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Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Two Strategies for Challenging Eurocentrism

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Nowadays being critical of Eurocentrism, or seeking to "provincialize Europe"—more generally, trying to dislodge Europe from its privileged place in our thought—is no longer a marginal project, but one that engages growing numbers of scholars. Partly as a result, how this is done varies greatly. Schematically, it is possible—as I have done in my title—to identify two distinct strategies that have been adopted for challenging Eurocentrism. The aim of this brief essay is to contrast these, clarify the intellectual presumptions and entailments of each, and then briefly—as one who writes squarely within postcolonial theory—to outline what I see as the advantages of my own chosen path.

Works in historical or political sociology by Jack Goody (1996), Andre Gunder Frank (1998), Samir Amin (1989), James M. Blaut (1993) and John Hobson (2004), all their significant differences notwithstanding, have a common agenda. They retell the history of the emergence of the modern world in such a way that Europe no longer occupies a position of centrality; they challenge what we might call the "conventional narrative," in which modernity begins in Europe and then spreads gradually to the rest of the world through colonialism, trade and armies. In the alternative version(s) that seeks to displace the conventional narrative, the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long predated Europe's ascendance and, moreover, provided the conditions for that ascendance. Andre Gunder Frank writes, "Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European 'exceptionalism' of rationality, institutions,

entrepreneurship, technology... instead Europe used its American money to muscle in on and benefit from Asian production, markets, trade, in a word, to profit from the predominant position of Asia in the world economy" (Gunder Frank 1998:5–6).[6] Other works of what I am calling historical sociology are less polemical, aiming less at grand alternative explanations than at showing that the "great divergence" between the West and the rest happened much later than the conventional narrative would have it, and due to historical exigencies rather than any trait or cluster of traits exceptional to Europe (see, inter alia, Pomeranz 2000; Bin Wong 1997). Once meaningful comparisons are made, the factors commonly thought to be unique to European history can be seen to have been present in parts of Asia. But in this case also, the aim is "to dislodge European state making and capitalism from their privileged positions as universalizing themes in world history" (Bin Wong 1997:1).

The challenge to Eurocentrism is pursued in a different manner by the second strategy, which we might term postcolonial. Works by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Walter Mignolo, Timothy Mitchell and others start from the premise that not just the dominant accounts offered by the social sciences, but the very concepts through which such accounts are fashioned, have genealogies "which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000:4).[7] This does not in and of itself mean that they are "merely" European and provincial, but it does mean that the analytical categories which the social sciences presume to be universal—capital, state, individual, civil society and so on—may not in fact transcend the European history from which they originate. "Provincializing Europe" is thus neither a matter of rejecting Europe or European thought, nor principally of developing historical accounts that show Europe to be less unique and central than the conventional historical accounts would have it. It is, instead, writes Chakrabarty, "to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories... in the context of non-European life-worlds" (Chakrabarty 2000:20).

I am drawing a distinction, then, between two very different ways of seeking a common end, that of displacing Europe and European thought from the centrality that it is normally accorded. One way contests the privileging of Europe by questioning, and in some cases providing an alternative to, the conventional historical narrative according to which modernity begins in Europe and then radiates outward. Since the focus is on the story to be told, this is an enterprise that conducts its battles largely on the terrain of the empirical, counterposing some facts against other facts, and making "hard" claims to accuracy and truth. Works of this sort have a wide range of historical reference, and bristle with facts, figures and comparisons. What I am calling postcolonial works are "thicker" histories, often based upon archival research and, partly as a result of this, usually confined to one place (Egypt, India, Latin America). Unsurprisingly, since their aim is to mobilize a non-Western history or slice thereof in order to show that the categories through which we think are not fully adequate to their task, what they lack in terms of empirical range, compared to the first group, they make up for with a wider range of theoretical referents.

This distinction is of course schematic and therefore overdrawn. The two strategies are not mutually contradictory. Nonetheless, these are two very different ways of undermining Eurocentrism. In summary form, one could say that historical sociology aims at an alternative genealogy of modernity for the purpose of

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[6] The world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and his colleagues—which had also emphasized that capitalism and modernity were not the gift (or curse) of endogamous European development—is criticized by Gunder Frank and other authors for not going far enough, because it still accords Europe centrality, treating the rest of the world as a "periphery" incorporated into an emergent system whose core, from the beginning, was Western Europe.

[7] See also Mignolo (2000, 2003), Mitchell (1988, 2000). This list is by no means exhaustive.

producing better social science, whereas postcolonial theory—or at least of the kind I invoke here, for there are other kinds—seeks to problematize the governing assumptions of the social sciences, usually by juxtaposing their analytical categories with non-Western pasts and presents. As one who opts for the latter course, I will now outline what I see as the two main benefits of this approach.

Postcolonialism assumes that even after the biases of social science are corrected for and appropriate adjustments made, problems of the politics of knowledge remain, precisely because the central categories of the social sciences are the product of a European history, and are not necessarily adequate to everywhere, even in their amended versions. To put it another way, it may not just be the "content" of the social sciences (the explanations they offer, the narratives they construct) that is shaped by a genealogy that is both European and colonial, but their very "form" (the concepts through which explanations become possible, including the very idea of what counts as an explanation). In the limited space available, I will let one such example stand in for many others. The example is of "religion," a category that takes the form of a genus divided into different species (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.), and thus a category which would seem to have "built into it" a capacity for being sensitive to difference, and for drawing useful comparisons—at least, once it has been purged of any Eurocentric baggage. However, this is a category that also already has built into it the idea that certain "beliefs" (pertaining to the transcendent or "sacred") are of its essence; different religions are distinguished by their differing beliefs. But this understanding of religion, far from being universal and trans-historical, in fact is itself a product of a history, as some scholars of religion have come to recognize. Peter Harrison argues that in England in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "'religion' was constructed along essentially rationalist lines, for it was created in the image of the prevailing rationalist methods of investigation... inquiry into the religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed..." (Harrison 1990:2);[8] "religion" and "belief" emerged as mutually constitutive categories. Thus the very notion of "religion" is itself "a Christian theological category" (King 1999:40), "a modern invention which the West, during the last two hundred years or so, has exported to the rest of the world" (Hick 1999:vii). But it may not be a useful export: it may produce misunderstandings and unfruitful comparisons when applied to "religions" that have not undergone the same history that rendered them into systems of belief. The same, I would suggest, is true of many of the categories of the social sciences, including the concept/category of "society" itself, and similarly "nature"; and even the very distinction between the "real" and "representation," which, Timothy Mitchell has argued, is not something given and natural, but "a particular historical practice in which we are still caught up" (Mitchell 1988:173).

Such arguments can provoke ire, and sometimes lead to the charge that such claims amount to "relativism" and to abandoning the aspiration to understand and explain. But note that, as in the example of religion given above, such problematizing of categories arises in the course of exploring and often deploying the category; and the argument is never that the social sciences are purely and simply European and are therefore "wrong." The argument is usually—and in my view should always be—that we cannot dispense with these categories, but that they often provide only partial understanding. In Chakrabarty's elegant phrase, postcolonial theory seeks to register and explore the "simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of social science thought" (Chakrabarty 2000:6).

My second reason for preferring to practice postcolonial theory as a path to provincializing Europe is connected with the first. Anti-Eurocentric historical sociology stakes its claim to producing "better" knowledge on the grounds that it more accurately re-presents what really happened. But knowledge does not just

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[8]See also Asad (1993), Byrne (1989), Pailin (1984) and Smith (1982).

offer cognition of a world external to it by representing this world, it also constitutes it; and modern Western thought, of which the natural and social sciences are the formalized expressions, has been constitutive of modernity, and has not just been the self-apprehension of modernity. This theoretical insight is largely unavailable to anti-Eurocentric historical sociology because its aspiration to "do social science better" presupposes accepting that the relation between knowledge and its objects is one of externality, where knowledge "represents," "renders," "captures" and "portrays." By contrast postcolonialism is more receptive to the idea that knowledges may create, and not merely describe. Thus Mitchell argues that the distinction between real and representation, central to modern Western ways of apprehending and organizing the world, did not make much sense to Egyptians, who neither thought that way nor inhabited a world organized around this distinction. In a similar vein, I have argued that many of the anxieties and complaints that came to centre around the introduction of Western knowledge in colonial India—that Indian students were absorbing the new knowledge in their old ways, by rote learning, or that educated Indians were in the throes of a moral crisis, "torn" between their traditional beliefs and the new ideas they were exposed to at school and in university—should be read less as testifying to real problems, and more as indicating that certain foundational assumptions of modern knowledge could not, in fact, be assumed in India. I read these complaints and controversies as indicating that the foundational assumptions that underlie them—that knowledge is a relation between a meaning—endowing subject and a world of disenchanted objects (which is why knowledge has to be made one's own, and rote learning is a failure of knowledge rather than a form of it), and that morality is a matter of "beliefs" held in something called the "mind" (hence why Western-educated Indians were assumed to be suffering moral crisis, even though most of them seemed blissfully unaware of this fact) did not have purchase in India. However, as the institutions and practices of colonial administration and, not least, of modern knowledge itself, transformed life-worlds in India and Egypt, Western knowledge and the social sciences became more adequate as tools for "representing" that changed scene. As the distinction between the real and representation became the grid organizing collective life, it assumed a certain reality, and now became meaningful in a way that it had not previously been; as the subject/object relation came to undergird not only pedagogy but the spatial layout of the city and the practices of the lawcourt and the office, some Indians became subjects who did experience morality and religion as beliefs, and were now capable of being rent by the conflict between different beliefs (Seth 2007).

But only ever partially so, which is one important reason why the social sciences remain at once indispensable, but also inadequate. These inadequacies are most immediately apparent (for those willing to see) in relation to the non-Western world. But modern knowledge has not so completely remade the West that the social sciences are fully adequate to it either (Seth 2007, esp. the "Epilogue"). In the West too, the analytical categories of the social sciences do not neatly and fully map onto the entire social space, for many and varied forms of human solidarity and belonging have not wholly given way to, or been subsumed by, citizenship; older public arenas and their rituals and practices of identity have not been completely effaced by the rituals of statehood; and the secular assumptions of the social sciences have not become the common sense of everyone.

Thus a project that begins by critically examining the universalist pretensions of social science in relation to non-Western pasts and presents may end up doing more than challenging Eurocentrism. And this may prove to be the most important difference between historical sociology and postcolonial theory—that whereas the former assumes that the social sciences can (be made to) be applicable everywhere, postcolonial theory argues that they are fully adequate nowhere.

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