Decolonizing the 'Global': The Coloniality of Method and the Problem of the Unit of Analysis

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Abstract

What should 'global' stand for in order to qualify 'historical sociology' when it aspires to move beyond its Eurocentric foundations? The answer to this question lies in the ability to investigate the limits that Eurocentrism imposes on the possibility of reformulating the world as a unit of analysis, and simultaneously in tackling the centrality of the colonial question in methodological and epistemological terms, rather than exclusively in historical terms.

Introduction

What should 'global' stand for in order to qualify 'historical sociology' when it aspires to move beyond its Eurocentric foundations? The answer to this question lies in the ability to investigate the limits that Eurocentrism imposes on the possibility of reformulating the world as a unit of analysis, and simultaneously in tackling the centrality of the colonial question in methodological and epistemological terms, rather than exclusively in historical terms. Thinking globally was not extraneous to 19th-century European social theory. As Merle (1987) recalls, Henri de Saint Simon and his followers promulgated the quintessential views of *Le Nouveau Christianisme* from the pages of *Le Globe*. Harvey (2010) maintains that Marx's historical materialism was entirely developed within the frame of the globalizing forces of capitalism. For Connell (1997), Weber's historical

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cartography of world civilizations contained *in nuce* many of the globalist connotations that historical sociology should rescue from the hegemony of modernization theories. Inglis and Robertson (2009) trace the origins of global sociology back to Durkheim's analysis of supranational phenomena. Yet, thinking the global implies the altogether more specific idea that it is plausible, and theoretically advantageous, to understand the entire world as an integrated spacetime and that this frame of analysis is more adequate than the nation-state or other units of analysis 'contained' within the globe. Historically, in fact, the reorientation of sociological analysis towards the global marks a shift in emphasis that is characteristic of the post-Second-World-War period, when decolonization irrupted in world politics and theory production.

The global is not simply a further description for the 'international', the 'cross-national' or the 'transnational' (Babones, 2007). Neither is its significance reducible to a matter of scale or to one among the possible levels of analysis that define the scope of the research questions in place (Sassen, 2013). Nor is it reducible to the complex territorial as well as non-territorial dynamics connecting the world (Urry, 2012). The conceptual and terminological problem of thinking the global is twofold. On the formal level, it calls for registering the dissonances between the global intended as exogenous and over-determining, on the one hand, and the global as endogenous and emergent, on the other hand. On the substantial level, it implies confronting the inevitable transitional adequacy and situatedness, as well as the changing geopolitics of knowledge production, which the construction of the world as a significant unit of analysis conveys.

The intellectual history of 'the global' is always reconstructed in terms of a chronological succession of paradigmatic shifts that design a linear incremental trajectory: going from the nation-state to the world. This disciplinary narrative systematically neglects three points. The first is that the rise of state-centrism systematically promoted by modernization theories was a response to the political challenge provoked by the birth of embryonic forms of the decolonization of theory in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, rather than the latter being a reaction to the mounting ideological and theoretical hegemony of the former. The second is that the methodological critique elaborated by world-systems analysis was coherent with the tradition of American sociology, rather than an exception to it, and the latter's bias (evident since the 1960s) to align the theorization of the global with the tradition of the Western colonial gaze upon the history of the world. The third is that the irruption of the colonial difference into the realm of theory production since the 1980s is responsible for the disentanglement of relationalism from holism in methodological thinking about the global. The consequences of this disentanglement disclose the possibility of rethinking the global through a *planetary* imagination. The tension between globality and planetarity prompts global historical sociology to engage with the challenges, often unheard and unregistered, that postcolonialism and the decolonization of social theory launched against the prevailing parochialism of sociology (Bhambra, 2010; Go, 2013). This tension questions the legitimacy of whatever conception of the global to prosecute the worldly projection of an ethnocentric sociological gaze that obscures the particular standpoint from which it claims the superiority of its universalism. Rather than a connotative semantic field, the planetarity renders the global as a limit to theorization. In so doing, the tension between the global and the planetary enhances the potential articulation of the global as the conceptual space for conceiving a

multiplex and connected world (or worlds) that the Eurocentric understanding of the global renders unthinkable: overlapping, but irreducible, plural yet equally legitimate non-Western spacetimes, narratives and conceptual grammars.

Modernization and globalization theories unintentionally or intentionally reaffirm Eurocentrism, even when they are mobilized to overcome the limits of state-centrism and methodological nationalism. Different forms of Eurocentrism erase, eclipse, or mystify the constitutive nexus between the colonial difference and the construction of the global. The legitimacy of the Eurocentric construction of the global is safeguarded in surreptitious ways and buried under the methodological assumptions informed by the *coloniality of method*. The coloniality of method consists in the ability to mortify the transformative potential of the colonial difference both historically and epistemologically. The coloniality of method legitimates and incorporates the asymmetries of power formed through, and by, colonialism into categories of analysis. This colonial construction is rendered invisible by dissolving epistemic violence into apparent conceptual neutrality and terminological transparency.

In order to dismantle the colonial logic involved in existing understandings of the global, a decolonizing perspective on the historical construction and reciprocal interpellation of the global and the colonial is here adopted. It draws from some of the more radical upshots of the critique of Eurocentrism produced in social theory in the last four decades.

The Coloniality of Method versus Decolonizing Genealogy

In a polemical vein against his predecessor as president of the International Sociological Association Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Burawoy calls for a global sociology that tackles global inequalities. Burawoy (2010) suggests a double movement. A first move consists in what Robertson (1998) has called the 'globalization of sociology'; that is, the institutional and demographic change of sociology into a discipline whose space of theorization needs to be transformed by non-Western research traditions. The second consists in the collective effort to decolonize sociology from its Eurocentric constrains. It is an effort, as Bhambra (2014: 104–112) remarks, precisely for being compelling and uncertain, that is required. This is not only because Eurocentrism is often reproduced through national structures of knowledge, but also because it is precisely the reproduction, conscious or unintended, of Eurocentric premises in the non-Western academy that works as a means of selection, co-optation and international legitimation of non-Western national traditions and scholars into world academia.

In order to respond to this challenge, the global can be rethought by referring to the neologism 'coloniality', introduced by Anibal Quijano (1992). Coloniality conceptualizes the totalizing colonial nature of power within modernity. The coloniality of power takes the form of a complex dynamic matrix that operates regardless of the end of formal colonialism. It is made of intertwined hierarchies of culture, class, race, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, gender, and cosmologies. Through this matrix, the colonial difference is translated into naturalized hierarchies of power whose original, yet mobile, configuration is white, capitalist, masculine, heterosexual, Christian, dominance. Our available conception of the global is thereby constrained within Eurocentric coordinates by the *coloniality of method*. The term 'coloniality of method' conceptualizes

and systematizes a wide range of criticisms that in recent decades have denounced the complicity of modernization and globalization theories with the Eurocentric construction of the social sciences (Lander, 2000; Santos, 2007; Walsh, 2007). The coloniality of method operates through three devices: *negation*, that is, the assertion of the irrelevance of colonial relations in causal explanations and historical narratives; *neutralization*, that is, the acknowledgment of colonialism as a worldly relation of asymmetric power distribution, together with the simultaneous presumption of the irrelevance of non-dominant agencies within the colonial relation; *sterilization*, that is, the exoticization of non-dominant epistemologies and their displacement from the realm of theoretical production to that of particularistic cultures, standpoints, and spacetimes unable to express transformative universalisms. The coloniality of method materializes in shifting combinations of these three devices, and probably through others which I am here ignoring. It informs the genealogy of the global and thus freezes the sociological imagination within Eurocentric horizons of understanding.

So, 'decolonizing genealogy' is a heuristic strategy deployed against the coloniality of method. It exploits its own semantic ambiguity. It argues both that the genealogy of the global needs to be decolonized from its Eurocentric assumptions, and that a different genealogy emerges in an alternative elaboration of the notion of the global. If the global turn is often reduced to the formal overcoming of state-centrism, Julian Go (2014) offers a thoughtful re-articulation of this consolidated narrative when he describes how the global has been occluded in historical sociology. He retraces the chronological succession of paradigms that goes from modernization theories, to dependency theories, to world-systems analysis, up to the proliferation of divergent strains of historical sociologies and globalization theories. Conversely, in what follows, I seek to show the emergence of the global as a methodological issue that derives its cogency from the irruption of the colonial difference into the realm of theoretical production. This irruption followed the reconfiguration of world politics, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In the sociological imagination of the global turn, the Second World War irrevocably divides the 1940s. Yet, as was clear to historians of the Cold War, the debates and concerns that emerged after the end of the armed conflict continued, in part, and reformulated, political and theoretical issues raised earlier. These were encountered in the problem of the transition of hegemony from Great Britain to the United States of America, and in the transition from colonies to formally independent nation-states. Both materialized as political options and processes to be managed: a matter of global governance. The construction of the global is rooted within the story of the politics of the global governance of post-Second-World-War decolonization, rather than within the formal succession of research traditions, theoretical paradigms and their units of analysis. What historical sociology has occluded is not the global. Rather it is the colonial: the way the global has been conceived methodologically in Western social sciences from the end of the Second World War onwards is a major theoretical agent of the coloniality of method.

As Neil Brenner correctly notes, from a critical geographical perspective,

the emphasis on global space does not necessarily lead to an overcoming of state-centric epistemologies. Global territorialist approaches represent the global space in a state-centric manner, as a pre-given territorial container within which globalization unfolds, rather than

analyzing the historical production, reconfiguration, and transformation of this space. (Brenner, 1999: 59)

In a similar vein, but from a critical international-relations theory perspective, David Chandler registers a risk of oversimplification of the label 'global' attached to social theory.

> In understanding the globalisation of politics as a response to processes of social and economic change … the shift towards the global has been essentialised or reified. Rather than the shift from national to global conceptions of politics, power and resistance being a question for investigation, it has been understood as natural or inevitable: as a process driven by forces external to us and out of our control. (Chandler, 2009: 535)

Nonetheless, this spatial (and temporal), as well as this political-ideological, critique is insufficient. It fails to address the relevance of the colonial formation of the global as a methodological issue. Method itself is an articulation of the historically determined relations between power and culture, and thus a different, non-formalist, substantial criterion of relevance is needed, one that lies in the assertion that thinking the global is coterminous with the political and theoretical problem of how to think the colonial. In this sense, if the formal shift from state-centrism to the global does not suffice in itself to overcome Eurocentrism and to refute the coloniality of method, conversely, not all forms of state-centrism imply an equivalent attitude towards the colonial. For this reason, the entire genealogy of the global turn has to be rethought, respecified and partially reversed.

Modernization as Theoretical Counter-Insurgency

The post-Second-World-War terms-of-trade controversy around the role of international commerce in the world distribution of wealth was the first attempt to think the global through a decolonization of social theory. Rather than dependency theories being a reaction to modernization theories, it was the latter that emerged as an early theoretical counter-insurgency movement to repress the first formulations of the core–periphery theory. Toye and Toye (2004: 110–136) have convincingly reconstructed the genesis of the terms-of-trade on political economy controversy from a global perspective. Since 1948, one year before the famous 'point four' in Truman's presidential address, the German economist Hans Singer was working on a paper for the newly born Economic Development Commission of the United Nations. The clue for this research was offered by some quantitative analyses of serial data on international trade from the 19th century onwards, which Folke Hilgerd, director of the UN Statistical Office at the time, had compiled since 1943. Singer embarked on the study of a very specific problem: during the inter-war period, a number of former colonies (particularly India) had export surpluses that they subsequently wished to use to import capital goods for their national economic plans. Yet, in this interval, the prices of capital goods had risen, so the export surpluses were worth less in terms of imports than they had been when they were earned. Singer's argument was radicalized by Raul Prebisch: while poor countries were helping to maintain a rising standard of living in industrialized countries, they were not receiving

any compensation; rather they were getting poorer and poorer. Prebisch enriched Singer's thesis with a methodological coherence that Singer's argument had not provided, introducing the meta-geographical interpretative model of core–periphery. This powerful heuristic device was endowed with strong self-evident political connotation and rapidly created a vast consensus among scholars from former colonies within the United Nations. But Prebisch polemically also argued against the presumed universalism of economic theory.

> One of the most conspicuous deficiencies of general economic theory, from the point of view of the periphery, is its false sense of universality […] An intelligent knowledge of the ideas of others must not be confused with the mental subjection to them from which we are slowly learning to free ourselves. (Prebisch cited in Toye and Toye, 2004: 131)

This is analogous to what Friedrich List had advocated against Smith and Ricardo's theories of free trade in the first quarter of the 19th century. The project of decolonizing knowledge was thus entering the world theoretical scenario of political and scholarly controversies in a manner that created immediately two irreconcilable sides: Western industrialized countries, on the one hand, and former colonies, mainly agricultural and raw materials exporters, on the other. Toye and Toye defined the firm reaction that followed the exposure of the Prebisch–Singer thesis as the 'North American critical onslaught' (2004: 130–134). North American economists attempted to delegitimize the Prebisch–Singer thesis by affirming the inaccuracy of its statistical base or the inconsistency of its explanatory multi-factorial model. The leading figure of the Northern camp, Walt Whitman Rostow, contributed to dismissing the entire embryonic perspective that was emerging within the United Nations as 'speculative'. Like the majority of the economists of their generation, Rostow, Prebisch and Singer shared an analogous intellectual horizon. They all passed from studying economic cycles during the 1930s to include long-term trends in the analysis of economic development by the end of the Second World War. The politics of their heuristic questions, nonetheless, were radically diverse. They were determined and shaped by opposite political attitudes towards the colonial question.

In a paper, split into two articles successively published at a distance of one year from each other by the *Economic History Review*, Rostow (1950, 1951) demonstrated awareness of the political pressures on world trade coming from the changing configuration of power in world politics. He declared that his intention was 'to indicate the schismatic state of economic theory and analysis with respect to the terms of trade', since

> movements in the terms of trade hold a central position in the analysis of current international (and inter-sectorial) economic problems and in the formation of policy designed to solve them. The issues involved in the structural adjustment of world trade, which has been proceeding over recent years, are not likely to be transitory in nature, although their form and impact on different portions of the world economy will certainly change. (Rostow, 1950: 1–2)

Among his major sources, a particular place was occupied by the same statistical body undersigned by Hilgert and his colleagues at the United Nations, which Singer had used too. But the core question that drove Rostow was elaborated entirely within the

logic of hegemonic transition. As Gilman (2003) points out, Rostow's intent consisted in the use of economic history to suggest international trade policies that could effectively enhance the newly established US power at the world level, directly involving the reoccupation of the spaces uncovered by the relative collapse of the European colonial empires. Rostow's theoretical problem was provoked by the rise of the US (and its structures of knowledge) to world hegemony following the decline of the British economy in the wake of the demise of the latter's colonial empire. The question was: how, in the inter-war period, had Great Britain dissipated the advantages accruing from highly favourable terms of trade? Rostow (1950: 20) brought in a vast 'array of variables' and called for a closer interaction between economists and historians in order to construct an interpretative model that could grasp the 'continuous interplay of short-term and long-period forces'. Significantly, the history and the economics he relied upon did not envisage the colonial question at all.

Modernization theories were effective in crystallizing into method the North American critical onslaught. By means of a radical state-centrism it completely negated the colonial question. The notion that each nation-state corresponded to an autonomous political entity whose space was defined by the geo-historical borders within which a distinctive society evolves through time, was hardly unfamiliar to Western thinking. Yet, the formalization of the nation-state as the unit of analysis in American social sciences in the 1950s marked the construction of a distinctive normative epistemological strategy that permitted a cogent notion of replicability (Agnew, 1993; Bach, 1982).

Replicability, within the frame of modernization, is something different from the simple aspiration of mimicry. It holds out the promise that the historical experience of the more advanced nation-state could have been replicated elsewhere in space and time, that is, *ad libitum* and *urbis et orbis*. Obviously, the majority of modernization theorists in sociology and in international-relations theory were well aware of the global dimension of world politics. State-centrism and methodological nationalism within the horizon of modernization did not mean naively ignoring the single world context within which political entities exist. Rather, it meant that the world context for the historical development of a distinctive society within a single nation-state had to be thought in a manner that could not interfere with the presumed replicability of the path to modernization. It had to be thinkable, before being rendered feasible through policies, that the capacity of each state to modernize would depend exclusively on the correct implementation of the packaged model of modernization, and it not being disturbed by whatever possible external interference.

This establishment of the irrelevance of colonial connections actually meant the domestication, both in the performative and etymological sense, of colonialism in sociological explanation. The negative effects of the colonial relations of power were transmuted into apparent domestic incapacity, or structural obstacles inherent in a particular society, to move from tradition to modernity. This was the hallucinatory and enduring mantra of developmentalism.

Holism or, American Sociology Goes Global

The disciplinary history of sociology concerning the global was almost oblivious to the circumstances in which the first explicit call for the methodological formalization of a

global sociology had been expressed, by the new president of the American Sociological Association Wilbert E. Moore (1966), just a few months before his election. This move inaugurated a distinctive trend in American sociology, which, however, did not dent the tradition of methodological nationalism, quantitative methodology and behaviouralism that remained largely hegemonic in the decades that followed. As Steinmetz (2010) has argued, the knowledge transfer taking place from social scientists previously working under the Nazi regime, then as refugee scholars in the US, did not affect the a-historical orientation of American sociology, and historical sociology remained a niche interest from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Nonetheless, Moore's article 'Global Sociology: The World as a Singular System' put an explicit emphasis on social systems as 'sovereign systems' and as unit of analysis. It suggested a new direction towards the global, that American sociology should have taken. Against his predecessor, Moore affirmed:

> it is only in social systems that one makes explicit the emergent qualities that derive from the interaction of the human actors in any social context, and thus avoids the kind of classical exemplification of the reductionist fallacy embodied in George Homans' presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 1964. (Moore, 1966: 479)

In his overview of the history of the discipline, Moore described the inter-war period as the beginning of the process of Americanization of sociology, which corresponded both to the crisis of national European schools of sociology, and the narrowing of the socio-logical imagination to parochialism. As a reaction against this parochialism, the Americanization of sociology took the opposite direction and continued from the 1930s to the 1950s with a renewed interest in looking outwards. Rather than looking at the world through historical civilizations as had the former European sociological tradition, American sociology turned its attention to the ethnography and anthropology of 'primitive cultures', in order to understand comparatively the process of modernization on a global scale that the US were presumably leading. Relativism, Moore remarked, was the alter ego of parochialism inasmuch as it assumed the equivalence of all the different standpoints. But it was precisely this binarism between the two distant poles of modernization, namely the sociological global vis-a-vis the anthropological particular, which had to be overcome.

It is noteworthy, in this regard, how sociology and anthropology on different sides of the Atlantic were methodologically closer than it seems. When Bertalanffy (1950, 1951) introduced general systems theory, he offered an innovative path of analysis for both. General systems theory (GST henceforth) merged history, ecology, engineering and communication studies into a common meta-theory. Parsons (1951) applied GST to social systems and his approach rapidly became hegemonic. It was a pillar of the rarely questioned positivist frame of post-Second-World-War American sociology (Steinmetz, 2005: 1–20). The hegemony of structural-functionalism resulted in statements such as the following by Moore (1966: 479): 'social systems are real, they are earnest, and they may be both smaller and larger than societies, however defined'. The notion of system was, in fact, first of all ontological: it affirmed the real existence of an integrated super-system of global relations called *the world*. The system was marked by a functionalist

holism that affirmed the ontological superiority, as well as the epistemological priority, of the whole over the parts, and the irrelevance of the latter outside the integrating understanding of the former. Holism implied methodological relationalism, that is, the prevalence of forming relations over formed entities. There followed that social wholes were thought of as integrated systems whose dimensions and activities were defined in space and time by the extension and duration of their constitutive relations.

Analogously, in his *Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Evans-Pritchard (1951: 11) stated that 'the social anthropologist studies societies as wholes—he studies their ecologies, their economics, their legal and political institutions, their family and kinship organizations, their religions, their technologies, their arts etc. as parts of general social systems'. As Talal Asad (1973) remarked, these aspirations to study 'primitive' social systems, whose authority was a direct expression of the colonial rule, collapsed into micro-analysis under the pressures imposed by the emergence of nationalist structures of knowledge production in the newly decolonized countries. In the Third World, Asad (1973: 13) continued, scholars *from* the Third World began to 'recover indigenous history and denounced the colonial connections of anthropology'. So, sociology and anthropology were both affected by decolonization, but their respective institutional backgrounds and intellectual legitimation produced divergent methodological responses.

American sociology responded to the challenge posed by the decolonization of social theory by elaborating a frame that was able to literally *en-globe* the worlds of historical and social change, as well as their structures of knowledge production. Moore paid particular attention to the problem of the globalization of sociology. Nation-building and state-building initiated relevant demographic changes in the constitution of sociology as an international academic field and as a community of scholars owing to the construction of national sociological traditions in the former colonies. This was a change which, for intrinsic reasons, could not be paralleled by anthropologists. The horizon Moore took for granted was the modernization of the colonial world as a selective implementation of Western structures and meanings. The globalization of sociology should have followed an analogous path. For him, ethnography and anthropology were no longer sufficient,

> for dealing with the modernization of traditional societies […] two-party transactional models as contained in the older theory of 'acculturation' simply will not fit most of the evidence […] We may 'take a giant step' toward global sociology by returning once more to the *exotic* places, dearly beloved of ethnographers […] The main, overwhelming fact about them is that they are losing their pristine character at an extremely rapid rate. (Moore, 1966: 483)

Holism, which in the decolonizing countries did not survive the collapse of functionalist anthropology, conversely enjoyed a more favourable institutional space of intellectual citizenship within the context of American sociology. Holism in sociology seemed to offer the theoretical advantage of dismantling the limits of the nation-state as a unit of analysis, while maintaining the legitimacy it acquired from an overall state-centrist frame of analysis for political economy and international relations. As Moore proposed,

> in practice, society has come to be defined 'operationally' either as units identified by anthropologists as 'cultures', not always with explicit criteria, but duly recorded as separate

entities in the Human Relations Area Files, or as coterminous with national states, which, though they may not be truly self-subsistent, do mostly get represented in the United Nations, and do form the principal takers of national censuses and assemblers of other aggregative and distributive social quantities. (Moore, 1996: 480)

Diffusion, Expansion and Incorporation

In this tradition, the elaboration of the world-system as a unit of analysis was not 'an exception that confirms the rule', as Go (2014) concedes. It was pledged to the global as a holistic-and-relational construction inaugurated in American sociology by Moore. However, the world-historical perspective elaborated by world-systems analysts offered an important antidote to Parsons' a-historical understanding of the social system. Moreover it provoked a paradigmatic shift from methodological state-centrism, since nations had to be placed within systemic processes operating at levels 'beneath' and 'above' the nation-state (Wallerstein, 1974: 390). For Hopkins and Wallerstein, the modern world was a living historical system with its multiple temporalities, its spatial organization, its onset, development and possible end. Yet it was profoundly Eurocentric (Hobson, 2012). It implied the view that the world has become 'global' only when the West managed to incorporate the Rest within a single world-system. Modernity, as a self-expanding capitalist system, was thought of enlarging its space by violent or consensual processes of inclusion and simultaneous peripherization of new areas, peoples and resources. In this narrative of expansion and diffusion, the incorporating and self-expanding 'whole' (the West) is active, transformative, modern; the outside to-be-incorporated (the Rest) is passive, stagnant, traditional. In a sense, the former is the subject of history, the latter its object.

This narrative structure persists in histories of globalization, even though the reasons for this expansion vary and the spacetime coordinates dramatically change according to those who think of globalization as an original phenomenon of modernity and those who see it as a characteristic of the last five decades of the configuration of the world. Wallerstein restates this overwhelming logic of historical thinking when he affirms that the geography of the globalizing forces of capitalism can be deduced from the geometry of global commodity chains:

> The historical geography of our present structure can be seen to have three principal moments. The first was the period of original creation between 1450 and 1650, during which time the modern world-system came to include primarily most of Europe (but neither the Russian Empire nor the Ottoman Empire) plus certain parts of the Americas. The second moment was the great expansion from 1750 to 1850, when primarily the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, southern and parts of Southeast Asia, large parts of West Africa, and the rest of the Americas were incorporated. The third and last expansion occurred in the period between 1850 and 1900, when primarily East Asia, but also various other zones in Africa, the rest of Southeast Asia, and Oceania were brought inside the division of labor. At that point, the capitalist world-economy had become truly global for the first time. (Wallerstein, 1999: 21)

The geometry of global commodity chains derives its significance from relationalism as a methodological option with which to think the global. As Hopkins and Wallerstein clearly put it:

our acting units or agencies can only be thought of as *formed*, and continually re-formed by the relations between them. Perversely, we often think of the relations as only going between the end point, the units or the acting agencies, as if the latter made the relations instead of the relations making the units. Relations, generally, are our figures and acting agencies are our backgrounds. At certain points, in conducting the analyses, it is of course indispensable to shift about and focus on acting agencies; but I think we too often forget what we have done and fail to shift back again. (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1982: 149, original emphasis)

Relationalism within this holistic frame reduces the fallacies of replicability as a mechanism of social change, now conceived not at the level of the single state, but at the level of the system.

Differently from Wallerstein and Hopkins, Charles Tilly's historical sociology suggested a different methodological option. Tilly (1984) endorsed 'encompassing comparison' across states and 'societies' as a way to avoid formalist rigidity involved in assuming the state as a unit of analysis. He suggested that the analysis of inter-societal processes lifted the scale of sociology towards a world-historical understanding of both the inter-state system and capitalist modernity. This derivative understanding of the global remained less explicit about how to formalize the world as a unit of analysis, and partly reversed the epistemological hierarchy between the part and the whole in favour of the former. Yet Tilly shared with Wallerstein the Eurocentric explanatory frame that associated the understanding of the world as an integrated whole in the narrative of the Rise of the West. As Brenner remarks:

the primary geographical units of global space are defined by the territorial boundaries of states, which in turn constitute a single, encompassing macro-territoriality, the world interstate system. The national scale is thereby blended into the global scale while the global scale is flattened into its national components. […] the global and the national scales are viewed as structural analogs of a single spatial form: territoriality. Wallerstein's approach to world-systems analysis entails the replication of a territorialist model of space not only on the national scale of the territorial state but on the global scale of the world system. (Brenner, 1999: 57–58)

From the perspective of the coloniality of method, the notion of incorporation conceals the colonial gaze and neutralizes the colonial difference by obscuring non-Western, non-capitalist agency and the critical appreciation of colonialism as a historical process of large-scale and long-term social change. Incorporation expresses a function performed by the system to adapt its structures to the pressures generated by its own inner historical contradictions. The critique of the dynamics of the fall of the rate of profit that Marx had seen as a long-term trend, is resolved by re-articulating in space the possibility of re-establishing highly profitable conditions for accumulation through the inclusion of cheap colonial labour and natural resources into the enlarged cycle of accumulation. Yet, incorporation, that accounts for colonialism as a large-scale/long-term relation, works as a reductionist hyponym of the colonial. Incorporation overrides colonialism by reducing it to a function within capitalism. It gives prominence to exploitation, domination and the formation of hierarchies, but it also neglects and underplays the historical possibility of non-Western, colonial, post-colonial, and decolonial agency and the way these agencies

co-produce social change in heterogeneous meta-geographies other than the core–periphery structure. Agency, as per Hopkins' claim, becomes over-determined by the relations that produced it. But this assertion conceals the fact that the same relation, as an object of analysis, is presumed to be analytically neutral and operates in such a manner, whereas it is not neutral at all. The historical agency described in the dynamics of the colonial relation implicitly coincides with the dominant subjects, classes and groups that are mirrored in the hierarchies of existing power relations.

Asymmetries, Agencies and Relations

The adequacy of Eurocentric diffusionism and its related concept-formation protocols has been effectively confuted in the vast intellectual field of anti-Eurocentrism in many interrelated ways. From a methodological point of view, the overall effect of the critique of diffusionism has been the rupture of its core presumptions; the breaking up of the bond holism-and-relationalism, the disentanglement of relations from the whole as well as from the parts constituting a definition of the whole. Relations produce entities which do not possess any essentialist trait. Relations, rather than inner properties, determined the emergence of capitalism and modernity as world significant long-term/large-scale processes of historical and social change. Nonetheless, the global as a holistic construct does not provide a single over-determining unit of analysis to be comprehended. The global is rather understandable as a singularity open to multiple conceptualizations.

This disentanglement has disclosed divergent ways of adopting relationalism in sociological thinking. But this disentanglement is both a departure from the previous articulation of the global in the context of modernization and globalization theories, as well as a surreptitious reaffirmation of some of the most enduring tenets of Eurocentrism in social theory. This is particularly the case where historical sociology ends up reiterating the assumption that the transition to modernity remains fundamentally a European phenomenon, an assumption buttressed by the sociological paradigms of multiple or alternative modernities.

Sanjay Seth (2007: 335) provides a fruitful entry point for us to explore the ambiguities inherent in the attempt to reformulate the methodological and theoretical approach to the conceptualization of the global as a by-product of constitutive long-term/large-scale relations. He explicitly compares historical sociology and its study of global modernity with postcolonial theory and its political concern with pluralizing modernities:

> 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. […] 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. (Seth, 2007: 335)

Historical sociology aims at explaining the Rise of the West, or the transition to capitalism, or the breakthrough to modernity. Here, the global is understood as the result of a dialogical exchange between the East and the West, with the West acting as a borrower of Eastern resource portfolios, both material and ideational (Bala, 2006; Hobson, 2004). Elsewhere, the interconnections of geo-historical paths between more 'advanced' regions of the world economy, due to diverse responses to cultural, institutional and socio-economic civilizational needs and pressures, contextually defined but interconnected at a world level, are considered (Parthasarathi, 2011; Pomeranz, 2000; Wong and Rosenthal, 2011). In these accounts, relations include non-Western agency, yet the heuristic problem of explaining societal divergence in terms of fluctuating power differentials between advanced zones of the derivative global space, limits the relevance of this agency only to those dominant social groups located outside Europe. In this sense, the coloniality of method allows for the relevance exclusively of those non-Western agencies that could compete with the West on the terrain of modernization, and concur to form modernity by means of the conscious or unintended outcomes of the responses they provided to the interaction between global connections and local needs and pressures. So the relevance of non-dominant agencies is relegated to the effects they produce in terms of pressures that exist locally, and considered only in their vertical dialectics with modernizing power, rather than historically existing in a multiplicity of otherwise ignored relations of social co-extensiveness.

Moreover, while these explanatory/narrative approaches share the tendency to neutralize forms of non-dominant agency, at the same time they also sterilize the transforming potential of existing epistemologies of otherness by never questioning the heuristic apparatus derived from the threefold conundrum of the breakthrough to modernity, the Rise of the West and the transition to capitalism. As Bhambra (2014) remarks, this strategy limits its scope to providing new data to confute or support existing narrative structures, yet precludes the theoretical possibility of engaging with the elaboration of not-yet-existing structures of meaning and narratives where qualitatively new data can be produced, elaborated and placed.

Postcolonial theory, conversely, sees modernity in terms of a discursive formation through which the rest of the world was simultaneously subjugated and relegated to the role of Europe's binary opposed Other(s). Against this Eurocentric bias, first explored by Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, both postcolonial theory and the paradigm of decoloniality affirm the reciprocal historical, social, cultural and identitarian co-formation and co-determination of binary hyperreal constructs, such as colonizer/colonized, in order to dismantle the diffusionist logic that is implicit in conceptualizations of the global in terms of centres-and-peripheries. This epistemological critique is twofold. On the one hand, it is affirmed that not just the dominant accounts offered by the social sciences, but also the concepts through which such accounts are fashioned, have genealogies which 'go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4). On the other hand, 'colonial subjects, even subaltern, or marginal and silenced, are able both to actively appropriate, re-elaborate and transform institutions, practices and knowledges received and to interpellate alternative, indigenous, knowledges and epistemologies' (Seth, 2007: 335). As Kapil Raj puts it, this shift in emphasis means rethinking the colonial relation by postulating that 'being colonized and having agency are not antithetical' (2013: 344). Achille Mbembe makes this point when he affirms that the threshold from asymmetry to annihilation is necropolitical:

an unequal relationship is established along with the inequality of the power over life. […] Because the slave's life is like a 'thing', possessed by another person, the slave existence appears as a perfect figure of a shadow. In spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. […] Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another. (Mbembe, 2003: 36)

Postcolonial counter-histories mistrust the hegemonic construction of whatever master-narrative as well as those universalizing understandings of the world that attempt to conceal their site of enunciation. Castro-Gomez has conceptualized the geo-cultural nature of the geopolitics of knowledge to denounce the self-concealing epistemological strategy that Western social and historical sciences have adopted in their attempt to construct a *science of society*. Castro-Gomez makes explicit the 'hubris of the *point zero*', that is, 'the illusion to create valid knowledge about the world only if the observer situates himself on a neutral and objective platform of observation that, at the same time, cannot be observed by any other observer' (Castro-Gomez in Cedeño and Nolla, 2012: 68). According to Fernando Coronil (2000), this ability to hide the partiality of universalism is the hallmark of the underlying transformation and resurgence of Eurocentrism under the semblances of 'globocentrism'. The disarticulation of the image of Europe as a geo-historical construction integral to a precise spacetime location, does not imply the automatic demise of the hegemony of the discursive and analytical frame that legitimated its superiority, since 'the deterritorialization of Europe or the West has been followed by their, less visible, reterritorialization within an elusive image of the world which hides transnational financial and political networks, socially concentrated but geographically diffused' (Coronil, 2000: 103). The 'global', as such, resuscitates suspicion when the problem of constructing a heuristically valid unit of analysis for world-historical processes translates into an uncritical conceptual and terminological continuity with the Eurocentric genealogy of the global turn. World history and, more recently, global history (Eley, 2007) practice a concept of the global that does not go beyond a polycentric cartography of networks, processes and connections. On the contrary, a sociological reconstruction actively engaged in the elaboration and formulation of what is to be intended when the 'global' is invoked as a theoretical premise, a methodological attitude, and a qualifier for research questions, necessitates either a critique of the Eurocentric bias surreptitiously persisting in existing conceptualizations of the 'global', or an effort to push the sociological imagination along the paths of methodological formalization and epistemological foundation disclosed by a postcolonial, connected, post-ethnocentric understanding of the 'global'.

Conclusion: A Planetary Imagination for Global Historical Sociology

Bhambra (2014) proposes to conceive the global not as a condition of possibility to conceptualize large-scale/long-term processes, but rather as a by-product of 'the histories of

interconnection that have enabled the world to emerge as a global space' (2014: 155). At the same time, she subverts the assumption that globality is the result of the transition to modernity, and she thinks the global as an 'always/already there'. Bhambra's proposal conveys an aporia: it simultaneously holds the static logic of the 'always/already there' with the dynamic process-like logic of the historical emergence of the world as global. This aporia, I contend, is not the fall-out from an intrinsic problem of concept formation. Rather it derives from the historical condition of transitional (in)adequacy that the global expresses in the context of the inability of the Western conceptual archive to attune itself with the need to decolonize social theory and to expose its architecture to non-Western and post-Western histories and concepts. The predicament of the global is a privileged locus of terminological analysis for rethinking the grammar of sociology. Its ambiguity calls for an exploration of the limits of the sociological imagination that gird world-historical analysis.

Spivak captured this discrepancy between the vocabulary of social sciences and the reconfiguration of the post-colonial world. She wrote that the global is inevitably associated with the idea of making the world a controllable spacetime. The global suggests the ability of the subject to *figure* the world she/he inhabits: a figure endowed with plastic, visual and geo-historical determinants that provide the subject with the coordinates to encode a presumably intelligible non-subjective and objective alterity. Against this she proposes that

> the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say 'the planet, on the other hand'. When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition. (Spivak, 2003: 72)

The planet is thus the epistemological transfiguration of the methodological figure of the global. It interrupts the continuity between the situated Western thinking-subject that presumes to be the unique model of rationality, historically the bearer of the sociological imagination, on the one hand, and the world as the reified spacetime wherein such a subject locates long-term and large-scale historical processes of social change, on the other. Planetary imagination exceeds the established colonial social fabric of spacetime and makes the coordinates that define the specific, colonial situatedness unfamiliar, uncomfortable and uncertain. This destabilized condition renders the global a space contested by other, non-Western understandings of the world as a singular spacetime from alternative standpoints. The latter are diversely situated in the present hierarchy of the geopolitics of knowledge, but are nevertheless endowed with their own alternative narratives, distinctive conceptualizations and alien theoretical grammars. It follows that the global as a significant unit of analysis is irreducible to an emergent spatiotemporal envelope produced and reproduced by processes; nor is it the ultimate and overall geo-historical entity that generates processes.

The 'global' here stands as a negative limit: a horizon to theorization. As such, it traces the transient threshold from where the impossibility of unambiguous definitions imperceptibly slides into the possibility for transgressing and unthinking the Eurocentric boundaries of historical sociology. The global as methodological limit translates into the

heuristics of the methodological attitude towards the global; that is, the endeavour to move beyond sociology's parochialism in disguise towards what remains outside the borders of the colonial conceptual archive of the West, and resists conceptual and terminological homogenization. This implies enlarging and democratizing the foundations of global historical sociology. But such an objective also necessitates a movement in the opposite direction, evoking a predisposition to make the conceptual grammar of sociology more permeable to multiple outside(s) and planetary other(s).

> Planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of such names, including but not identical with the whole range of human universals: aboriginal animism as well as the spectral white mythology of postrational science. If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. (Spivak, 2003: 73)

Far from being definitive or necessarily 'progressive', the predicament of the global mirrors the territory of uncertainty where the social sciences find themselves awoken from a 19th-century positivist dream turned into a nightmare of failed attempts to make the world fully transparent through the colonial gaze. It figures the specific condition of contemporary social theory, its transitionally adequate epistemological status of intelligibility, which is nevertheless able to expose current sociology to post-Eurocentric, de-centred, unexpected, and uncanny interventions that the coloniality of method makes otherwise invisible, irrelevant, and exotic. Thus the unit of analysis migrates towards the dis-unity of planetary understandings. This is a route that links the impossibility of fully thinking the worlds of historical and social planetary connections and disconnections in terms of an exhaustive spacetime singularity, with the awareness that this dis-unity is the premise for new regimes of theoretical and empirical validation. The latter are grounded in geocultural pluralization as well as in the possibility for reciprocal interpellations and frictions between overlapping, but irreducible, histories, explanations and conceptualizations.

Funding

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