

## **The Rise of Postwestern Knowledges: Possibilities and Pitfalls**

A Response to Raewyn Connell's Southern theory: A conversation about knowledge<sup>1</sup>

*Rosa Vasilaki, London School of Economics and Political Science*

As we can see from Professor Connell's lecture, in recent years, the question of the location of knowledge, in both the geographical and conceptual sense, has acquired particular prominence within social and human sciences. The radical questioning of the source of knowledge in modernity, that is science, and its particular location, that is the West, the rise of standpoint epistemologies and regional/indigenous schools of thought, the deconstruction of the 'modern' as a system of thought and domination, have all contributed to the crystallisation of a new approach to knowledge production, which could be described by the umbrella term 'postwestern knowledges' which is the term that I will use throughout my contribution to our conversation about knowledge today. Raewyn Connell's Southern Theory – along with other attempts of rethinking knowledge production, knowledge distribution, knowledge hierarchies and possibilities of emancipation through knowledge – is among the most significant ones, along with postcolonial thinkers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Gurminder Bhambra, with thinkers such as Buenaventura de Sousa Santos, with new strands of thoughts such as decolonial thinking most notably represented by Walter D. Mignolo, and along with projects inspired by religious thinking such as Talal Asad.

I have chosen to refer to these projects as postwestern, because of their convergence in assumptions and commitments in the following sense: they are articulated around the idea that the emergence of Western science as the authoritative source of knowledge in modernity cannot be thought as a neutral development because this process produced hierarchies of knowledge (science over religion), hierarchies of culture (the Western over the Rest) and hierarchies of historical eras (civilisation over 'barbarity'), and in that sense, it also produced inequalities. The disenchantment with modernity and the deconstruction of Western colonial and postcolonial power produced a significant realignment of positions in the relationship between power, knowledge, and location. As domains of knowledge undergo reorganization, postwestern thinking challenges the established order of knowledge and questions hierarchical binaries such as West/East, North/South, tradition/modernity, or faith/science. The postwestern problematic derives from such reconsideration of 'Western', 'modern' knowledge, which is thought as sustaining its primacy by inflicting a particular kind of epistemic violence over other ways of knowing the world. In the postwestern perspective, the

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location of knowledge becomes a political and ethical question, intricately linked to questions of power and tied-up with the claim that the political and conceptual - European, Western - centre of the modern world has collapsed. Postwestern projects emerge in this particular historical conjuncture as a quest – and often as a struggle – for a conceptual redefinition of social sciences and question both the practical utility and ethical legitimacy of its key analytical categories: universality and modernity are perhaps the most prominent among them.

Taking as my point of departure Raewyn Connell's lecture as well as the book itself, I would like to share with you my thoughts with regards to the possibilities and pitfalls deriving from those epistemologies aiming to decentre the West as a system of thought and domination. For this purpose, let me briefly survey the postwestern spectrum in order to situate Connell's project within the broader field of postcolonial thinking.

### **The postwestern spectrum**

Three partially overlapping lines of theoretical engagement can be distinguished within the new intellectual space of postwestern knowledge production: pluralism, particularism and postcolonialism. It goes without saying that these attempts overlap and relate to each other because they are grounded theoretically, politically and ethically in the same concern: the critique of the West as a system of thought cum domination.

By pluralism, I refer to the cluster of projects which came to be known as 'multiple modernities' and which sought to re-examine the idea of universal convergence to a Western-style modernity by conceptualizing the possibility of different ways of becoming and being modern and by bringing to the fore these alternative paths. This thread is represented by works which seek to democratize the field by opening up a space where parallel stories can be told without being thought as mutually exclusive and without making absolute normative or ethical claims, but by simply sharing the terrain of theoretical production and allowing space for this interaction to occur.

By particularism, I refer to a body of literature that seeks to distinguish itself from mainstream social theory by prioritizing local or cultural standpoints and systems of thought. In social theory, this thread has been initially expressed by projects revolving around the articulation of new and antagonistic 'centrism' to Eurocentrism, such as Asante's Afrocentrism, or around the possibilities of indigenisation of social sciences which would enable the conception of universal principles from within the local traditions and

cultures such as Akiwowo. The thread was further expressed by the idea of development of autonomous social science, such as Alatas' work, which seeks to recognize the multiple, local intellectual traditions of social sciences. In the cognate discipline of IR theory, this thread is often represented by regional schools of thought – e.g. 'Asian', 'African', 'Chinese', 'Japanese', or 'Indian' – which share both the critique of Western hegemony and the emphasis on the uniqueness of a particular region, nation or culture and its international role within the world order.

However, both these stances make a problematical assumption: social theory is not getting post-westernized or de-colonised, and in that sense less hierarchical, by simply opening an intellectual space where more non-Western views can be aired or because various forms of particularisms or 'centrism' are elevated into universalisms. On the one hand, particularism *per se* is not a guarantee of non-hegemonic or democratized social theory. The idea of autonomous development – if at all possible in an increasingly interconnected world – implicitly appeals to categories of purity, authenticity and nostalgia which embrace the logic of exclusion and do little to generate possibilities of mutual transformation. Furthermore, replicating the structure of Eurocentric epistemology – especially the idea of an antagonistic new 'centre' – is also prone to reproduce 'autonomous' or 'indigenous' legitimizing mechanisms of supremacy and domination. Nowhere is this tendency more obvious and unapologetic than in the articulation of regional schools of thought which are often the mirror-image of the logic underpinning Western dominance: based on the idea of uniqueness of a 'special' civilization, culture or nation, its 'special' place in the world and its 'special' mission, they often produce their own versions of hegemony and imperialism.

On the other hand, pluralism brings together, pell-mell, non-Western traditions and integrates them in its own Western, modernist logic which is not really modified as a result of its contact with the 'Other'. Pluralism, as Bhabra convincingly argues in her critique of the 'multiple modernities' project, may acknowledge the multiplicity of cultural forms of modernity but does nothing to address the fundamental problems with the conceptualization of modernity itself: Europe remains the originary modernity to which all these other alternative modernities are compared to and evaluated. The same implicit teleology of the developmental course of history operates and the structure of established binaries of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' is left undisrupted. In that sense, theoretical pluralism – like multiculturalism which is its political expression - cannot fulfil the radical promise of a postwestern system of thought. If the postwestern project is taken seriously, that is theoretically rigorously, then it needs to move both beyond the elevation of local

particularisms to universalisms and beyond the idea of a generalized pluralism, beyond the charitable ‘addition of more voices’.

This is exactly what projects like Connell’s aspire to do, to overcome precisely these problems which arise in the effort to decolonize or de-westernize the production of knowledge. In that respect, I would include Connell’s contribution within the broader thread of postcolonialism. There are, however, other problems that arise in the effort of articulation of projects where the colonial moment is taken seriously, that is when recognizing that the colonial encounter itself produced knowledge, and that the issues raised by coloniality are not marginal but central. I would like to refer briefly to two of the most significant, in my view – and I could elaborate further during the discussion.

First, the re-appropriation of local knowledges and epistemologies has been characteristically marked by ambivalence between the narrative of the capital, or the narrative of modernity, on the one hand, and the local cosmologies on the other hand. Perhaps the most prominent example of such engagement is Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. The ambivalence reigning in such efforts may seem more sensitive to the ‘non-Western’ experience than the unambiguous commitment to one epistemological stance. However, the implication of such indeterminacy, of the effort to bridge the gap between the religious or spiritual realm of local cosmologies on the one hand, and social science on the other hand, leads to a peculiar paralysis. If religious experience is the locus of the irreducibly subjective, of radical subjectivity which cannot be enunciated in any imaginable cross-cultural or universal terms, then indeed social or human sciences have nothing to say, since the sociology or anthropology of religion are only possible from within a secular epistemology. This observation can be seen in two ways: either it makes social sciences redundant and consequently we are at a deadlock, or it makes the need for a sheer separation between faith and reason within social sciences clearer. As such, ambivalence and indeterminacy come with the price of neutralization of sociological engagement itself.

Second, the re-appropriation of local cosmologies and epistemologies is often governed by a logic of radical singularity. Talal Asad’s work, a seminal thinker in this line of thought, is a characteristic example of such tendency. In fact, what often passes for specific or particular in postcolonial approaches of Otherness is, under scrutiny, *singular or singularising*. Accounting for the non-Western Other in his/her own terms only, entails operating in singularising terms, and as a consequence they define the non-Western Other in terms of absolute alterity. The main implication of the analytics of cultural singularity is that it cannot sustain any substantive understanding of the Other, and as such it cannot disrupt or

radically democratise the established power relations of knowledge production. The radical cultural relativism that such projects endorse as an ethical paradigm of pluralism and openness is in fact the mirror image of unapologetic essentialism: cultures end-up to be seen again as ‘discreet entities’ to use Connell’s terms in the lecture. The insularity of cultures across time and space or the lack of continuity in terms of relationality between cultures, eventually neutralises the ability of postcolonial analytics to account for the Other. Its singularising logic is, in the last instance, exclusionary as ‘ultimately, it will act even in the absence of others as such’ (Hallward 2001: xii).

### **Toward a logic of transformations**

I propose that a more productive approach would be to recuperate early postcolonial theory, whose conceptual lineage may be a more sustainable way out of paralysis and neutralization or ethical and epistemological absolutism.

This concern about the possibility, not to say necessity, for transformation lies, for instance, at the heart of Spivak’s strategic move of *catachresis*, essentially, a move of appropriation of the colonizer’s epistemic culture. For Spivak, concepts and/or political claims such as nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship or democracy are coded within the legacy of imperialism and as such they are concepts-metaphors with no historically adequate referent in the postcolonial space. However, for Spivak, the fact that the authoritative (the ‘correct’) narrative was produced in Western Europe does not make the claims less important. Catachresis emerges as a strategy, as a process by which the colonized displaces, seizes and re-inscribes the code value of political claims, concepts and epistemologies (ibid: 204, 206-207). It is this potential of mutual transformation, the possibility of re-writing the grammar of vital concepts and claims – such as equality, autonomy, social and human rights - that may allow theory to succeed in overcoming the conceptual binaries and political dilemmas of constructs, such as the West versus the postcolonial, the West versus Islam, the West versus the Rest and so on. Effective de-westernization requires us to think beyond the construction of new ‘centres’ (with their associated antagonisms and hegemonies), as well as beyond the idea of ‘decentring’ Europe where culturally-bound paradigms produce their culturally-bound subjectivities and perceive interaction as threat or betrayal. Such attempts – despite their important contribution in construing and questioning the way Eurocentrism produces and sustains its dominance – are trapped within the trope of resistance. Changing the terms of the debate to move beyond the ‘anti-’ or ‘post-’ Western means also recognizing that resistance is not necessarily progressive, anti-hegemonic or reflexive and that non-Western forms of dominance, hierarchy and inequality not necessarily preferable because of their local ‘colour’.

Bhabra's proposition, for instance, to think in terms of interconnectedness is essential in deconstructing our sociological categories and political claims. But I would like to submit that along with thinking backwards in terms of understanding the conceptual lineage of our (dominant) categories of analysis and explanatory frameworks (modernity versus tradition, development versus stasis, progress versus backwardness, centre versus periphery and so on), we also need to work forward, toward a mutual transformation which can allow the possibility of new 'universals' to emerge. This double move is necessary if superseding the West as the privileged site of knowledge is to mean something more than acknowledging our respective parochialisms and their local significance. The 'universal' has been, of course, the epicentre of critique of postwestern epistemologies. However, taking the idea of mutual transformation seriously requires to recognize that understanding the genealogy of our ideas is not only about revealing the workings of discursive hegemonies and systems of knowledge, but also about unearthing their suppressed possibilities and reclaiming the creation of new 'universals' is one of the most promising ideas in that respect. This could be a more reflexive and productive route to take than unwittingly romanticizing local hegemonies or imagining the future as an invented innocent and redemptive past. In that respect, Connell is right to say to point towards an alternative universalism, that is other ways of making universal claims, however, there is still work to be done to avoid the pitfalls I have tried to examine here in my brief contribution.