making credible distinctions between the objects of social enquiry and the frameworks of discourse available to configure them. The idea of sociology thus refers to the way in which we seek validly to characterize social formations as being of a certain systemic type, the effects and realization of which can be identified and generalized across a range of empirical particulars. Our motivation for sustaining such an idea ultimately stems from our nature as social beings making our practical, collective, conflictual way in the world; and as part of that, we routinely seek to increase our knowledge of historical and natural contexts that are considerably larger than ourselves, but to which there are many points of access. When a project of cumulative partial understanding is rigorously conducted and transmitted, both empirically and theoretically, we think of it as ‘science’, such that for all its difference from physics and biology, it is not ridiculous to think of sociology as science-like.

To supporters and critics alike, this guiding image implies an approach to the comprehension of social life that is broadly realist, objectivist, naturalistic, structuralist and progressivist. Undoubtedly, there are many ways in which these terms could be defined and combined, and versions of them that come across as ‘scientistically’ strict will often strike us as plainly and even perniciously wrong. Better then to regard all serious contentions around these notions, including sceptical ones, as operating legitimately within the orbit of the idea of sociology, so that no rigid right of exclusion exists. If that all begins to seem rather bland, the point is that in a number of versions of the ‘posts’ – postmodernism, poststructuralism, postsecularism,
postfeminism and so on – any positive attitude towards these supporting props for the idea of sociology, and any combination of them, are almost chortlingly dismissed. On another tack, it is sometimes presumed that fifty years of post-positivism in the philosophy and sociology of science have left realism, objectivism, and the rest in complete tatters. But this is not the case, especially given the broad-brushed way I am framing these guidelines (which usually suffices for sociological meta-theory). It is certainly true that under postpositivist lights a significant deflation of those default notions has occurred, and as a result it seems appropriate to consider them as something like analytical values rather than as definitive criteria of judgment or methodological rules. But even in that deflated, chiefly heuristic vein, enough coheres to shape a distinctive culture of enquiry. So the question is: how far do discourses on postcolonial sociology conform to or disrupt that culture of enquiry?

Now it seems perfectly plain that the idea of sociology, even thus mildly construed, is Eurocentric, in at least two senses. First, its substantive exemplification and its philosophical propping-up have been developed, paradigmatically, within the Western intellectual tradition(s). Secondly, as pointed out by Elias, Foucault and many others, sociology’s typological classifications have played a major background role in the development of the governmental apparatus of the modern Western nation state. What the current batch of anti-Eurocentric critiques adds to these well-understood features is the stronger charge that the concepts and pretensions of sociology have systematically ‘occluded’, where they have not thoroughly demeaned and helped destroy, understandings and peoples outside the dominant modern West. The conclusion once again seems unmistakeable, namely that if sociology is undeniably Eurocentric in these ways, and if Eurocentrism is manifestly both parochial and noxious – then it can play no part in the formation of postcolonial projects and categories.
Yet this still cannot be quite right. Without playing down either the need for reflexivity about the kinds of things that constitute and limit the sociological imagination, or the amount that Eurocentrics have learned and can learn further from non-western situations and cultures, the relentless imperative rhetoric of postcolonial revisions is at times distinctly overstated. This is because the critiques themselves are either firmly, or else conflictedly, sociological in character. In what follows, I seek to show this in a fairly forensic fashion, an approach that recommends itself given the predominance of high-octane rhetoric on all sides.

2. Out of the Matrix?

One way to engage with the question of postcoloniality for sociology would be to join the exchanges around Michael Burawoy’s widely advertised proposals for a global sociology from below, designed to promote a ‘dialogue between a sociology of globalization …and a globalization of sociology’ (Burawoy 2008: 437). However, Burawoy’s ideas about postcoloniality and globality are so closely bound up with his own discourse of the ‘four sociologies’ – concerning which I am appreciative but sceptical (Burawoy 2005, McLennan 2011: 157-67) – that it would take too much of a detour around that block of thinking to get to the starting grid here. I therefore flag up three other currents, less obviously ‘for’ sociology than Burawoy, which also espouse anti-Eurocentrism and global thinking from below. These projects overlap significantly, but they are differently coded, culturally as well as in their ostensible attitude towards disciplinary sociology and disciplinarity generally, which is the focus of this section. In the next section, their separate and collective cogency will be examined in relation to the broader ‘idea of sociology’, analysing various assertions in these literatures concerning epistemology and general theory, modernity, and progressivism.
De-linking

The component theses and something of the declamatory style of the position we can label ‘the de-colonial option’ are encapsulated in the opening sentence of a recent article by its principal proponent Walter D. Mignolo (2009: 160):

Once upon a time scholars assumed that the knowing subject in the disciplines is transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured.

Of Latin American provenance, de-colonialists press that the ‘Eurocentred matrix of knowledge’, so often self-presented as enlightened, has been instrumental in fostering and transmitting the ‘dark side of modernity’, by objectifying and silencing the social and cultural life of peoples subject to colonial power. Even if colonialism in a formal political sense has long ended, the argument goes, its social and intellectual hegemony continues (Mignolo 2010a: 11, Quijano 2010: 23). The de-colonialization of knowledge, therefore, requires not merely critical reflection upon, but sustained disconnection from, the dominant paradigms. The nomenclature of ‘de-colonial’ is strongly preferred over ‘postcolonial’ because postcolonial studies is already thought to have taken its place in the academic heartlands, with postcoloniality registered as just another object of study from the points of view of the various conventional disciplines. It may well be the case that to get to that point, postcolonial theory has had to interrogate the established knowledge-formation, but something more radical is needed for any prospect of ‘restitution’: nothing less than epistemic disobedience and a thoroughgoing de-linking from ‘the magic of the Western idea of modernity’ (Mignolo 2009: 160-61).
Of the positions I am considering, the de-colonial option has the least to say about the consequences of these propositions for sociology as such, though Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano’s basic contention that colonialism remains symbolically hegemonic features prominently in manifesto statements. It is certainly implicit that none of the resident western academic subjects can be redeemed, because ‘thinking de-colonially means, precisely, to delink from thinking “disciplinarily” ’ (Mignolo 2010a: 11). Singling out, amongst others, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work in Aotearoa/New Zealand as exemplary in this respect, Mignolo says that Smith (1999) is not to be considered as ‘practising Western anthropology’ but rather ‘subsuming anthropological tools into Maori (instead of Western) cosmology and ideology’. Her de-colonial purpose is thus to ‘engage in knowledge-making to “advance” the Maori cause rather than to “advance” the discipline’ (Mignolo 2009: 172). Presumably there would be close parallels in thinking about the identity politics of sociological research in and for the margins, not least because Smith’s project is by no means only anthropological.

These announcements of disciplinary dislocation are not entirely convincing. On the general level, whilst the movement to inter-, post- and trans-disciplinarity is undoubtedly conducive to postcolonial thinking, it is nowadays quite common to strike a fairly easy-going compromise with continued disciplinary allegiance (eg. Steinmetz 2007). This is partly because the movement beyond disciplinary exclusiveness has been under way for many years, and for diverse reasons, not all of them shinningly radical. Today, in the UK for example, the academic funding establishment that oils the machinery of whatever dominant matrix exists, unmistakeably favours trans-disciplinary over disciplinary endeavours. And it is not as though the western disciplinary traditions have themselves been lacking in radical assaults on their mainstreams through the subsumption of existing tools for subversive
ideological purposes. This is, after all, an important way in which disciplines have ‘advanced’.

Mignolo’s exemplification of Linda Smith’s work also requires amendment. Operating in a context where it is seldom agreed on any side how best to advance ‘the Maori cause’, Smith’s standpoint also contains pervasive elements of Gramscianism and feminism. Powerful as Smith’s disruptions of academic assumptions about the situation and interests of the tangata whenua may be, these elements are screened out by Mignolo’s quasi-nativist and ‘cosmological’ gloss. As it happens, Mignolo then withdraws from the suggestion that an easy distribution of ‘epistemic privilege’ can be made amongst Maori and ‘New Zealand’ academics (as though Smith is not one of these too). Rather, the point is the less controversial, democratic one that non-Maori have no obvious right to ‘guide the “locals” in what is good or bad for the Maori population’ (2009: 173).

Listening up

A second variant is Raewyn Connell’s insistence that sociology and general theorizing in the global North must wholeheartedly open itself up to ‘Southern theory’. Starting from a conception of sociology as a potential force for democratic good rather than as a detached scientific quest, Connell tells a persuasive story of how ‘sociology was founded within the culture of imperialism, and embodied an intellectual response to the colonised world’. Developed in the ‘specific cultural milieux’ of the white male metropolitan liberal bourgeoisie, but shattered by the First World War, the constitutive focus of sociological
thought moved from ‘progress’ to ‘society’, and then there was the Sixties’ shift into a more contested phase, but one still deeply conditioned by the workings of ‘global history, especially the history of imperialism’. Across the piece, sociology’s ‘foundation stories’ have constantly been reconstructed (Connell 2007: 9, 14, 24).

Even today, ambitious sociological theories, not least the several available accounts of globalization itself, are profoundly structured by what they never name – the positionality and interests of the metropole. To overcome this defect, sociology must first admit that its central modernist concerns with integration and progress have excluded those conceptual motifs most closely associated with the actual historical experience of most of the people of the world: the destruction of social relations, the discontinuity of institutions, and dispossession (Connell 2007: 215). As part of the corrective process, we are urged to listen harder to the voices and arguments of thinkers of the global South, not taking their words as further material for cultural mapping or as adjuncts of accepted sociological categories; but rather as ideas in their own right, contributions to the kind of more inclusive social theory that is so badly needed. Accordingly, Connell introduces a whole series of authors from Africa, the Islamic tradition, Latin America, and India. And she reconstructs elements of how sociology is imagined in her own Australia, tracing its settler-westernized formation and wrestling with the ongoing intellectual tension between colonial notions of ‘terra nullius’ and the hugely richer concept of the land in indigenous Aboriginal value-systems. As a result, it is hoped that four key dimensions of sociology’s Northerness have been rendered inoperable (2007: 45-8): its universalist assumption that all societies ‘are knowable in the same terms’; its habit of ‘reading from the centre’ as if it had no external determinations; its persistent ‘gestures of exclusion’ of other traditions and literatures; and the ‘grand erasure’ in terms of which
sociology’s very ‘building blocks’ are never imagined to rest on the occupied land of the majority of our species.

Connell’s searching diagnosis contains some excoriating censures of her disciplinary heritage, as though standing squarely on the same platform as postcolonial anti-sociologists. But this is deceptive, as becomes evident towards the end of *Southern Theory* (2007: 226-31). There, Connell rediscovers a certain warmth towards metropolitan sociology, allowing that it has produced ‘profound insights, well-honed methods, well-defined concepts, and lots of skilled practitioners’. And if sociology’s remit needs to be broadened out into the more fluid field of social science as a whole – throughout the book, Connell treats sociology, social theory, and social science as something of a continuum – in that form it can still regain its status as the ‘self-understanding of society’, aspiring to a new sort of unitary consciousness. But this is only on condition that it contains and recognizes ‘many voices’, only some of which represent the (often ‘splendid’) ‘ethno-sociology of metropolitan society’.

Later sections will deal more fully with what is perhaps the main plank of Connell’s (and others’) disillusionment with sociology, namely its investment what she calls the ‘grand ethnographies’ of the social science classics, according to which non-Western societies are positioned as backward and modern capitalist ones as ‘advanced’. We can begin to broach that matter here by wondering what is really gained by characterising Anthony Giddens’s sense of the ‘historical order’ of societal types (tribal, class-divided, class society/capitalism) as an updated grand ethnography in that mould, even though Giddens himself declared it not to be an ‘evolutionary scheme’ (Connell 2007: 37-9). Two reasons are given. One is that
Giddens, just like the classics, treats the historical types as marked by distinctive structural principles, such that ‘if a society is one, it is not the other’. This already, for Connell, leans towards viewing the whole society in normative terms. But is it being suggested that socio-historical analysis using typifying generalities is to be altogether abandoned? If so, it is hard to see how Connell’s own analysis in terms of such large-scale metaphorical essences as North/South and Metropole/Majority could get off the ground.

So we move to the more specific claim that Giddens does not recognize the violence of colonial conquest in his description of the movement from one societal type to another. He does not even mention the indispensable concept of imperialism. His position thus defaults to the familiar Eurocentric trope of endogenous explanation: ‘other social orders are passing away not because Europeans with guns came and shattered them, but because modernity is irresistible’ (Connell 2007: 38). Yet this summary is quite unfair. Above all in The Nation State and Violence (1987), Giddens clearly identifies four separate dimensions of the coming of modernity: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance, and territorially organized military violence. And since the third and fourth of these are co-terminous anyway, there is no doubting the central role of internal and external coercion in his account. Furthermore, the motivation for this priority is explicitly to counter the (alleged) endogenism, the seamless structural logic, of historical materialism. This in itself explains Giddens’s avoidance of the terminology of imperialism, from which the Marxist influence cannot be expunged.

I am drawing attention here to the dangers present in Connell’s determination to bracket sociological theory as all of a piece in its nothing-but-‘Northerness’, as though her main
critique of James Coleman, for example – that his construction of ‘society’ in the image of
the western individualist rational chooser is culturally very specific – had not been made
many times within modern social theory itself, and as though the latter discourse is not
habitually critical and revisionist. Connell’s most forceful contribution, then, becomes her
very telling observation that the giants of post-war social theory, even colonially experienced
people like Bourdieu, never seem bothered even to name colonialism among their conceptual
coordinates, or name any non-Western theoretical contributions. Correspondingly, Connell’s
rectifying strategy of hearing out a range of Southern authors is extremely interesting.
However, part of the interest lies the fact that Connell’s impressions turn out to be quite
strongly governed by her continuing background commitment to the norms of ‘western’
critical social thought.

For example, amongst the African thinkers considered, Paulin Hountondji is singled out for
commendation. But Hountondji’s main contribution is said to be a ‘scathing’ and
‘devastating’ attack on ‘the idea of an immanent African philosophy’, something he shows to
be lacking in ‘rigorous and testable methods’ and based upon ‘bad social analysis’ (Connell
2007: 101-2). Not surprisingly, Hountondji has been criticised as Eurocentric as a result.
Nigerian sociologist Akinsolo Akiwoko is also praised by Connell, not for showing the
manifest value of Yoruba culture for critical understanding (Connell indicating that the
outlook of this group is ‘relatively privileged and strongly traditionalist’), but for seeking to
‘extract sociological principles’ from that oral tradition. Connell further remarks, on the basis
of other African commentary, that the quality of Akinowo’s effort to produce an indigenous
sociology is, among other flaws, conceptually far too fuzzy (2007: 91-5).
Turning to the Islamic tradition, Connell highlights its rationalism, acute sense of global power, and its coherent refusal of the tradition/modernity distinction. In stressing these qualities, together with the courage and vision of authors such as al-Afghani, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, and Ali Shariati, Connell rules that such minds must never be treated as ‘entering someone else’s monologue’ (2007: 223). But does Connell’s treatment of their ideas fully support the wholesale rejection of the assumption ‘that social science can have only one, universal [ie. Northern] body of concepts’ (2007: ix)? Take her comments (2007: 14-15) on al-Afghani, who conducted a blistering ‘Refutation of the Materialists’ in 1881. This effort is depicted, notwithstanding its blatant ‘rhetorical exaggeration’, as valuably sociological and critical to the extent that al-Afghani seeks (negatively) to identify the ‘social effects of false doctrine’, and (positively) to provide ‘a sociology of social cohesion in which economic and political well-being depend on the cultural foundations of human action – cultural foundations that al-Afghani presented in the language of morality and religion’. But this gloss hardly honours the dedication and courage of the thinker in question, for it is a manifestly secular translation, part of the very mind-set that al-Afghani explicitly represents as a ‘conspiracy against religion’. Al-Afghani is not instancing religion as part of the cultural foundations of societal cohesion, as though any expression of religion could in principle fulfil that general social function; rather he is specifically seeking to uphold the superiority of Islam as the way of rationally understanding life and our place within it.

When it comes to Al-e-Ahmad, the latter’s polemical idea of ‘Westoxicication’ is thought to contain a ‘powerful argument’ that helps us understand ‘cultural domination’ better. Indeed it foreshadows later critiques of orientalism and helps us explain why ‘modernizing secular intellectuals’ in postwar Iran were deposed from their perch under the Shah’s regime. To be
fully pluralistic here, Connell might perhaps have considered tapping into the ideas of those victimized secular intellectuals as well. Still, it is not as though she finally ranks Al-e-Ahmad’s position very highly, given that she thinks it is repetitive, opinionated, disorganized and misogynist (2007: 118).

More compelling altogether is the figure of Ali Shariati, presented by Connell as ‘a systematic thinker’ and a ‘conscious social scientist’ as well as a ‘religious innovator’ (2007: 124). Tracing out Shariati’s turbulent career through the 1960s and 1970s, Connell spotlights how he adapted elements of the concepts of class, social justice, and social revolution from Marxism and elsewhere, to the point where even his arguments against polytheism are ‘not so much sectarian as sociological’. In spite of his Sufi-influenced mysticism and multi-genre facility, enough can be grasped to see that Shariati has a ‘this-worldly’ conception of religion, a strong sense of ‘social analysis’, and a dynamic egalitarian vision of Islam. Thus, ‘there is no doubt of his general intention to valorise the mass of the people as the central concern of both true religion and social reform’ (2007: 132). Arguably, Connell should have made more of Shariati’s abiding concern to combat the ‘rising tide’ of intellectual atheism, the distortions of which include any aspiration towards a religion-free social science. Moreover, framing Shariati as having a Mannheimian ‘utopian’ view of Islamic intellectuals rather undermines the possibility of the kind of Mannheimian sociology of knowledge that Connell, in her own way, is producing (207: 134-35). But it can certainly be agreed that reading Shariati takes forward the task of intercultural theoretical dialogue, since his concerns do map on, in considerable part, to those of critical social thought.
But here’s the point again, and it comes out much more in Connell’s dialogues with Indian and Latin American writings: in few of her receptive encounters is Connell actually confronting a categorical, non-western, radically ‘other’ habit of analysis. The subaltern studies group, Prebisch and Cordoso, Dorfman and Mattelart’s How to Read Donald Duck – interventions like these stand within relatively long-standing syntheses between world systems analysis, Gramscian neo-Marxism, dependency theory, and Freirean liberation educationalism. Indeed, the urbane sociologist in Connell comes to the fore when she feels obliged to remark that some of this work is ‘decidedly schematic’ (2007: 148). Where seriously radical alterity does appear, it gets rather short shrift. Ashis Nandy, for instance, is the Indian author discussed who is least compromising with the norms of both Left and mainstream social thought, though actually he is quite close in spirit to neo-vitalist strands of cosmopolitan postpositivism. For Connell, however, Nandy’s conception of power is felt to be too ‘homogeneous’, his Gandhian preference for myth over history is questionable, he underplays the structural centrality of corporate capitalism, and the cast in his multi-dimensional works are ‘almost entirely male’ (2007: 190-1). So if the pluralist aspirations in Connell’s project are there in principle, she is by no means limitless appreciative of difference, and her summary claim that all the Southern theorists she considers stand on ‘common ground’ has to be taken with a pinch of salt as a result (2007: 229). If something called the ‘standpoint of the metropole’ is not to be simply a caricature, then Connell’s own project must be regarded as closely bound up in some of its multiple strands.

Reinventing Emancipation

The third strand of postcolonial critique I want to discuss is the ambition of Portuguese socio-legal theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos and associates to demonstrate that ‘another world
is possible’ by going ‘beyond Northern epistemologies’ (Santos 2007). Santos’s discourse displays many similarities to those already discussed. Thus, it is roundly asserted that ‘epistemicide is the dark side of the triumph of science’ being the intellectual accompaniment to genocide; that there can be no global justice without ‘cognitive justice’ and an end to the ‘monoculture of knowledge’; that many of the categories of social science – even proto-egalitarian ones like social class – have a ‘racialized’ element to them; and that all in all ‘conventional social theories…are more and more inadequate to grasp the inexhaustible variety of world making’ (Santos 2004a: 158-60). The ongoing academic task, therefore, is to advance a climate of ‘intercultural translation’, and the political task that guides such efforts is nothing less than reinventing social emancipation.

The counter-cultural strength of these proposals cannot be minimised. Santos is full-square with the view that there is systematic inequality between North and South, including knowledge inequalities, because the structural connections between power and taken-as-proven epistemic formations are fully visible only ‘from the margins’. The macro-level categories of social science, specifically, have domesticated three resident subordinate figures: nature, the savage, and the woman. And the presumption that Northern methodology and science possess the answer to the ‘problem’ that is represented by the South remains completely orthodox in academic and policy circles. Yet this is a ‘false universalism’, for Santos. The true answers to what are in fact significantly shared problems and dilemmas, generated indeed largely by the North itself, can only develop from treating science itself as a form of ‘globalized localism’, and from the commitment to a pluralistic ‘ecology’ of knowledges (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: xxvi-xl).
The coincidence of de Sousa Santos’s postcolonial agenda and those of many others is readily perceived. But there are signal differences too, not least in the subtlety of Santos’s discourse, even while the headlines remain unapologetically bold. Take for example the way that he distances himself from Mignolo’s project, slightly stung, perhaps, by the latter’s suggestion (Mignolo 2000) that Santos’s critique of modernity is basically an ‘internal’ rather than truly confrontational one. In response, Santos (2010: 232-3) suggests – as I did in relation to Connell – that any rigid division of that sort between external and internal modes of thought is basically undialectical, and that the ‘genius’ of modernity above all lies in its ‘complex voraciousness’, such that ‘absolute alterity’ is barely conceivable, unless we are happy to regard religious fundamentalism as different but equal. Santos also notes that his standpoint is more exactly sociological than Mignolo’s. The latter’s culturalism, which sticks chiefly to the level of mindset comparisons and ideational exhortations, plays down the social fact that almost nothing now really does stand outside the grasp or influence of modern western power.

Thus, while the intercultural epistemic project involves overcoming the ‘inertia of disciplinarity’ (Santos 2009b), ‘Eurocentric concepts and concerns’ can only be undermined by means of (critical) social science (Santos, Nunes and Menses 2007: xxxiv). In particular, the ‘lazy reason’ characteristic of the ruling image of knowledge needs taking apart through the operation of three ‘sociological procedures’ (Santos 2004b: 158). One of these, ‘the work of translation’, has been touched upon, but it is thought to be preceded by the ‘sociology of absences’ and the ‘sociology of emergences’. The first of these procedures brings to light just how it has come about that the existence of diverse knowledges in the world, all likely to be contextually credible, through the lens of lazy reason has been turned into a kind of non-
existence. Not merely not credible, but – from the ‘abbreviated version of the world’ that is western techno-science – non-existent and even impossible (2004b: 163-4). For Santos, this amounts to the enormity whereby vast reserves of human experience, especially non-western experience, are in effect rendered waste. The sociology of emergences then takes over, emphasising that the existing richness and variety of conceptual and cultural imaginings, for all the levelling of modernity, have a future as well as a past. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s ideas, Santos here treats existence as tendency and value as capacity, such that the world’s innumerable other local knowledges are legitimate, necessary expressions of the collective ‘not-yet’ of human fulfilment (2004b: 172-5).

Santos dissects lazy reason into four modes. The first is the sensibility that everything is external, implying our essential impotence, while the second – that we nevertheless have unconditional subjective freedom – confirms our arrogance. The third conceit is that of metonymic rationality – totality as order, such that the whole is greater than the parts and the whole is only ever one. Finally, in proleptic reason, the future is held knowable and known, completely dominating our appreciation of the present. The task of the sociology of absence is simultaneously to critique these components of existing reason, and to show how they are socially produced, not cognitively self-evident. The goal of the sociology of emergences is to encourage rather than repress contextually specific expressions of social possibility.

Santos’s evident facility for creative conceptual distinctions sets him apart, in my view, from many other postcolonial theorists, but the critique of lazy reason as expounded gives rise to three reservations. One is to do with the legitimacy of running together without ado such very
different pathways through the discourse of reason as the impotence/externality and freedom/arrogance pairing. As any of their putative champions would probably insist, these are seriously conflicting thought-styles, not a contradictorily harmonious standpoint, notwithstanding the efforts of Kant and others to concoct one. Ironically, Santos’s own operation here could therefore be said to be, precisely, ‘metonymic’ in his terms. Also, it is not obviously perspicuous to couch philosophical deficits in the psychologistic register of laziness, perhaps especially from a sociological point of view. Then, thirdly, there is the question of the extent to which Santos’s moves against lazy reason really are sociological rather than grandly philosophico-normative. He says that the downsides of lazy reason are socially produced, but the mechanisms through which the rule of lazy reason might be fully demonstrated are not covered in any fine-grained way. To be fair, that is a huge task that could only be gestured towards in overview mode – as in Santos’s advice that we should look closely at how the ‘naturalization of difference’ occurs across the board. In any case, Santos has for several years led a large intercultural project covering the social logic of production, politics, and science as they play out against the recognition of ‘practical, plebeian, popular, common, tacit knowledges’ from the South (Santos 2007: xvi). Meanwhile, from a sociology of knowledge point of view rather than that of academic philosophy, Santos’s in-principle braiding of the conceptual and socio-ideological aspects of the reasoning process strikes a good note.

In addition to taking the collective endeavour further, Santos’s presentations of the problems surrounding colonial and postcolonial thinking alike have become (even) more reflexive. He accepts that the register of South versus North, East versus West is a metaphorical one that, whilst effective as a ‘defamiliarizing’ tactic, runs the risk of a sloppy reverse essentialism in
which Europe and its traditions are treated as a ‘monolithic entity’. The summative geo-social phrasing should not, therefore, be taken to suggest the stand-alone sufficiency of ‘Southern’ values or suchlike, or imply that references to the actions of the North or the West signal anything other than ‘the human suffering caused by capitalism’ (Santos 2010: 231, 235, 227, emphasis added). Santos emphasises – as do growing numbers of postcolonialists – that there is, and always has been, a ‘South of the South, and a North of the North’ (2010: 236). Indeed, it is time to pay closer attention to that syndrome within the West itself comprising ‘exhaustion with lack, unease around injustice, anger yet hope’ (2009a: 111). Accordingly, in order to grasp that the problems facing a diverse humanity are problems in common, it may be necessary to go ‘beyond’ postcolonialism itself.

One of the ways Santos follows up this adjusted horizon – it is certainly not a rejection of postcolonial critique as such – is to recover, within the western traditions, thinkers and ideas that the ‘political objectives of capitalism and colonialism’ have discarded or marginalised (2009a: 103). In that spirit he spotlights Lucian of Samosata’s ‘non-Hellenocentric’ account of the roots of classical antiquity, Nicholas of Cusa’s notion of learned ignorance as a counter to Descartes’s template for ‘orthopedic’ thinking, and Pascal’s wager as offering a pragmatic way of managing the necessary tension between the human finite and the God-like infinite. In all this, Santos intends to expose how ‘erudite knowledge has a naïve relation with the knowledge it considers naïve’ (2009a: 122). And he projects the intercultural knowledge-building process as an ‘artisanship of practices’, another attractive locution, hinting that the work of mutual understanding is not to be couched primarily or at least solely as a matter of propositions and evidence, but rather in terms of receptive social encounters and the crafting of provisional positions therein – a sociological take on knowledge-making that is also
underlined in some recent British statements on how best to provincialise sociology (Holmwood 2009).

3. Pluriversality

The message of the preceding analysis is that there is a double-sidedness running throughout postcolonial theory. The prospect of a viable and necessary postcolonial sociology emerges, but it is half-hearted and *sotto voce*, owing to the sociological tradition’s disqualifying Eurocentrism. This double-sidedness can be illustrated further by presenting some aspects of a pervasive and difficult issue: universalism.

The first major flaw in Northern thinking, according to Connell, is ‘the idea that theory is universal’, contending further that ‘bold abstraction’ is both the hallmark and method of the ‘imperial gaze’ (2007: 44, 12). For Mignolo (2010b: 312) and de Sousa Santos (2004b: 160), ‘abstract universalism’ also stands as a bulwark against the production of ‘another knowledge’ that will do cognitive justice to the South. In a further condensation, Santos couches the main problem as ‘false universalism’. In weighing up these assertions, we need to ask: is it *universalism* that is false, or is the problem rather *false* universalism? And what exactly is it about *abstraction* that appears to be both central to universalism, and to whatever is false/problematical about it?

In the de-colonial option, the dominant Eurocentric rationality is said to be centred on ‘the figure of the detached observer, a neutral seeker after truth and objectivity’, something that
represents the ‘hubris of the zero point’, setting up a frame of knowledge that is ‘beyond geo-
historical and body location’, and thus based upon ‘ontological de-relationality’ (2009: 196,
160, 2000: 27). For Santos also, it is the neutrality assumption, presumed to be the guarantor
of universalism, which turns the western scientific quest into rigid ‘orthopedic’ thinking
(Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: xx1v-xxxi, Santos 2009a). The postcolonial position here,
it is often pointed out, parallels the critique of western science and rationality coming from
feminist standpoint epistemology. For feminists too, it is the over-rational, disembodied,
detached figure of the individual knower that is invidious, standing over against an unruly
external world, and seeking to both know and control it – because that knowing subject is a
male figure, and indeed a male fantasy.

Are these characterizations secure? Certainly, there is plenty incisive feminist work showing
how the manifestos for science from Francis Bacon onwards (who also, as it happens, derived
significant booty from early English colonialism), have been awash with those masculinist
figurings of the nature and purpose of knowledge. Similarly, postcolonial exposures of the
techno-scientific investment in constructions of the world’s knowledge environment such
that, as Santos argues, the North is assumed to possess the proven cognitive leverage needed
to solve the murky issues of the South, are convincing. But we need to note as a minimum
that it is principally a positivist notion of knowledge that is under fire here, one that, whilst it
may have been the dominant image for periods of western philosophical history, by no means
exhausts the repertoire. Critiques of positivism’s residual individualism and instrumentalism
abound, such that when Mignolo advocates knowledge for collective well-being rather than
for ‘controlling and managing populations’, this is hardly a novel suggestion (2009: 177).
The reinventing emancipation option takes things further, alluding to some of the
postpositivist lines of thought that have rendered the concept of scientific knowledge ‘internally’ pluralistic, in preparation for the argument that what now also renders it ‘externally’ plural is postcolonial, non-Northern critique (Santos, Nunes and Meneses (2007: xxiv ff.). The points are well made and well taken, though the primary role allotted to feminist epistemology and social studies of science in that fifty year process of undermining positivism is too prominent: Marxist philosophy, then critical realism, had already exposed the basic flaws, though no special prompting was required from those quarters either, since from the mid-1960s onwards liberal philosophers of science themselves were making unorthodox suggestions: that science is a web of culture and a way of seeing, that claims to objectivity are routinely revised and overturned within the process of science itself, that facts are overdetermined by theories and theories underdetermined by evidence, that theories are visions which are never definitively ‘refuted’, that the boundaries between science and other imaginings cannot be militantly policed, and so on.

The depiction of western science as a singular agent in ongoing colonial intellectual hegemony cannot, therefore, be the whole story; nor is positivism itself always likely to be ‘complicit’ with anti-social projects. Logical positivism, we need to remember, was envisaged by its proponents as helping to stem the tide of fascistic irrationalism. Moreover, for all the attraction of postpositivist pluralism around the ‘disunity of science’, it cannot be said to have exploded everything to do with positivism, at least insofar as we identify everything to do with universality and objectivity as ‘positivist’ (which would be a mistake). Thus, feminist standpoint epistemology seemed to need to claim versions of objectivity and realism for its understandings to be more ‘adequate’ than the male scientific image it was upsetting. Of course, this greater adequacy was held to stem distinctively from the
subordinate social position and subversive social movement that FSE was philosophically voicing. But equally, its claims to knowledge were not to be taken solely as a reflection of or as limited to, that social and ideological formation (see McLennan 1995a). So this is the element of universality, qua objectivity, in all knowledge projects: an immanent reaching out for cross-contextual validity, even if in due course all such aspirations are shown, by later claims of a similar nature, to be at best only partially successful. Knowledge is always significantly and unmistakeably 'situated', but various ideas, analogues and observations carry forward into other times, frameworks, and situations. If this were not so, then the critical sociology of knowledge itself – postcolonial thought included – would have no intellectual authority.

It turns out that all our theorists agree with this, because they repeatedly stress that although they are questioning universalism, they are by no means endorsing its ostensible opposite, relativism. And they accept that objectivity – albeit understood as an inter-subjective process – is indispensible for gaining a necessary 'critical distance' (Santos 2009). We should underline that this softening of the hostility to universality is vital if postcolonial critique is to be properly discriminating. Reflecting on his important work on the different ways that early Twentieth-century European sociologists of empire handled political pressures, George Steinmetz (2011: 24) highlights the determination to maintain 'analytical distance' and 'scientific autonomy' as crucial in the way that some of them resisted 'alignment with imperial demands'. It is here that even an aspect of 'neutrality' forms part of what we mean by objectivity. Mignolo dislikes the term because it counters his self-positioning in these debates as an activist making an intervention. Yet Mignolo also trusts that on encountering his text, readers will realise that they need to shift their 'geography of reasoning and of
evaluating arguments’ (2009: 163). In other words, they will have to seek to neutralise their prior commitments and assumptions by thinking hard and being willing to follow the force of argument as it impacts on their sense of self-formation. Moreover, if positivism’s instrumentalism (interest-driven knowledge for control of populations) is to be effectively countered, this can only be on the basis that some kind of disinterestedness is possible.

Now although postcolonial philosophizing tends to single out canonical philosophers like Descartes and Kant for special condemnation, arguably those thinkers were exploring nothing other than this defamiliarizing logic of critical distance. Very roughly, they were saying that in the critical knowledge process, we must not only seek to discount the worldly interests, habits and embodiments that might govern existing claims to validity, we must also try to put our own ‘locations’ to one side as we figure out more adequate and transformative ones. As that doyen of anti-relativism in the social sciences Ernest Gellner (1974, 1992) continually pointed out, there may well be something very strange and even impossible about this Cartesian, scientific idea of non-located and even mechanistic thinking from first principles. It certainly carries with it experiences of unhomeliness in the world, and a kind of permanent rift between what is likely to be true and what we want the world to be like. The ‘zero point’ option, in other words, even if it looks rather ‘hubristic’, is never a comfortable zone to occupy – it leaves us residually in need of subjective consolation from some other source. But, still, it works, Gellner insisted, or at least it wields a significant context-breaking power, such that once set in motion, it cannot be domesticated, or exclusively attached to any one cultural set. If the method of distancing is frequently used to shore up dominant orders, therefore, it also plays a vital part in overturning them. So when Mignolo says that the zero point mythology serves to advance various nefarious ‘global designs’, he can hardly be
saying that he wants nothing to do with global designs, only that he wants better ones. And when Santos says that orthopaedic, detached/neutral thinking reduces ‘existential problems to analytical and conceptual markers that are strange to them’ (2009: 110), implying that those markers ought to be following the contours of familiar existential sentiments, he is underplaying the cognitive tough side of social emancipation.

As a result of these arguments, and by attending to the full range of postcolonial statements, we can see that what is being asserted is not so much a ‘new’ or ‘an-other’ rationality (Mignolo) or a ‘different’ rationality (Santos), but rather a ‘broader’ rationality (Santos, 2010: 225). Universalism, as such, is not being rejected, because the real task is to produce a more ‘legitimate’ universality (Mignolo 2000: 32). With these concessions, the edgy allure of promised ventures into ‘border gnos’ and ‘border epistemology’ (Mignolo 2010a: 11, 2000:13) rapidly diminishes.

Moving on from the epistemological dimension to that of general social theory, the complaint concerns the way in which the latter’s ‘abstract’ and unilateral nature again encourages particular cultural understandings (imperialist ones) to over-ride the concrete specificities of social existence across the world. In that vein, and appealing to something like ‘negative universalism’, Santos suggests that the only sustainable general theory is one establishing the impossibility of general theory (Santos 2010: 238). For Mignolo, following Quijano, modernist rationalism requires us to think, oppressively, in terms of closed, organistic ‘totalities’ (history, modernity), without noticing the constitutive outside of those totalities – the colonized (Mignolo 2000: 29-30). For Connell, the very business of producing systemic
generalization, even generalization in terms of systems, is necessarily to reify peoples and cultures. If we do need theory, she proposes, then it will have to be ‘dirty’ theory, not ‘pure’ theory; the sort of conceptual work that seeks only to ‘clarify’ and ‘multiply’ ideas, not to ‘slim them down’ or to ‘subsume’ concrete realities within them (Connell 2007: 67-8, 207).

Are these statements conclusive? It is certainly now agreed on many sides, and (let us be clear) majorly as a result of postcolonial interventions, that various western theories, claiming to apply to the whole world, do not so apply. Thus, normatively- and culturally-laced general perspectives, such as liberalism, socialism and democracy do not have cross-cultural application, at least not automatically or in full. And no single template will operate wherever they do have relevance. Even analytically, many general concepts – freedom, say, or capitalistic behaviour – which have been thought on occasion to stretch across the whole of geo-history, are highly questionable in that regard, and often smuggle in ‘western’ assumptions and goals. But what this shows is that some claims to universality are wrong or inappropriate. It does not show that all claims to universalism – concerning some basic features of all persons or all societies – are illegitimate from the outset, nor, as already explained, does it erase the element of universality attaching to all claims, even those of less than universal scope. If, say, capitalism has existed, and been an exploitative system, only in the last two hundred years of specifically western history, then that is still a universal claim about how it has operated across a delimited set of contexts. And such a claim will not be right solely in terms of one’s situated standpoint towards it.
As for the ‘abstractness’ of generalization, Connell herself acknowledges that generalization is nothing less than the ‘lifeblood’ of social science: to reject it would be to ‘immobilize’ us (2007: 207). The terminology of mobility in describing the work of generalization is significant here, referring to the capacity of good generalization to take us ‘illuminatingly’ – another Connell phrase – beyond a single context of application. Bad generalization, by contrast, does not ‘travel’ well, as Connell remarks of the limitations of Al-e Ahmad’s thought (2007: 118). So you cannot have a theory that does not generalize, or a generalization that is not abstract: abstraction is what enables generalization, and therefore intellectual travelling, to happen. Connell may not wish concrete forms of life to be ‘subsumed’ under abstract generalizations, or to be classified ‘from the outside’, but she cannot have it both ways. To refer to a situation in all its concreteness is actually impossible anyway, because what we decide to say about that distinctive concreteness is bound to involve typological categories. If generalization and classification were intrinsically suspect, because always-insufficiently-concrete, why does Mignolo, for one, go to the trouble of applying the super-general categories of Emile Benveniste’s (western, universalist?) theory of language to ‘subsume’ different ways in which western disciplinarity can be disrupted? In this gambit (Mignolo 2009: 163), some aspects of the concrete colonial matrix of power are reckoned to fall under the general category of ‘the enunciated’, others under the rubric of ‘the enunciation’.

Obviously, there is a need to criticise general theories that have little traction when it comes to seriously illuminating concrete situations, or that distort them. To that extent, abstraction for its own sake does equate to bad abstraction. These issues regularly arise in routine social theory. For example, a frequent charge made against Giddens’s structuration theory, objected
to by Connell on postcolonial grounds, is that it represents rather inconsequential social
philosophizing rather than something that can be productively deployed in substantive theory
and investigation. It is thus perhaps excessively abstract. But this does not mean that
abstraction is wrong, or specifically Northern, or in any case avoidable, whether in social
theory or in concrete life itself. Moreover, the type of abstraction or totalization that sets
social being in terms of systemic, hierarchical properties and relations could not be jettisoned
without the whole notion of colonialism, and the knowledge regimes that work for it, also
imploding. It is therefore imperative to retain a framework that is both structuralist and
totalizing, even if the preference is for the ‘open’ (Mignolo) or ‘pliable’ (Santos) sort.

Down one more step in the levels of abstraction, there is the question of ‘modernity’. As in
the epistemological and general theory sectors, postcolonial critics are at pains here to declare
that they are not postmodernists, where ‘celebratory’ postmodernism is taken to involve
(characteristically metropolitan) relativism, scepticism, endless game-playing
deconstructionism, and so forth. So once again, it is not a matter of rejecting the concept of
modernity altogether; it is more about recognizing the twin ‘pillars’ of societal modernity –
one propping up tendentially coercive social regulation, the other promising social
emancipation (Santos 2010: 230). Eurocentric ideas of democracy, equality and science
cannot be abandoned, but they cannot be left in their narrow, slanted condition. As with the
other arguments we have considered, and generally after Chakrabarty (2000: 6), the line is
therefore dualistic: understanding the world in terms of modernity and its typical modes of
apprehension is both indispensable and inadequate (Mignolo 2010b: 308, Santos 2010: 227).
The category of modernity is indispensable because it can hardly be denied that many of its ideal-typical components – industrial society, scientific-technical apparatuses, nation state bureaucracies, secularization processes and so on – have become not only globally dominant in a purely ‘external’ sense, but are now constitutively part of a huge range of non-Northern economies and polities. The prevailing talk thus becomes that of ‘multiple modernities’, which further internally divides the postcolonial camp. Because modernity still remains the ‘master category’ in such talk, the ostensible diversification implied by ‘multiple’ is regarded by some critics as ultra-insidiously Eurocentric. Others accept that a structural logic of similarity has in fact long been in operation, but the vitality of its cultural variation can still be caught, in terms of the many different modernistic ‘strivings’ that can be observed (Therborn 2010). At any rate, it is not so much the analytical category of modernity per se that is most at issue for postcolonialists, rather it is the string of implications that tend to accompany it: that modernity can be theorized without acknowledging that colonial violence constituted it; that its generalization through Western expansion was not a matter of evolutionary advance; that modernity cannot be understood simply as the rise of the West; and that even now non-modern, non-western cultural styles and social relations have a future. These assertions are powerful, but they do not erase the ‘master concept’ altogether, nor should they be allowed to disguise the fact that, within western discourse, many thinkers and theories have brought attention to, and countered, the dark side of modernity and its categories.

A related duality concerns postcolonial critique and Marxism. All three strands thoroughly run together, as Marxists do, the notion of modernity and that aspect of it that liberal theories standardly pitch as separable, namely capitalism. Colonialism is specifically part of the
capitalist world system (Mignolo 2000: 72), it is not even ‘thinkable’ without capitalism (Santos 2010: 233), and it is the particular neo-liberal variant of capitalism-colonialism that is regarded as especially vicious today (Connell 2007: 208-9). Now these propositions, in turn, are unthinkable without Marx, though postcolonialists are reluctant to say this outright, owing to the presumed scientistic, over-generalizing cast of Marx’s thought, his formation in the tradition, and his supposed restriction to emancipation couched as a matter of social class, all of which features are considered Eurocentric. Are these features Eurocentric? Yes, partly because no theoretical or political programme can escape a certain ethnocentrism and situatedness. But does situatedness in general, or Eurocentric ethnocentrism in particular serve to disable the cross-cultural reach of Marxist theorization, or stunt Marx’s power of objective perception? No. Just about all of the ‘Southern’ writers from India and Latin America consulted by Connell display a Marxisant pattern of thought. And famously, Marx portrayed capitalism coming out of its pre-capitalist hinterland ‘dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’. Specifically, ‘the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal’ (Marx 1976: 925-6), and

[...]he discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production.

(Marx 1976: 915)

Ah, but these statements only came in a late chapter of Capital, they were not the headline story. And so the wrangles continue. But postcolonialist thinkers are increasingly aware that blanket accusations of ‘Eurocentrism!’ eventually stymie acute diagnosis, just as the constant reduction of the power of ideas to their context of origin eventually commits the ‘genetic
fallacy’. Ironically, indeed, the single most notable feature of strong postcolonial critique is a
theory of ideology of the (modernist) sort that ‘vulgar marxists’ are regularly assumed to
practise. In this mode, Eurocentric thought shores up the interests of the metropole and
functionally oils the workings of the colonial matrix, and to become aware of this necessary
relationship is to break from the realm of illusion into that of lucid truth. From that angle,
even subaltern knowledge ‘from below’ cannot entirely be valorized, because it too is likely
to be contaminated by the dominant ideology (Mignolo 2000: 67).

All in all, when examined, the dualities involved in postcolonial revisions of universalism,
lead to the weakening of certain axioms. Thus, for Santos at least, four central questions – the
necessity or otherwise of general theory, the extent to which Eurocentric ideas ‘are
indispensable today for reinventing social emancipation’, the need to maximise
interculturality without subscribing to cultural and epistemological relativism’, and the
attempt to give meaning to social struggles ‘without giving meaning to history’ – are
modified in status from settled programmatic premisses to ‘major challenges’ still awaiting
resolution (Santos 2010: 237-239).

One last consideration in this domain arises: can these deadlocks be sprung open by thinking
of postcolonial critique as not only supporting a more ‘inclusive’ social theory (Connell) but
as advocating a radically pluralist worldview? In other words, could the pluralizing
postcolonialist moves in qualification of the universalisms of the positivist and critical
mainstreams be firmed up into something like a ‘comprehensive doctrine’, in the Rawlsian
locution? This possibility seems to underlie Connell’s contestation of the orthodoxy
according to which ‘social science can have only one, universal, body of concepts’ (2007: ix). Can there be more than one body of universal concepts, then? Similarly, Santos et al also hint that instead of a partially pluralized common agenda, what we are looking to ratify are ‘plural systems of knowledge’ (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007: xxxix, emphasis added). Then Mignolo announces that the true universal project is to attain pluriversality (2010b: 351).

These intriguing threads raise complex issues about the implications of full-scale philosophical and political pluralism that cannot be covered here (see McLennan 1995b). However, significant difficulties can be initially aired. One is that although pluralists might say that they are not relativists, relativism is indeed entailed by consistent, ie truly radical, pluralism. This is because if the integrity and situatedness of worldviews are to be honoured according to a strict logic of difference rather than one of sameness/commonality, then epistemic and moral schemes are not commensurable. Their respective standards of validity and meaning, accordingly, have to be accepted at face value, without appeal to any overriding principle that could trump radical diversity, even in acknowledging something of it. The appropriate move at that stage would be not to denounce relativism at all, but rather embrace it as a wise and generous habit of mind. At the purely ontological level, after all, there is no necessity in the idea of a single universe. String theorists appear excitedly on board with the possibility of multiple, separately dimensioned and mutually exclusive planes of existence, and William James’s wry empiricist observations on the variety of religious experiences came close, within early social scientific thinking, to the claim that there are, quite literally, many human worlds.
But those who think in terms of social emancipation, and who consider its cognitive side important, will probably baulk at this. Plural ontologies, they will feel, scupper any prospect whatever of unified human understanding – one of those robust remnants of ‘positivism’ that I referred to before. And the whole political and moral point of postcolonial and other disruptive critical knowledges is to insist, absolutely, that exploited and marginalized peoples and thought patterns are part of this one (variable, precarious) human world, the whole of which is precisely not recognized in dominant versions of universalism. Such (broadly) philosophically realist and critical humanist people will therefore seek out a coherent way of integrating plurality rather than leaving all the important bits and pieces as stand-alone references. They might try perhaps to make the integrating factor sound tantalisingly new, as in Mignolo’s cryptic description of the de-colonial option as ‘the singular connector of a diversity of decolonials’ (2009:161). But that connectorliness itself still has to rest on a bottom-line commonality, which is inevitably specified in partial and normative, as well as analytical, terms. In Mignolo’s case, the unifying specification is the grandly vague, neo-vitalist idea is that a ‘planetary consciousness’ can be built up around the principle ‘life first’ or ‘life itself’ (2010a: 11, 2010b: 353, 2009: 178). Or they might, like Connell, view respectful intellectual exchange amongst diverse thinkers, and building sociological networks, as the vehicles for something bigger than us all, but not transcending us: compassionate democracy (2007: 228-30).

Santos takes a rather different line. In his ecological perspective, ‘equality of opportunities’ must be granted to the full plurality of knowledges and cosmologies that exist. This is because there is no one way to categorise reality, and thus ‘no complete knowledges’. But ‘the point is not to ascribe equal validity to all kinds of knowledge, but rather to allow for a
pragmatic discussion of alternative criteria of validity’. Thus, ‘from a pragmatist point of view, relativism is a non-issue’ (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: xlviii-ix). This is an important line of thought, partly because it chimes in perfectly with the newly felt appeal of pragmatism today across the whole range of (western) social thought. And it is fully congruent with Santos’s ‘no general theory’ suggestion. But the conundrums in play here cannot be side-stepped. The proposition that the only viable general theory is that there can be no general theories is, after all, some kind of general theory or universal contention, and to that extent it rather undermines itself. It is therefore probably better taken as a tease than a demonstration. As for the intellectual rewards of pragmatism overall, each generation seems to rediscover a core puzzle: does pragmatism stand in its own right as another major trumping discourse, or is it the sort of outlook that downgrades the value of all trumping criteria? In former mode, such criteria as the practical consequences of ideas, praxis, ‘what works’, ‘problem-solving’, and so on, are reckoned, quite loftily, to be better norms of judgment than realist or idealist alternatives. But this pragmatist mode still looks somewhat universalist, and it is certainly controversial, quickly giving rise to cogent arguments to the effect that ‘what works’ is not necessarily ‘what’s true’ or ‘what’s best’, even when it comes to matters of social praxis itself. This is why classic pragmatist thinkers like Peirce, James and Royce felt the need to associate their pragmatism with very different philosophical lineages.

In the alternative softer mode, pragmatists seek to relax the hold that ultimate criteria have on us, and pluralistically accept that lots of strong visions with many merits will be out there competing with each other, none of which are to be taken as ‘right’. Pragmatists then either get rather perplexed and annoyed that people should, especially these days, continue to be gripped by strong universalist tenets of any kind, or they rest content to witness the
marvellous panoply of motives and ideas without venturing to do anything so boldly self-defining as take sides. This gives rise to the criticism – with Richard Rorty usually in the frame – that soft-pedalling pragmatism of this sort is merely liberal, conversational, and actually complacently ‘metropolitan’. Overall, it seems implausible that pragmatism as such, in either of its modes, offers serious backing for manifestos of ‘social emancipation’. In the work of writers like Roberto Mangabeira Unger (2007), the search is on for a reworked pragmatism that will drive a fresh, postcolonially sensitive vision of self- and social ‘awakening’, but to date that looks more like another of Santos’s ongoing challenges than an immediately convincing remedy (McLennan 2010c). Meanwhile, the best way to summarize the gist of the positions evaluated is, in Seyla Benhabib’s words from an adjacent debate: ‘a pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism on a global scale’ (Benhabib 1999: 51).

4. Staging History

In the spirit of Santos’s four ‘challenges’, I now pick up Connell’s claim that sociology’s difficulties in becoming authentically postcolonial go back to its installation as a (deleterious) ‘intellectual response to the colonised world’. Committed to ‘laws of progress’ that are strewn with racism, and composing ‘evolutionary stories’ incapable of grasping ‘concrete historical questions’, the standpoint of the metropole looks to be intrinsic to the discipline (2007: 7-10). Sociology’s postcolonial quest, we might say, is *foundered* from the start.

The thinker around whom I wish to circulate these themes is John Millar, author of *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, first published under a slightly different title in 1771. Of course, there is an issue about whether Scottish Enlightenment thought can legitimately be
presented as establishing sociology as such. In the UK, such a depiction has become fairly common, but this could just reflect ethnocentric inclinations that might not hold elsewhere. And there is certainly the risk of losing one good anchor in deciding who the ‘classics’ are – the use of the very term ‘sociology’ – if we push the foundations back beyond Comte. But at a time when inter- and trans-disciplinarity are burgeoning even as we uphold something of disciplinary sociology, it seems apposite to emphasise the contribution of the earlier wide-ranging theorists, especially given the centrality of Enlightenment values to the question of postcolonialism and Eurocentrism. And as it happens, Millar’s reputation in the context of ‘proto-sociology’ continues to grow, even though it has not quite yet overtaken that of Adam Ferguson, author of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 1767. But if Ferguson yields many important passages on the necessity of causal social analysis, the unintended consequences of action, the nature of the social bond, and the emergence of class based structural divisions, nowhere in the *Essay* do we find anything as lucid as this:

*When we contemplate the amazing diversity to be found in the laws of different countries, and even of the same country at different periods, our curiosity is naturally excited to enquire in what manner mankind have been led to embrace such different rules of conduct...In searching for the causes of those peculiar systems of law and government which have appeared in the world, we must undoubtedly resort, first of all, to the differences of situation which have suggested different views and motives of action to the inhabitants of particular countries...The variety that frequently occurs in these and such other particulars, must have a prodigious influence upon the great body of a people; as, by giving a peculiar direction to their inclinations and pursuits, it must be productive of correspondent habits, dispositions, and ways of thinking.*

(Millar, in Lehmann 1960: 175)

In this rendition of the ‘idea of sociology’, Millar is saying that we need to establish, in causal terms, *both* the uniformities *and* the differences that characterize a huge variety of situations, systems of rules, popular views and motives. And a little further on in the *Ranks*, he itemizes the complex *layering* that compounds any social situation: natural environments, types of labour/subsistence, demography, ‘proficiency in arts’, advantages of ‘mutual
transaction', and the innumerable forms of 'intimate correspondence' between social subjects. Millar presents the relation between situation and motives as only the first step in a larger strategy of understanding, because questions of subjective meaning – 'people's cultural inclinations', which reveal that 'amazing diversity' – require our full attention too. And if the social-structural aspects of situations materially 'influence' and 'give direction to' these cultural aspects, the connection between the two is not to be taken in an overly deterministic sense. Finally, we need to note – recalling comments in the previous section – the astute sense of analytical distance and even a certain sort of neutrality in Millar's characterization. He seems confident that whilst we all have our views and influences, we need to try to gain the fullest understanding prior to any moralistic comment. His own terminology of 'situations', 'habits', and 'dispositions', moreover, seems well geared to travel across a range of social contexts and belief systems.

Millar’s statement is manifestly universalist, naturalistic, explanatory, and quasi-scientific, but this hardly makes it too ‘abstract’ for the appreciation of concrete cultural lives. Would we wish to cross its priorities, following present trends within sociological theory, with a greater emphasis on matters of embodiment, locality and affect? Possibly – though it is not obvious that Millar’s conspectus does minimise these dimensions. Is the vision, then, not Eurocentric? It surely was, given that Millar shared the rationalist values of the European Enlightenment, and given that his own embodiment is that of a middle-class white educator at the height of Glasgow’s dominance of the tobacco trade with the Americas. Nearly a quarter of tobacco merchants in the city matriculated at Glasgow University, and quite remarkably when compared with, say, Cambridge (at around 8%), about half of the student population in Millar’s later lecturing career were the sons of industry and commerce (Whatley 2000:124-5).
But do those contextual influences make Millar’s Eurocentrism ‘bad’ Eurocentrism? No, because Millar was possessed of an objective and critical frame of mind that enabled him to be somewhat distanced from an overly moralistic philosophic history. Relatedly, he was a staunch abolitionist, and fretted consistently about women’s demeaning social status (the social-structural nature of gender relations being a theme running through the *Ranks*).

Notwithstanding the calibre of Millar’s idea of sociology *in principle*, the complaint remains that the wider canvas within which his methodological statement was positioned was an evolutionary, stadial theory of history. In this schema, human society had evolved, and indeed before the Enlighteners’ very eyes was still evolving, from a ‘rude’ and ‘primitive’ state to a ‘polished’ and ‘advanced’ one, represented by the societies of Western Europe. A series of near-inevitable transitions is imagined, in which hunter-gatherer social practices are superseded by pastoral nomadic ones, which in turn evolve into settled agricultural nations, until a breakthrough occurs into a world of mercantile commerce, urban consumerism and proto-industrial economic production. The overall story is one of progress, not just for westerners, but for Human Society as a whole. This very classification system, critics say, especially under its progressivist gloss, plainly positions non-European peoples and cultures as backward and inferior.

Millar’s exemption from at least part of that indictment was proposed sixty years ago by W.C. Lehmann, who pointed out that amongst all his contemporaries, it was Millar who most emphasised the centrality of power-relations. Presaging today’s pre-eminent theoretical focus, drawn upon relentlessly by postcolonial critics, power for Millar was a kind of
sociological constant, exercised variously through ‘ever-changing social and political institutions’, and at different social levels – the individual, the group, inherited general ‘manners and customs’, and formal regimes of regulation (Lehmann 1952: 40). Lehmann’s overall take on Millar was far-sighted: that even as Millar asserted the dominant causal role of ‘techno-economic’ factors, he accepted a degree of contingency in the historical process, recognized the role of leaders, politics and military prowess, and took a ‘descriptive’ rather than ‘evaluative’ view of understanding the emergence of ranks in societies of all types. More than Ferguson, at least more sociologically and empirically, Millar drew attention to the way in which every societal stage, including the polished commercial stage, contained within it elements of corruption and interest-driven conflicts of rank and class that might lead to its structural demise. Later commentators (eg. Carrithers 1995) have underlined the methodological quality and sociological materialism of Millar’s work, others (eg. Price 1990: viii) have been impressed by his ‘trenchant scepticism about the inherence in nature of a natural (or divinely ordered) hierarchy’. Just because of this distanced, yet also distinctly critical angle of approach, Ronald Meek concluded that the stages theory was formulated more expertly and applied more intelligently than anyone else by Millar, in whose hands, ‘the new social science of the Enlightenment comes of age’ (Meek 1976: 161).

The possibility arises that these commentators themselves, like Millar in his way, are thoroughly Eurocentric. This observation may hold, but the argument is patchy. Lehmann was writing long before reflexivity concerning the point of view of the metropole got fully under way, but Popperian polemics against socio-historical theory were in the air at the time, so Lehmann reluctantly allowed that ‘Millar’s fundamental evolutionism and historicism cannot be passed up entirely’ (1952: 35). (The coincidence between postcolonial critique in
this respect and Popper’s attack on ‘the poverty of historicism’ becomes an interesting side-
topic here.) Meek’s *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, for its part, was a seminal
resource for emerging postcolonial critique, at least in the UK, being the first work to
demonstrate in detail the repeated operation in a range of writers of the constitutive ‘binaries’
in the stadial discourse – between primitive and advanced, rude and polished, progress and
darkness, and so on. Meek fully accepted that the schema ‘imposed’ on the anthropological
materials that were pouring back from colonial voyages and conquests reflected ‘the
emphases and patterns of the time’, not least the belief that only private property and capital
accumulation stood as ‘engines of progress’ (Meek 1976: 126-7). For all that, and well aware
of the dangers of ‘Europocentrism’ as he put it, Meek felt that if due ‘safeguards’ could be
put in place – and he thought that people like Millar did this to a creditable extent – a viable
socio-economic, structural account of human development could be salvaged (Meek 1976:
241-2).

Even if Millar earns partial exemption from the charges against stageism, surely others do
not? Surprisingly, on that score, historical anthropologist Alan Macfarlane (2000) has given a
sympathetic hearing to figures like Montesquieu, Adam Smith and Tocqueville in their – and
his own – attempts to address ‘the riddle of the modern world’. This is surprising because
generally Macfarlane’s outlook on modern sociologicist theories of society and progress
positions them strictly as *ideologies*. Not in the Marxist sense, but not in the ‘merely
ethnocentric’ sense either. Such theories, Macfarlane thinks, should be treated as visions and
self-assurances speaking to the cultural worlds in which they are set. With that in mind,
Macfarlane acknowledges that the Enlightenment stadialists did not sufficiently appreciate
the ‘darker side’ of progress, and incompletely recognized the role of ‘external predation’ and
‘conquest’ in their optimistic perspective. Yet contrary to expectations, they managed to avoid gaping deadly ‘traps’ — of believing that liberty came courtesy of some kind of western genetic strain, of a blatantly teleological presentation of historical development, of ‘an easy social Darwinian evolutionism’, and of holding that their speculations represented the unassailable truth (2000: 275, 286-92). He is further impressed by their understanding that the accumulation of modern wealth occasioned a loss of social meaning, and their awareness that any explanation of the rise of the west required a credible balance of causal factors. But maybe, despite his commitment to anthropological relativity, Macfarlane too is just practising (sophisticated) apologetics? Maybe. However, in no serious sense can Macfarlane be aligned with metropolitanism as Connell defines it, seeing as his distinguished output includes hugely knowledgeable encounters with Japanese culture, the Gurungs of Nepal, and meticulous accounts of the world-historical significance of both tea and glass, completely bound up as those stories are with logics of empire and colonialism.

In a monumental series of studies, Jonathan Israel (2001, 2006, 2011) takes to the limit the pattern of argument I am sketching. Israel is not nearly as sympathetic as Macfarlane to the likes of Montesquieu, who is bracketed along with Hume and others as the leading delegates of the ‘Moderate Enlightenment’. Israel does accept that this group were significantly less toxic than the forces adhering to conservative theologies, the latter being the principal source of supremacist justifications for ‘subjugating non-European peoples’, on account of them being heathens (2006: 598). By comparison, even if Hume, for example, did state his opinion that negroes were inferior to metropolitans on account of their intellectual torpidity, his later views may have altered, and he certainly thought in private that that slavery was immoral and barbarous. That said, Hume’s kind of apolitical shilly-shallying could not be further from the
spirit of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ as Israel exhibits it, in which the progressivist philosophy of
history is pivotal to the radicals’ far-reaching democratic and thoroughly anti-colonial
egalitarianism. In Enlightenment Contested, Israel draws attention not only to the inspiring
integrity of the better known democratic anti-colonials like Diderot and Helvetius, but to
numerous others in the radical current. Thus, amongst many examples, he spotlights how
Dutchman Van den Enden denounced slavery as ‘wholly contrary to reason, justice, and the
basic equality of man’, and how Italian Doria ‘viewed great colonial empires as a system of
global oppression which had enslaved the Indians of Spanish and Portuguese America and
ravaged the West Indies’ (2006: 608, 611).

The case is pushed further in Democratic Enlightenment. Only by adopting a systematically
progressivist, universalist perspective, Israel insists, was it possible to deliver a decisive
counterblow to those who divide, rank, and stigmatize diverse human cultures. And it is not
as though those opposing such enforced elitism, in the name of progress, were sunnily
optimistic exactly. The politics of the radical Enlighteners may have been unstintingly
revolutionary, but they were generally rather pessimistic about the prospects of success
(2011: 34). Yet they did, Israel maintains, have tremendous, good and necessary influence
throughout the world. In a series of assiduously researched chapters, he unwinds the fabric
and dispersion of the spirit of the radical Enlightenment across a whole range of non-western
contexts: Amerindian, Ibero-American, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Russian. For example,
the Tupac Amaru insurrection of 1780-3 in Peru is analysed in terms of the indigenous and
hybrid expressions of Enlightenment in Spanish America. Also underscored are the creative
adaptations of revolutionary European ideas in ‘the newly radicalized Creole political
consciousness’ exemplified by people like Don Jose Baquijano, Francisco de Miranda,
Manuel Belgrano, and Simon Rodriguez (2011:497-503, 504ff.) . In these and other ways too numerous to mention here, Israel’s thesis is that the democratic materialism forged in Europe triggered off a profound ‘global process’ and ‘project of world revolution’, the remnants and ‘challenge’ of which are still with us today (2011: 438, 937, 951). And in his large exhibition of intellectual portraits, Israel picks out Millar as ‘remarkable’ amongst the Scottish Enlighteners. The stadial variants of Kames and even Ferguson (though he was much less obviously racist than Kames) are deemed too caught up, still, with religious understandings of moral purpose and with paternalistic notions of the ideal polity. Only in Millar is the four stages theory pressed with consistent materialist rigour, and he alone is ‘powerfully infused with a sense of the need to weaken aristocracy and push forward much more vigorously the emancipation of women, slaves, serfs, and the non-privileged generally’ (2011: 18).

The fruits of Israel’s mighty labours have not suited all palates. From our angle of interpretation, three problems persist. First, the very ardour with which Israel pursues, through thick and thin, his defence of Enlightenment secular rationalism must surely reflect some kind of Eurocentrism – mustn’t it? Second, many scholars think that Israel’s clean division of the Enlightenment into revolutionary and liberal-conservative brands is just too Manichean. This objection has force even in Millar’s case, given that founder’s formation as a son of the Manse, his modest and ‘academic’ temperament, and his personal closeness to perhaps the most coherent ‘moderate’ Enlightener of them all, Adam Smith (see Berry 1999). Third, whilst Israel and others flag up Millar’s (egalitarian) universalism and (sociological) materialism, this does not necessarily vindicate the four stages theory as such, which even in honourable hands remains, it will be reiterated, suspiciously evolutionary.
5. Conclusion: System and Event, Analysis and Commitment

In this article, I have tried to steer a convincing pathway through the tangled polemics behind the question: can there be a postcolonial sociology? It has been no part of my argument to imply that postcolonial transformations of the focus and concepts of ‘the discipline’ are anything less than thoroughgoing and necessary. But reflecting upon three current strands of postcolonial critique, I showed how some of the standard thrusts against sociology’s Eurocentrism turn out to be blunter than they appear at first sight. This is partly because postcolonial critique, in assertively non-postmodernist mode at least, cannot be other than a kind of critical sociology. More generally, but following from that, postcolonial critics turn out to be more conflicted about modernist epistemological and general-theoretical framings than they occasionally lead us to expect. In particular, a number of core philosophical and political issues around universalism have not satisfactorily been resolved, nor any new platform of pluriversality consolidated. As for the very foundations of modern social enquiry, the wellsprings of both the orthodox and critical traditions are undeniably Eurocentric in various ways, but the final value of that characterization of ‘western’ conceptualisations, whether past or present, is highly variable, and may also generally be waning in attention-grabbing appeal. Along with de Sousa Santos, but from a more sociologically ‘defensive’ posture, I have been treating his ‘challenges’ as genuine and taxing problems, not matters that can be determined by, in his terms, lazy reasoning.

I conclude the paper by briefly extending the discussion of the fourth section, where it seemed difficult to erase altogether – and this would hold for postcolonial critique too – the trademark of historical sociology to view the human social world, and confirm its objective character, in terms of successive systems of social relations. No presentation of socio-
historical logic can escape the clutch of ethnocentricities and reigning ideologies, not least because that logic itself constantly posits causal connections and general homologies holding between structural and superstructural features at any given time. But we saw in the case of Millar that there are very different degrees of intellectual capture. And we saw that ‘progressivism’, seemingly built into all modern presentations of history and society, is even more necessary for radical than for liberal or conservative purposes. Israel (2011: 5) supplies the Enlightenment’s bottom line as the intellectual perception of the need for ‘betterment in this world’, with a view to ‘transforming society for the better’, a sentiment echoed today in Santos’s slogan ‘another world is possible’.

Nevertheless, some post-colonial critics continue to be suspicious of even ‘analytical’ structural-historical schemas. They think that this sociological mode retains, questionably, a sense of societal change as always heralding development, and a sense that developmental change always comes about through endogenous mechanisms. This in turn, they say, leads to a rosy and inevitabilist vision of the ‘rise of the west’ in which external colonial violence is played down and the equal standing of different past and present human cultures denied. Has not this debate, we might think, by now been adequately mediated? John A. Hall (2001), for example, seems to speak collectively for historical sociology when regretting his previous inattention to both non-western worlds and postcolonial critical interventions. He also recognizes that the modern west’s historical advantages were essentially fortuitous or contingent, that very many factors were involved; that other societies showed significant scientific and organizational development at various times; that Europe depended upon on food and materials from India and the slave-based New World, which it had conquered; that other civilizations contained elements of ‘advanced’ science and social organization; and that
the liberal west has largely failed to achieve the sort of stable and good civilization that some of the societies it helped wipe out perhaps got closer to achieving. But Hall does not accept that we should stop looking for the sources of dynamism in systemic change, or deny that specific combinations of dynamic factors structurally shaped the ‘accident’ of western modernity, or abandon the typically sociological (principally Weberian) habit of seeking always to flexibly combine materialist-structural and cultural-ideational analysis in identifying the specific mechanisms that prompt significant societal transformation. Not only that, the very tone of Hall’s rather coy title ‘Confessions of a Eurocentric’ seems designed as much to provoke and pretend as to conciliate. Postcolonialist readers are bound to be irritated as a result, indicating the political and emotional freight that this debate still carries.

An important re-run of the rise of the west issue in the Canadian Journal of Sociology gets to the heart of whatever chiefly analytical matters are still at stake. Set specifically within the question of postcolonialism and anti-Eurocentrism, and with all the protagonists drawing upon and contributing to the growing volume of excellent scholarship on the specialness or otherwise of European modernity, the fundamental methodological issue boils down to this: structuralism versus accidentalism, and the right way to think about combinations of internal and external factors. Thus, convinced that his approach to these matters has nothing whatever to do with Eurocentrism or evolutionism in any serious sense, Joseph Bryant (2006, 2008) emphasises the necessity of explanation in terms of path-dependent trajectories and the pervasive structural integration of social formations. From that angle, and allowing that much else remains to be established, Bryant maintains that there were slow-burning mechanisms of transformation at work within western Europe that enabled the undeniably dramatic breakthrough – for good or ill – into capitalist modernity. He also insists that revisionist
scholarship such as Jack Goody’s (admired, incidentally, by de Sousa Santos) simply fails to
demonstrate in any organized way that the post-medieval societies of China, India and the
Islamic world did possess such truly transformational mechanisms. That being so, and
bearing in mind that postcolonial historians of every stripe do fully accept that western
modernity in some sense has been widely and successfully exported – again for good or ill –
the tendency of revisionist and ‘polycentric’ analysts to separate off ‘external’ causality from
‘internal structure’ is unjustifiable. Similarly, their tendency to see Europe’s rise to
dominance as merely ‘late and lucky’ is ‘markedly ahistorical and non-sociological in its
underlying premises’ (Bryant 2006: 410).

Of the critical responses to Bryant, only Jack Goldstone contested Bryant’s assertion that it is
‘analytically incoherent’ for historical sociology to be ‘accidentalist’ in that manner. Calling
upon contemporary complexity theory, Goldstone (2008) noted that systemic change is very
often non-linear, with hard-to-track factors suddenly and almost inexplicably coming to the
fore. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that until very late, there was nothing distinctive
about the West, because no major social formation, East or West, was structurally
‘progressing’.

This tête à tête in historical sociology reflects a profound set of questions re-emerging in our
time about the nature and status of explanation and understanding, questions that are
interestingly different from those surrounding the tired old figure of ‘nomothetic’ versus
‘ideographic’. An emblematic figure in this regard, not least because his posture as a political
revolutionary and progressive seeker after truth, is French philosopher Alain Badiou. The
shining idea in Badiou’s (2006) ontology and ethics is subjective fidelity to the unique truth
of an ‘Event’. Badiou’s point is not that we entertain the significance and value of an Event’s occurrence in the light of some wider contextual canvass that alone makes sense of it. Badiou finds that kind of standard epistemological (western? sociological?) form of reasoning both inadequate and pusillanimous. In Badiou’s alternative stress on ontology, Events cannot be calibrated with the ‘situations’ that they puncture, because they are not knowable generalities at all, or markers of emergent processes within a stable world; rather they are singular irruptions that constitute and reconstitute ‘worlds’. The purport of Events is therefore not decidable as such, either according to pre-existing reference points, or by dint of some postulated externality. Events simply confront us, and our receiving subjectivity is defined in anticipatory commitment to their force.

As Enlightenment rationality becomes more historically situated in our minds, and as Badiou-style thinking gains in prominence, the whole question of history and postcoloniality is close to being completely (and fascinatingly) re-posed, perhaps even putting into doubt Bryant’s conviction that ‘there is no historical creatio ex nihilo’ (Bryant 2006: 437). But not quite yet, partly because it was not so long ago that a kind of accidentalist empiricism was the advised methodology in uncritical academic historiography. As for Badiou, in addition to noting the continuing, militant universalism in his striking outlook, some serious weaknesses can be tabled: its excessively performative character, pitched in exaggerated contrast to propositional thinking; its rather silly anti-naturalistic delight in sheer singularity and heterodoxy; and its elitist assumption that only the chosen can decode the world-shattering truth of certain Events, without obligation subsequently to justify their perceptions to those that cannot see the light. Significantly, Badiou’s recent Logics of Worlds (2009) markedly tones down the explanatory exceptionalism and disregard for context of his previous work.
The emergence of ‘exceptionalism’ in historical sociology is similarly rather deceptive. Goldstone is perhaps saying only that, as he sees it, evidence of systemic structural causation in the rise of the West is hard to find, not that we should stop looking for it. And when he points out that, in fact, it is Britain’s rise that is special, and that intellectual-scientific factors are the ones that dynamized that context, he is getting notably close to earlier semi-stadial accounts such as Gellner’s. Moreover, Bryant’s response to Goldstone is telling, arguing that the latter’s treatment of Britain as autonomous from its larger geo-social context, and the relative disconnection of culture and material life in the way that Goldstone devises his favoured causal factor, are ‘radically implausible’ (Bryant 2008: 158). Implausible, at least, from the point of view of the idea of sociology that I think Bryant is forcefully upholding in all this. Finally, we should mark that the reference to complexity theory in support of accidentalism simply does not work. For one thing, that now ubiquitous brand of thinking makes no sense unless it is about the ways in which multi-dimensional systems formed within wider environments stabilise and de-stabilise. Secondly, part of the attraction of complexity talk is that it provides socio-historical enquiry with something of the authority of science, whilst allotting to it (and even to the Humanities generally) a more prominent role in the specification of what science is and what it might become; but these are, paradoxically, somewhat ‘positivist’ attractions (see McLennan 2006: Ch. 8).

Returning in that light to our original dialogues, it is not convincing for Connell to position ‘endogenous change’ so thoroughly against ‘external violence’ in the understanding of colonialism. If insufficient attention has been paid to ‘the destruction of social relations, the discontinuity of institutions, and dispossession’, we need to know the patterns of social relations and forms of possession in terms of which these destructive disconnections make
sense. Nor is it fully coherent to say (of Giddens in this case) that standard sociological accounts present the dominance of the west in terms of ‘temporal precedence’ rather than ‘because it conquered the rest of the world’ (2007: 38). Explanations couched as a matter merely of temporal precedence are not (sociological) explanations at all, nor can conquests of the world be adequately comprehended solely in terms of happenstance coercive capability driven by deadly intent.

What, then, finally, of the prospects for a provincialized European sociology, and a global sociology from below? Despite my reservations about some of the theses that ground these initiatives, they very much gain my allegiance too. But another way of putting what I am getting at in this paper is to say that even if sociology is (arguably) a tendentially progressivist and radical discourse, there exists only an affinity, not an indissoluble bond, between its general analytical resources and specific ethico-political commitments. There is thus some danger, evident both in the postcolonialism debates and those around the project of ‘public sociology’, of blaming or praising sociology, as such, for this and that, or of expecting sociology, as such, to drive forward global political and ideological change. It is persons and peoples (and they will include those who are also sociologists) who are variously organic agents in the public world. Whilst such agents and collectives will be sure to draw upon the idea of sociology in furthering their projects, especially if the latter are transformationally progressive, the primarily analytical, questioning character of critical social science ensures that it can never be completely political or aligned with any singular project. This is not at all to diminish the need for sociology-transcending activity. Indeed, it might only be to say, after Hamlet perhaps, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your intellectual discipline.
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