

Comment on Julian Go/3

What are the Criteria for Truth in Globalized Sociology? A Critical Appraisal of Go's Southern Standpoint Approach

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In a number of discussion rounds we held within our research project “*Universality and Acceptance Potential of Social Science Knowledges: On the Circulation of Knowledge between Europe and the Global South*” (University of Freiburg, 2010-14), my dear colleague Veronika Wöhrer insisted that feminist standpoint theory provided the solutions needed to move towards global sociology without Eurocentric biases. Go's paper [2016] reads like the one I always expected Veronika to write, a good reason for us to be green with envy. Luckily, at least, I was invited to comment on this paper.

To start with, I congratulate the author for this piece. I'd like to quote two crucial sentences from his text:

Scientific pluralism permits *multiple objectivities*. The choice between pure Cartesian objectivity and dangerous relativism is a false one that must be thrown out once and for all [*Ibidem*, p.23].

This is the essence of Go's argument, and in my view it marks an important intellectual achievement in the debate on globalization of sociology. I believe that in future debate, we should not back down from this point. It is not necessary here to repeat the epistemological and ontological argument that underpins the author's statement. Thus I agree with the core argument of Go's paper; I particularly welcome his fundamental take on a debate where geopolitical and identity-political arguments on the one hand and silent ignorance on the other have often made it difficult to grasp

its far-reaching epistemological consequences for our discipline as a whole. Starting from this acknowledgment, my comment first includes a complementary argument; second, a few minor criticisms; and third, two more fundamental questions that go beyond the text.

First I wish to complement the author's proposal of alternative *analytical* strategy for overcoming metrocentrism and globalizing sociology. His argument is rooted first in an epistemological stance on how social science knowledge is – or should be – produced and second in an underlying ontology of what the world is like. I would like to return to my earlier works to complement this with another alternative strategy; not an analytical but a *practical* one. I formulated this argument with regard to the development of South African labour studies [Keim 2008]. When I started research for my book at the beginning of the 2000s, the debate on the globalization of sociology and the necessity to develop alternative strategies was not my first motivation. Rather what sparked my interest was mostly stupefaction about the complete absence of references to the intellectual production from the global Souths during my entire university education in Germany and France. This led me to develop a centre-periphery-model for international knowledge production [Keim 2009; 2010a; 2010b], which also became the basis on which I conceptualized global circulation of social science knowledge [Keim 2014]. However, while the quantitative and structural take on global knowledge production clearly indicated a centre-periphery divide, the more interesting part of the study addressed the existence of vibrant social science communities producing original knowledge despite the strictures and structures of the international knowledge economy, difficult to detect through quantitative indicators. One such example that I studied in detail is the development of South African labour studies from the apartheid era to the 2000s [Keim forth.a]. Instead of starting from the epistemological debate at a global level and the need to open mainstream sociology to engage with Southern standpoints, I began my inquiry at the level of sociological *practice*.

The question was: under which conditions had the development of this scientific community succeeded? My conclusion outlines a practical strategy that is very different from Go's, and yet complements it. As in Go's work, it involved a critique of the indigenization debate of the time and of the deconstructive endeavours emerging out of various places in the global Souths. However, my main point was a slightly different one. I argued that their major weakness, besides the obvious effects of institutional and material inequalities at a global level, was not a matter of content, but a result of their strategy. They addressed a scholarly public that was mildly interested in including some voices from the South for representational reasons, but were quick to dismiss earlier efforts as belonging to a bygone phase in the globalization of the

discipline.¹ Mainstream sociology did not see much interest in engaging with those projects and did not even perceive this lack of interest as problematic. Therefore, the major weakness of indigenization was its reliance on the dominant arena of competition [Shinn 2000] that it was actually criticizing. Indeed, in order to achieve its objectives and deploy its theoretical potentials, indigenization needed to be taken into account within that dominant arena.

It is precisely in this regard that the case of South African labour studies indicates a very different way out: instead of speaking to an audience that hardly listens or merely takes you for peripheral exotica, they drew their strength from a fundamental change of orientation towards different arenas: namely the South African scholarly community and extra-academic actors – trade unions, community organizations, the broader anti-apartheid movement, journalism; later on government, businesses etc. It was not epistemological or ontological considerations, no call for revolutionizing global sociology that gave rise to challenging debate, original thinking and alternative theorizing. Rather, it was the everyday friction between social theory and political practice and the ongoing intellectual negotiation and exchange within an integrated community of scholars and actors. It was a collective achievement, not attributable to the theoretical genius of individual scholars.

The argument is implicitly inherent in the examples picked by Go: the intellectual productions of Frantz Fanon and Raúl Prebisch. The point is that both of them were not only intellectuals but practitioners. Prebisch, in particular, in the studies mentioned by Go, basically produced “policy sociology” [Burawoy 2004, 2005]. Of course it makes sense to see these studies as enactments of southern standpoints. But it was the social and political *responsibility* of their work that guaranteed their critical attitude towards the received metropolitan wisdoms and their readiness to question mainstream achievements, their effort to collect empirical data and to ultimately produce alternative theorization. I believe that the social sciences should revise their epistemological tools in order to include the issue of practical responsibility as a means of scientific validation. A sociologist who engages with extra-academic actors, who lends his competency to support social movements, who enables political or economic strategies, as Raúl Prebisch and the South African colleagues did, is compelled to revise the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools at hand. When realities and actors outside academia resist conventional classifications and call for social change, the sociologist must be not only critical and deconstructive but constructive and innovative. She must not only respect scientific standards but be accountable outside of the academic realm.

¹ See the presentation of the indigenization debate in Albrow and King [1990]

In a recent interview, Sitas makes this abundantly clear:

My problem with many postcolonial writers, whom I respect a lot because of their egalitarian impulse, is getting more pronounced. I raise my core objections in one of the essays in *Theoretical Parables* which is called “*Exploiting Phumelele Nene: Postmodernism, Intellectual Work and Ordinary Lives.*” Their notion that there are multiple readings possible in any narrative and our role is to decipher how powers play themselves out would, and could, lead to cynical apathy. *You do not have to risk failure in your analysis of veracity and reliability in your conclusions. You never have to take the risk and say it is this explication that is correct and make yourself available to failure.* There has to be a demonstrative aspect of what I am saying as a scientist. It is not just discourse” [Sitas & Thomas 2016, emphasis added].

In what I decided to call counterhegemonic currents within sociology, like South African labour studies, the truth or falsehood of a scholarly statement has particular implications. It is not only important to produce true knowledge for the sake of scientific truth but because false knowledge can have harmful, if not disastrous consequences for the people outside of our window and for the world we live in. *This* is what favours original thinking. If the Northern-dominated mainstream wants to avoid gradual provincialization, sooner or later it has to take the intellectual achievements of such scholarly communities into account. I assume this is the case for Fanon and Prebisch.

Having presented my complementary argument, I now move on to minor criticisms. In my view, Go’s paper lacks recognition of complexity in various formulations. For instance, the “subaltern subject” is not singular but multiple, and split into parts by hierarchies and divides. Our Indian colleagues are often most acutely aware of this: from which standpoint are you speaking regarding class, caste, gender, generation, place of origin or diaspora, institutional affiliation etc.? In the same vein, the southern standpoints are plural. This is, by the way, one of the major criticisms that have been voiced against Connell’s “Southern Theory” [Arjomand 2008]. And “only from a single standpoint – the global North” is a gross oversimplification suppressing similar hierarchical, gendered, institutionalised fractions, and highly heterogeneous traditions of thought in a variety of languages.

Third, two major questions that lead us beyond Go’s article:

1) It is one thing to argue for “more knowledge” and for “more different knowledge”. It is a related, yet different thing to argue for “better knowledge” [Go 2016, p.34]. The second point relates to the first in as far as Go argues that allowing for more different knowledge will improve sociology as a whole. However, different does not necessarily mean equally true. Go rightly states [*Ibidem*, p.22] that “each map is open to falsification.” The question here is what criteria we have at hand to dif-

ferentiate between knowledges and to dismiss those we consider false? The global scholarly community is fractured and increasingly aware of its internal hierarchies. It is also increasingly tired of exchanging the same arguments around this deplorable state of affairs that has been denounced for years, but has yet to change as much as we would like it to. Therefore this question is a thorny one.

Certainly, perspectival realism and recognition of different standpoints is not a form of relativism. Still, Go agrees that critiques of North-Atlantic domination, or metrocentrism, within the discipline have led to a state of affairs where serious debate is easily inhibited by relativistic arguments. In many discussions across the boundaries of established scholarly communities arguments of standpoint are mobilized and instrumentalized to justify oneself and disqualify others as if standpoints alone were decisive for truth and falsehood of a given knowledge. Geopolitical and identity-political issues are taken for epistemological ones. Interestingly, while it is still difficult for many colleagues from peripheral locations to make themselves heard in the international arena, some of them have started to turn the tables to disqualify knowledge claims of representatives from the dominant metropolises as questionable or false. Go rightly dismisses claims for epistemic privilege. However, in concrete encounters, such claims function to silence the opponent and therefore make serious exchange impossible:

And this slave-master-relationship should go for you to understand who you are. And to understand who am I. Now I'm saying that the sensitivity that we have here in this university and that this enterprise of, not as I say, it's not indigenization of knowledge, but, universalization of knowledge. Islamization of knowledge is not an indigenization of knowledge. Now, we wanted knowledge actually to restore that universal category that it did have. And we feel that we are more qualified than our masters in Germany" [Zein, Interview 26.4.2012].²

This can go along with simplistic versions of relativism:

So it's different social norms, intellectual norms, but we have to allow for this. If you are talking about pluralism or plurality of views, well okay, this is it. I mean you have to be prepared if you go to Mecca, then women cannot drive. Just have to accept that. That's a norm in Mecca [Hassan, Interview 24.4.2012].

Hanafi makes an important complementary point highlighting the practical and political implications of relativistic arguments. From his standpoint as editor of *Idafat: The Arab Journal of Sociology* and a member of the editorial boards for many Arab

² This and the following quotes are from interviews I conducted at International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, in 2012. The topics of debate were the meaning and practice of Islamised social science, one of the key institutional missions of IIUM.

and international academic journals [Hanafi 2016, 25], he warns that cultural and moral relativisms are not merely an epistemological problem:

The quasi-conspiratorial apologetic and defensive claims become tools to justify local repression and even torture. Postcolonial scholars in the Arab region and sometimes some leftists in the West have rarely articulated a set of internal and external influences that shaped the political landscape of the Arab World [*Ibidem*, 26].

All this shows that as long as material and power divides persist it is very hard to agree on a common epistemological basis to distinguish between true and false knowledge [Keim Forth.b].³ How can we organize an exchange on equal footing in practice? Who has the credibility to establish common criteria to distinguish between true and false explications? What could common standards look like?

2) Interestingly, those are not really new questions for sociology. In fact, multiple incommensurable social theories – to start with, the imagined “canon” of Marx, Weber and Durkheim – have always coexisted within sociology. One last question is therefore that of the relationship between different standpoints and different theories. In fact, a standpoint does not provide you with a theory. Even if we break down the supposed “single standpoint” of the North into many, it does not seem that different standpoints end up producing different types of theory. Similar or equal standpoints do not necessarily generate similar theories. Apparently, the problem is much more complex; perspective does not necessarily account in itself for different knowledge. How important, then, is perspective at all? What other reasons are there for the existence of different theories? How are standpoints articulated with those other reasons for theoretical difference?

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³ If we wanted to take the argument still a step further, Martin Savransky, in a radically constructivist stance, argues that the problem of global knowledge in the social sciences is not only one of epistemology, but one of ontopolitics: Savransky [2012; 2014].

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Abstract: Starting from fundamental acknowledgment of Go's core argument that scientific pluralism permits multiple objectivities, my comment first includes a complementary argument: to complement Go's standpoint approach, I suggest not an analytical but a practical strategy towards alternative approaches in sociology. Second, I put forth a few minor criticisms. And third, I formulate two more fundamental questions that go beyond Go's text: in international scholarly debate, what criteria do we have at hand to differentiate between knowledges and to dismiss those we consider false? Furthermore, what is the relationship between different standpoints and different theories?

Keywords: Globalization of Sociology; Counterhegemonic Currents; Epistemology of the Social Sciences; Theoretical Pluralism; Sociologies of the South.

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