The unbearable lightness of method
Concept formation in global social science

by Gennaro Ascione

From translation all Science had its off-spring
Giordano Bruno

1. *Introduction*

Four decades of radical criticisms against eurocentrism in Historical Sociology manifest today through a side effect: the allergy to elaborate a more adequate method enabling global studies to cope with the multiplex challenges coming from heterogeneous geohistorical as well as epistemological standpoints. To be sure, the task of placing new methodological cornerstones urges, even though it remains inexplicit. For it solicits automatic suspicion of neo-positivist «conspiracies» or «neo-colonialism» of knowledge whereas scrutinized from postcolonial, decolonial or post-Western perspectives. In turn, these same critical perspectives do not acknowledge their own inability to steam an appropriate methodology out of a pressing demand: to struggle against the prejudice that the instances they express are in fact exclusively confined to provincial, exotic or solipsistic particularisms, therefore, never as universalistic as the dominant ones. Here contradiction arises. that calls for theoretical formulation in terms of methodological problem. The problem is enunciated as follows: once agreed upon the world as a single yet multi-layered spacetime of analysis, *how* should research about large-scale/long-term processes of social change advance, in order to cope with the asymmetrical power relations that materialize colonial history through heterarchies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, knowledge, cosmology and ecology? To answer this

question, I cope with one particular issue among the many that this formulation raises: concept formation. In so doing, I draw from my previous researches and scholar exchanges in conceptual and terminological analysis (Ascione 2014; 2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Ascione, Chambers 2016; Ascione, Shahi 2015). The argument that follows systematizes these findings and proposes new pathways for further collective debate.

The argument develops in four steps. First, it formulates the limits of Eurocentrism in terms of methodological issues within the social sciences at large; second, it provokes unthinking the limits of classical conceptualization in Historical Sociology; third, it explores heuristic pathways in postcolonial and decolonial thinking; fourth, it formalizes six methodological directives toward a new protocol of concept formation for a new global historical social sciences to come.

2. Why *method,* how *theory: thinking in an age of transition*

Within Modernity, Eurocentrism was the ideological pillar that legitimized the inequalities and the disasters that the capitalist mode of production produced globally. Today, after the irruption of the pandemic that promises to function as a social regulator for the present future, it becomes clear that Modernity has entered a state of extreme insignificance and Eurocentrism has entered a state of extreme fragility. Modernity appears an unstable construction, either as an era or as an emancipatory ethos. We used to think that Modernity had its onset in 1492. Yet, we automatically accept that this temporal threshold is meaningful only *ex post*, afterwards, for at least three reasons. First, Christopher Columbus did not even know that he had landed on a continent unknown to European explorers, astronomers, cartographers and geographers. Second, the process of colonization took decades and decades to reconfigure power and institutions at the global scale before culminating with the British Empire overcoming the Chinese Empire, after the Opium Wars (1839-1860). Third, a geo-culture where Modernity accounted for the dominant global ideology to manage European centrality lacked until XIX century, when the social sciences were born co-extensively with the nation-state. Conversely, the world, synchronically, has come to acknowledge that something epochal happened in 2020. An

era of transition has begun together with the awareness of such a change[1]. The hallmark of this historical threshold is this: the idea that the modern subject, in other words the political idol of Scottish, English, French and German Enlightenment, can consciously act upon the present in order to move toward a better society, is not a priority anymore. The horizon of Modernity is, for the first time, regressive rather than progressive. Therefore, political change looks deprived of the participatory and emancipatory ethos that the ideology of the French Revolution had transformed into the mythology according to which sovereignty belongs to the people (Wallerstein ~~1999~~). However, this sudden and radical change happens with a very different pace from the *longue durée* that characterize the life-time of the structures of knowledge and their inner inertia (Lee 2010). It will take time to cope with the partial irrelevance of many of the debates that run through these times of transition; nonetheless, it would be naïve to cede to the temptation to throwing the baby with the bathwater.

The major issues at stake in the attempt to produce a global social science are still there: to elaborate adequate knowledges about historical social change; to rethink methodology; to relaunch the program of an equal and just society. Such a tension is even more challenging than before. For the reaction to the pandemic consists in the radicalization of capitalist power, command and control: the movement of people is restricted in unprecedented ways for sanitarian rules, while capital forces cheap labour to stay or to go, where profit and the international division of labour needs it to stay or to go. In the realm of explanation, colonialism fades out, as if it was a luxury good of theoretical consumption even though racial discrimination exacerbates everywhere across the globe. In the realm of the politics of theory and the philosophy of praxis, methodological nationalism strikes back, hitting hard against interconnections, transnationalism and

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[1] The notion of «Age of Transition» refers to the way World-Systems Analysis conceives it, that is, a period of prolonged global structural instability. This notion is based on the research about global social change that took place during the decades between 1945 and 1990. World-Systems Analysis forecasted that the world will have entered the ultimate instability after 2015. Here, instability is not understood in general terms, rather under specific circumstances and analyzed through four main vectors: the interstate system, the accumulation of capital, global inequalities, the structures of knowledge. See Hopkins and Wallerstein (1997) and Arrighi (2006).

global analysis. Fear makes theory and theorists willing just to go metaphorically or materially home into the claustrophobic space of the nation-state: its national institutions, its parochial disciplinary histories, its abuse of comparative logic, its blindness to constitutive relations, its exclusive linguistic community, its belligerent rhetoric, and its deafness to fragile subjectivities.

Methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism are strictly interdependent, being the State the privileged unit of analysis in the hegemonic knowledges that legitimized Western dominance (Hobson 2012). This methodological hegemony moves in the opposite direction than the spread of critical globalization studies that animated Sociology and International Relations over the last decades (Applebaum, Robinson 2006; Sassen 2005). Eurocentrism prescribes that the State is the institution that characterizes the West as the single civilization that prompted the most advanced form of political organization in History. The latest version of this Eurocentric master-narrative articulates in space: it assumes that Western institutions were born in modern Europe and spread throughout the world allowing different cultures to form so-called «multiple modernities» in different geo-historical locations. Or, complementarily, the latest version of the same Eurocentric master-narrative articulates in time: a «late», «advanced» or «second» modernity would be on its way (Beck *et al.* 2004; Eisenstadt 2006; Macé 2020). This synchronical and diachronical way to reframe Western dominance through new attributive features of Modernity grounds the assumption that Europe (and by extension «the West» as hyperreal construction) is *prima inter pares*[2]. This assumption has been a major focus of criticism in the social sciences (Bhambra 2007; Di Meglio 2008). The customary genealogy of the «global» does not tell the full story of the conflicts of ideas in the context of the struggle for the redistribution of wealth and the decolonization of knowledge in the second half of XX century. The intellectual history of «the global», in fact, 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. Such a sociological

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[2] Chakrabarty (2000), drawing from Jean Baudrillard (1991), considers Europe a hyperreal entity, a cultural projection and ideological construction that works *as if* it existed in historical reality even though it actually performs no more than a ghostly ontological presence in space and time rather than enjoying geohistorical existence as such.

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 decoloniza-tion 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 dif-ference into the realm of theory production since the 1980s is responsible for the disentanglement of relationalism from holism in methodological thinking about the global (Ascione 2016b). Based on this critical acquisition, global social science has to move forward and elsewhere now.

Eurocentrism results still pervasive in social thinking today, however from a weaker position. Samir Amin (1988, 166) pro-vided an early, comprehensive and still working definition of Eurocentrism:

> Eurocentrism is not, properly speaking, a social theory, which integrates various elements into a global and coherent vision of society and history. It is rather a prejudice that distorts social theories. It draws from its storehouse of components, retaining one or rejecting another according to the ideological needs of the moment.

Two elements stand out in this general definition. First, the meta-theoretical level where Eurocentrism locates makes it a para-digm rather than a theory[3]. Second, the self-transforming ability of Eurocentrism enables it to respond with a sufficient degree of flexibility to the push towards changing organizational needs that change across changing historical times. The former explains *why* Eurocentrism informs social sciences even if several perspec-

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[3] Here «meta-theoretical» recalls the original terminology, introduced by David Hilbert in 1905 within the realm of the philosophy of science, and further developed by Kurt Gödel in 1931 in the realm of formal logic, rather than the conceptual drift postmodernism and deconstructionism caused since the late 1970s. Simply put: a me-ta-theory is a theory whose subject is another theory rather than an element, being it within a set of other elements or standing alone.

tives move radical criticisms against it. The second explains *how* Eurocentrism reshapes its own ideological attributes, in order to resurface even in non-Western geo-historical and cultural locations through several forms of indigenization of Western theories or new allocentric ethnocentrisms. The awareness of the constant recombination of these two elements shades light over the central theoretical problem at stake: Historical Sociology, Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies are very effective in dismantling *why* Eurocentrism raises constant and reiterate challenges to critical thinking, and regenerates itself constantly. Yet, they are much less effective in elaborating *how* social sciences should allow global studies to cope with multiplex challenges coming from heterogeneous geo-historical as well as epistemological standpoints, which these three fields of research brought to the forefront of theoretical debates as well as empirical research.

In fact, the globalization of concepts, notions and categories modelled upon European history and experiences encounters growing limits in its ability to explain, narrate or represent other geo-historical contexts and experiences (Burawoy 2005; 2008). Yet, between the specific inquiry into concept formation and the globalization of Western knowledge there exists a lag that remains unexplored. Those who work systematically on the way concepts in social science emerge underrate the problem of the cross-cultural articulation of existing categories in non-Western worlds (Knorr-Cetina 2007; Kontopoulos 1994; Marradi 20007; Marradi, Fobert Veutro 2001; Morgan 2014). Those who work on non-European knowledges are recalcitrant to move beyond the critical discourse over methodology and engage directly with the effort to formalize alternative ways to design concepts and assess their adequacy (Akiwowo 1988; 1999; Alatas 2006). This is why the debate over the methodology of concept formation does not go beyond two sharable premises: the constitutive relevance of conversations between perspectives that arise in different places at different times; the will to work for a common language for the social sciences, informed by a common set of values and concerns (Outhwaite 1988; Ersche 2014).

Nevertheless, frontier debates about methodology that explicitly cope with non-Eurocentric concept formation take place in the disciplinary sub-field of Historical Sociology for International Relations. This is because International Relations Theory, more than disciplinary Sociology, has become more and more exposed

to a global challenge: the shifting equilibrium in global power where ideological challenges to the hegemony of the West raise from non-Western powers and their structures of knowledge. These challenges put mounting pressures on the Western conceptual archive and its adequacy, because they are backed by millenarian strong, well-established, studied and respected complex philosophical traditions such as Indian, Chinese or Islamic, that are not less prestigious than the modern Western or the ancient Greek ones. The same reverence does not apply, for instance, to indigenous colonial knowledges. Because of such pressures, a mounting intellectual move devotes intellectual energies and institutional resources to question the hegemony of the strongest among the foundational Western assumptions: the strict hierarchical determination that moves downwards from ontology to epistemology to methodology (Lacatus *et al.* 2015). During the last ten years at least, the debate lives within a well-defined system of theoretical coordinates. On the one hand, Patrick Jackson (2015) restates the position that Bevir and Kadar (2008) safeguard in the field of Political Science. Jackson believes in the Cartesian-Kantian philosophical foundations of social science and reassert the cogency of the demarcation problem, that is, simply put: to establish what is science and what is non-science. For him, the ontological positioning of a theory logically precedes the construction of theory itself. Thereby, he restricts the realm of consistent epistemologies, which, in their turn, allows for a limited number of methodological options acceptable as valid. On the other hand, Bennett (2015) subverts Jackson's hierarchy of abstraction that descents from ontology to method. Barkin (2015) enhances the argument made by Bennett, and suggests that, rather than being ascribed to inner properties, epistemological frameworks are conceivable as relationally constructed, and selectively intertwined by multiple methods pragmatically mobilized. By looking to this articulation from a global perspective, the coherence of each framework looks grounded into the axiomatization of a restricted number of assumptions that are geo-historically determined and thus potentially questionable, even though plausible or consuetudinary. Thereby imagining a non-ontological space between epistemology and methodology where heuristics becomes relatively free. Free to engage with non-Western knowledges as it will be explained in the section 4.

Any attempt at elaborating a method rather than criticizing it solicits automatic suspicion of neo-positivist «conspiracies» or «neo-colonialism» of knowledge whereas scrutinized from post-colonial, decolonial or post-Western perspectives. This allergy to method is not unreasonable: it derives its *raison d'être* from the deconstructionist matrix of critical thinking, on the one hand, and from the indigenous knowledge genealogy of decolonial thinking, on the other hand (Harding 2011; Steinmetz 2013). These two reasons converge against the XIX century positivist bias from which social science draw its own Western and colonial unilateral authority over its own theoretical «Others».

In turn, these same critical perspectives do not acknowledge their own inability to steam an appropriate methodology out of a pressing demand: struggling against the prejudice that the instances they express are in fact exclusively confined to provincial, exotic or solipsistic particularisms; therefore never as universalistic as the dominant ones. Here contradiction arises that calls for theoretical formulation in terms of methodological problem. The problem can be enunciated as follows: *how* should research about large-scale/long-term processes of social change be conducted once agreed upon the world as a single yet multi-layered spacetime of analysis, in order to cope with the asymmetrical power relations that materialize colonial history through heterarchies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, knowledge, cosmology and ecology?

Not all the critiques to Eurocentrism conspire to think globally. Often they are engaged in a different effort, which consists in either recovering and rewriting the histories that Eurocentrism had silenced and misrepresented, or allowing marginalized and repressed social groups, subjects and knowledges to reshape history, theory and politics through a new privileged emphasis on their formerly excluded voices and experiences (Raj 2013; Fan 2016). This entire, constantly in-the-making, intellectual planetary heritage is indispensable for a non-Eurocentric, non-hegemonic global historical social science. Nonetheless, it is not enough. Eurocentrism survives in the *forma mentis* that the social sciences inherited from XIX century sociology, its language and its lexicon. Not only because Eurocentrism forces the social sciences to select only those histories and experiences that are compatible with the need to re-establish, time after time, the centrality of the West. Not only because the canonical concepts

of the social sciences draw from these experiences and these histories, therefore replicating themselves in a circular movement that pretends to discover while it is actually confirming its own partial and questionable premises. Rather, in the relation between histories and concepts.

Such a movement between histories and experiences, on the one hand, and concepts, on the other hand, involves some philosophical aspects and some sociological ones. One way to grasp the way they interrelate is thinking through the *concrete-abstract* movement. Concept formation in global social science conjures to let the concrete-abstract movement involve a linguistic dimension that sociology had constantly ignored. Sociology has confined the problem of other languages in the social sciences to the derivative approach that anthropology, ethnic studies, or Area Studies, share with comparative linguistics. It has never taken seriously the importance of placing linguistic otherness at the centre of its theoretical concerns (Connell 2000). Concept formation for global social sciences, instead, contends that the way concepts are formed through the words that allow the social sciences to think the world represents a circumscribable task whose relevance hides into the manifold n-dimensional space of the sociological imagination. It consists in a rational endeavour aiming at transgressing the limits of Western social thinking. This rational endeavour focuses on how to think the relation between the abstract and the concrete: the more the concrete-abstract movement remains an unquestioned part of the sociological imagination, the more Eurocentrism keeps operating underneath, preventing new ways of thinking to emerge.

This is why *how* to form concepts needs to be explained. Once made explicit, it needs to be reimagined. Once reimagined, its potential can be unleashed in order to explore new pathways and finally move toward the formalization of a different methodological approach to conceptualization.

3. Familiarizing with the methodological unfamiliar

According to Antonio Gramsci, when freed from evolutionism and positivism, the core theoretical problematics of Sociology share the same epistemological issues with Political Science. For both, however non-coincident forms of knowledge, the elabora-

tion of concepts and the use of categories relate to a wider *Weltanschauung* (Gramsci 1966, 80), which induce to overlapping methodological questions. In his attempt to systematize the methodology of concept formation from the vantage point of Political Science, John Gerring (2001) elaborated a framework whose quintessential logic perfectly expresses how Eurocentrism reproduces itself every time the issue of classification comes to the forefront of the social sciences at large. Gerring adopts eight broad criteria to assess the adequacy of a concept: familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility. Yet, he conceives these eight criteria entirely within the horizon of the universal applicability of Western notions. He does not consider the problem of scaling up geo-culturally, in order to dialogue with other non-Western experiences and ideas. All of these eight criteria are questionable. Yet, for the purpose of the current argument, the criterion of «familiarity» is the relevant one because familiarity alludes to an intuitive dimension of language and meaning. This dimension hides beneath what Noam Chomsky (1995) named «deep structure», in his paradigm of Transformational Grammar[4]: two interlocutors communicate at the superficial level of peaking but the meanings their communication conveys is deeply stratified and partly obscure, tacit, abyssal. Communication at deep unspoken strata is possible only thanks to an implicit agreement upon certain unexpressed rules of engagement and interpretation that privilege some intentions over others. Such shared intentions are automatically privileged because familiar.

Familiarity – in fact – operates a double control over the possibility to transgress the borders of Eurocentrism or, vice versa, to render those borders more porous, in order to allow exchange with epistemological «Others». Familiarity establishes a temporal boundary and a spatial one. Together, they operate jointly an *a priori* control over whether a concept is adequate or not. The temporal boundary consists in a conservative bias. According to this bias, there exists a hierarchy between the old and the new: the already accepted sounds familiar, the never heard results unfamiliar. This guarantees to Western concepts an

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[4] In extreme synthesis, Transformational Grammar is a part of the research program in Generative Grammar that aims at uncovering the hidden rules of communication and meaning in natural languages.

automatic comparative advantage. This advantage is not simply a historical by-product of academic colonialism as well as of epistemological imperialism (Lander 2001). It is a by-product of Popperian, falsificationist epistemology that, as Lakatos (1976) and Feyerabend (1975) demonstrated in the realm of the philosophy of science, resists change even when adequacy appears largely compromised. The spatial boundary pertains to the civilizational divide. It safeguards the ascribed superiority of the concepts elaborated within the Western tradition and its languages, over the concepts that belong to other locations and practices. Any attempt at using concepts from other languages, traditions, or geohistorical locations, produces perturbations and instinctive annoyance. The former, temporal boundary, reasserts the episte- mology of XIX century positivism. The latter, spatial boundary, relegates non-Western notions to the exotic territory of cultural particularism.

Once acknowledged, this condition is not easy to overcome. It mortifies new forms of conceptualization as far as a narrow theoretical imagination is concerned. Things begin to change when the social sciences at large think the whole world as the privileged unit of analysis. This move to the world as a single unit of analysis implies a direct confrontation with the meth- odological issues raised by Terence K. Hopkins in chapter 7 of the collective book entitled *World-Systems Analysis Theory and Methodology* (1982). For World-Systems Analysis is the seminal approach to the critique to the hegemony of methodological nationalism in global studies. Hopkins introduced the problem herewith by exhorting the reader to an intellectual counterintui- tive detour: «Forcing ourselves to think in ways we are not used to...» (Hopkins, 1982: 146). In his dense phrases that are under scrutiny here, Hopkins first resumes the usual way Sociology as a discipline, as well Historical Sociology as a subfield, thinks to concept formation. This way of thinking consists in the rela- tion that Sociology, the social sciences, and epistemology take for granted between the abstract and the concrete. Usually, he explains, we move from the level of concept (what is considered «the abstract») downward to the level of indicator (what is con- sidered «the concrete»). Through such a descending movement, we include layers of attributes that, one by one, enable us to visualize the concrete presence of the object we want to study in the real world; finally, we materialize what the abstract concept

captures in theory. The opposite, yet complementary, movement returns inductively from the indicator upward to the concept, by dropping these attributes and sublimating the concrete into the abstract. According to this classical sociological view, which Hopkins epitomizes with Paul Lazarsfeld, such a vertical double movement comes together with a horizontal one. This horizontal movement takes place at the level where concepts lay. On such an abstract layer, there exist the network of concepts. Hopkins invokes Carl Gustav Hempel's analytical philosophy to figure the abstract layer he wants to question: «The imagery of a theory as a network of substantive concepts (nodes) and logical relations between them (threads), floating, as it were, above a world of reality to which the theory is linked by 'rules of interpretation'» (Hopkins 1982, 146). How does Hopkins rethink the *concrete-abstract* from here, then?

A digression is due in order to enter the counterintuitive logic in Hopkins' methodology. According to Hopkins and Wallerstein, the only significant unit of analysis for long-term and large-scale processes of social change at the global level is the world-system. In extreme synthesis, a world-system is a spatiotemporal entity whose extension corresponds to the geography of the commodity chains of economic exchange that interconnect the multiple places of production into a single integrating «whole». A single overwhelming principle of social action rules this whole: in the modern world-system, this principle is the endless accumulation of capital. What is important to understand is that the world-system is a whole that enjoys a higher degree of reality than its constitutive parts, which, conversely, lose their own significance if taken in isolation from the whole. Different world-systems have existed in history, yet the capitalist mode of production is the only one that covered the entire world, to the point that the global world and the modern world-system came to coincide when exploration, conquest and colonization where geographically completed[5]. Digression ended.

Now, Hopkins questions the significance of the concept-indicator interpretation of the abstract-concrete movement, that is, «the

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[5] The year 1902 with the «conquest» of the South Pole marked the beginning of the extinction of the terrestrial frontier to conquest from the colonizer's imagery (see Blaut 1993). Yet, The Berlin Conference among the major European imperialist powers and the political division of Africa among the imperial European states had de facto materialized this process already in 1884-1885.

inclusion-relations in terms of the part-whole relations» (Hopkins 1982, 147). The usage of the word «relation» is ambiguous, here. We need to go deep into Hopkins' formulation and make it explicit. The word «relation», in the previous textual citation, conveys two distinctive meanings within the same short utterance, which has the form of an equational sentence[6]. When coupled with «inclusion», the word «relation» designs the abstract level where Lazarsfeld's classical sociological view locates the interaction among different concepts in a Hempel-like ontology. Differently from this classical view, the second part of the same Hopkins' equational sentence involves an alternative understanding of the word «relation»: relation means what makes possible the existence of the «part-whole» as a single conceptual unit. This means that Hopkins extrapolates «relation» from «inclusion-relations» in order to stress the autonomy of relation in this particular context of conceptualization for sociological thinking. «Relation» possesses a stronger ontological status than the two entities that it produces in the act of connecting them. Therefore, reading Hopkins's utterance against the grain clarifies the proper location of relation in social thinking: not a concept among other concepts, but a category of thought: something wider, which makes concept formation possible. In Hopkins' words:

> 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 1982, 149).

The part and the whole are ontologically distinct. The whole is not the sum of all its parts. Rather, the set of relations, which forms and re-forms the parts. Why? First, because even though the whole and the parts are inextricably intertwined, the whole is prominent over the parts: this is the quintessence of holism, not only in World-Systems Analysis. Second, the part is not something given, nor an essence, nor something fixed, nor existing out there as such: the part is a theoretical process to

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[6] A nonverbal phrase that expresses meaning without a predicate.

be conceived, defined, named and analysed. The part does not relate to being, rather to becoming. Its definition is not static; it implies movement. It is not an ontological essence, rather a process of historical-social change. As such, the part, which is a process in Hopkins's understanding, cannot be concrete: it is abstract. The whole, instead, which consists in the totality, is concrete: that is, more concrete than the parts. Therefore, Hopkins subverts Lazarsfield's notion of the abstract-concrete movement.

Nonetheless, it would be an epistemological error to conceive the whole in terms of empirical reality: the concrete (the totality, the whole, the world as a unit of analysis) does not refer to the «real world»: the concrete is a form of abstraction itself. The concrete is abstract too.

> The part-whole directive gives an utterly different set of directions. It says to keep moving out by successive determinations, bringing in successive parts – themselves abstract processes – in continuous juxtaposition and in this way form the whole, which you need for interpreting and explaining the historical changes or conditions under examination (Hopkins 1982, 147).

Operationally, relation is the category that provides the condition of possibility for thinking the part-whole; semantically, relation qualifies the hyphen (-) that symbolizes the connection in «part-whole». The hyphen herewith calls for further specification of what this particular connection expresses. The hyphen can signify different kinds of relation. For example, the hyphen in the attribute «non-Western» does not express a proper relation. Analogously, yet in a different manner, the hyphen in the attribute «geo-cultural» does not qualify a relation between geography and culture: it couples the two realms in a single one. Instead, the hyphen in «part-whole» as well as in «core-periphery» is a matter of method. As such, it involves a procedure of conceptualization and defines a way to conduct research[7]. How?

The relevance of appropriating the deep meaning of the relation that the hyphen symbolizes in the concept of core-periphery has major implications for our ability to look inside how notions work and how to form concepts, particularly when they are formed by two words that become a single unity. For four reasons. First, because terms couple in multiple, different

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[7] This methodological stance has been rarely further developed, except by McMichael (2000).

ways, and each way orients research in one direction or another[8]. Second, because the juxtaposition of words to form concepts is a viable path to cope with difference in order to maintain an acceptable degree of pluralism whereas a synthetic option would irremediably sacrifice meanings[9]. Third, because the juxtaposition of words across multiple cultural, civilizational and linguistic borders is a viable path to cope with the spaces of untranslatability[10]. Forth, because another viable path is to move further from juxtaposition and pass from a concept formed by two or more words to a single-word synthetic concept expressed with still another, different, word. In any case, the words we chose to form concepts always become different in sense and meaning from those previously used as single term.

Therefore, for instance, in «world-system», the world connotes the whole as historical formation; the system connotes the whole as theoretical construct based on its constitutive relations. In core-periphery, the core is a socio-economic part where the international division of labour locates specific activities such as capital concentration or most remunerative segments of production, research and development, while the periphery is another socio-economic part where the international division of labour locates the activities other than the one associated with the core. The world-system is a concept that designs the whole, a totality, the unit of analysis. It is more concrete than core-periphery. Core-periphery designs a set of processes not entirely reducible to a spatial matrix, where the international division of labour designs one among the relations between different parts.

The part of the whole is a process, not an entity existing *in se* and *per se*. The part is a process that we are called to study through an adequately formed concept or set of concepts, whose

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[8] For example, there exists a crucial difference between thinking in terms of world system rather than to assume the world-system as a unit of analysis, or talking of center and periphery, rather than analyzing processes through core-periphery as a singular intrinsically relational spacetime (see Wallerstein 1991). Analogously, for the notion of core-periphery, see Wallerstein 1979.

[9] Grosfoguel's elaboration on Anibal Quijano's concept of coloniality is exemplificative of this strategy. For Quijano (1991), coloniality originally expressed a complex matrix of power in the interstate system, across race and class. For Grosfoguel (2005, 85) the colonial matrix is «the entanglement of multiple and heterogeneous hierarchies of sexual, political, epistemic, economic spiritual and racial forms of domination and exploitation».

[10] For a general approach to the topic, even though limited to Western modern languages, see Cassin (2014).

formulation does not exclude taxonomical creativity, linguistic contamination and cross-cultural dialogue, rather than conceive it merely in terms of a region in world economy named India, Latin America, Southern Europe, or even Italy. Nor to a notion such as class, gender or status group.

4. *From ontology to heuristics: histories, concepts, relation*

Hopkins' methodological directive enables us to step into an epistemological territory where, paradoxically, the elaboration of concepts to think the world forces us out of either strict geographical locations or strict sociological notion. The vertical-horizontal architecture of the movement from concept to indicators, that Hopkins demonstrated inadequate for global studies, cannot grasp the historical processes of global social change. The world as a single unit of analysis calls for concepts grounded upon a different sociological imagination as far as the constitutive relation between the parts and the whole is concerned.

This suspension creates an intellectual space of its own. Thrown in this alien methodological landscape, the sociological imagination experiences an uncanny, fluctuating condition of disorientation. Hopkins rescues the reader by invoking Marx. Hopkins asserts that the methodological choice he is proposing «is the one that Marx discusses in his very brief and elliptical remarks on *The Method of Political Economy*» (Hopkins, 1982: 147). In the aforementioned brief essay, Marx made explicit that the concrete is the synthesis of multiple determinations of the relations in which they are seized, in which they participate.

The reader will notice how Hopkins resonates with Marx, but also how Hopkins transforms Marx's notion of society, that is, the whole of the relations between humans, into the notion of system, that is, the whole of the relations between parts[11]. On his turn, Marx inherited from Hegel the notion of integrated totality. For the idealist philosopher Hegel, totality is

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[11] It is important to note that single part and a single human do not coincide, from a methodological point of view, except in the case of methodological individualism such as in the marginalist critique to Marxian political economy. Therefore, Hopkins' methodological shift from society to system provide a useful tool to subsume Coleman's methodological individualism in Sociology rather than dismissing it as irreconcilable (Kontopolous 1993, 75-101).

a metaphysical whole endowed with ontological presence. For the materialist social scientist Marx, this whole is society as a conceptual construction. For the historical sociologist Hopkins, society is meaningless unless we think the world in terms of an integrated spacetime co-produced by long-term and large-scale processes of social change. This is why Hopkins and Wallerstein (1982, 111) affirm that:

> The arena where social action takes place and social change occurs is not «society» in the abstract, but a definite «world», a spatiotemporal whole, whose spatial scope is coextensive with the elementary division of labor among its constituent regions or parts, and whose temporal scope extends for as long as the elementary division of labor continually reproduces the «world» as a social whole.

Hegel, Marx, Hopkins and Wallerstein assume totality as an intrinsic limit of abstraction. The ontological presence of totality informs the presumed adequacy of the concepts aiming at studying the parts of the whole. Yet, the meaningfulness of totality comes at a cost: a theoretical *escamotage*. Either Hegel, or Marx, or Hopkins, or Wallerstein, affirm that the concrete is itself abstract, but they keep on deploying the concept of abstract-concrete as terminological invariant: they theoretically act *as if* the abstract (the part) would be *less concrete* than the concrete (the whole), even though, in fact, the concrete (the whole) is abstract too, however to a lesser degree. There follows that the movement toward the concrete, the totality, the whole, the system, the world, cannot but be purely asymptotical: it is meaningful only if one conceives it in terms of a constant tension towards an unknown reality. In other words, the abstract-concrete describes the permanent condition of incompleteness wherein the continuous transformation involved in historical social change can be conceptualized. Therefore, in front of such an awareness, the methodological problem of concept formation shifts from ontology to heuristics as the researcher, the social scientist is fully aware of the transitional heuristic meaning of what is the ultimate frontier of epistemological concreteness, which escapes any pure ontological essence.

This shift is crucial. It allows Western thinking to dialogue with other knowledges that are not structured in terms of hierarchy between ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Moreover, this dialogue does not necessitate the complete dis-

missal of the theoretical tools of the social sciences. Confronted
with this transformed self-understanding, Western social science
matures the awareness that the world is not only the geohistori-
cal space that the capitalist world-system came to englobe by
waves of successive incorporations until it covered the entire
surface of the planet. The world is also the vast spacetime of
multiple epistemologies that Eurocentrism had marginalized and
silenced. The vast majority of these epistemologies co-habited a
global space that pre-existed the full colonization of the world
by Europeans at the turn of XIX century. These epistemologies
continued to exist in recessive forms, regardless of the epistemic
violence that hegemonic knowledges blatantly materialized against
their survival[12]. Theoretically, thus, the «world» of the capitalist
world-system is one among other parts of the whole, and these
parts are either regions or processes, but also knowledges whose
existence interpellate global social science to register them and
understand their relevance.

The problem, then, becomes *how* to explore these parts,
which had been previously ignored. Three pathways follow from
here: 1) rethinking the relation between histories and concepts;
2) thinking the relation between concepts across cultures; 3)
unthinking the category of relation.

1) *How* to rethink the relation between concepts and histories?
Gurminder Bhambra contends that «it is the process of reshaping
shared narratives in light of what is presented as new data and
accounting for why it is understood as new that opens up the
space for further insights about historical and social processes»
(Bhambra 2014, 150). She problematizes the colonial relations
of power underlying the criteria for selecting the histories from
which sociological concepts are formed. Bhambra faces the
inadequacy of Eurocentric historiographical knowledge devoted
to long-term and large-scale processes available to sociological
imagination. She adopts the theoretical strategy that Immanuel
Wallerstein had adopted since the 1970s when he found in the
French historian Fernand Braudel new perspectives and materi-
als to source. Her historiographical new point of departure is
Sanjay Subrahmanyam's Connected Histories research program.
Subrahmanyam's methodological directive consists in assuming
that the world is full of connections whose existence precedes

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[12] On the concept of «epistemic violence» see Spivak (2010).

the relations that the researcher co-produce when establishes that different parts (in the specific epistemological meaning we are using it here) are intertwined. Connections are already there, and they set the condition of possibility for relations to emerge. This pre-condition of pre-existence of connections before relations allows, in fact, for the discovery of relations across spaces and times, events and processes, actors and structures. According to Subrahmanyam (1997, 762): «If we ever get to 'them' by means other than archaeology, the chances are that it is because they are already plugged into some network, some process of circulation». Bhambra transposes Subrahmanyam's assumption into sociological thinking, and enriches its significance by maintaining that the approach she baptizes *Connected Sociologies* «starts from a recognition that events are constituted by processes that are always broader than the selections that bound events as particular and specific to their theoretical constructs» (Bhambra 2016, 347). The methodological option of connectedness in Historical Sociology directly interpellates Postcolonial theory, by exposing the historical and colonial nature of the asymmetries that run along the relations existing between different standpoints, and the power differentials that sustain the authority to establish the procedures and rules of validation of knowledge. It is important to stress that the new data gathered through elaboration and measurement, and the new histories retrieved from the silenced colonial archive, are equivalent from a strictly epistemological point of view. They are both theoretical artifacts[13]. They both put existing concepts in tension. They both serve the purpose of spatializing Western concepts[14]. They both interpellate non-Western concepts that claim their own adequacy and are able to transform the parochial Eurocentric conceptual architecture of the social sciences. Thereby, when concepts draw from non-Western, indigenous or subaltern Western knowledges, they immediately recall the issue of translation.

2) *How* to rethink relation between concepts across cultures? Here translation is not a strictly linguistic operation, rather a cross-cultural dialogue that assumes the single concept as a

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[13] On the construction of historical facts see Shapin (1994). For a global and anti-Eurocentric assessment of the same problem, see Bala (2006).
[14] The notion of spatialized historical concepts draws from Reinhart Koselleck's (2002) practice of conceptual history. Nonetheless, the problem of cross-cultural dialogue is absent in Koeselleck's approach.

theoretical *locus* of tension, amongst other civilizational sites of negotiation where asymmetries of power materialize in *tropoi*, or even stances, that are transient because historically determined (Ivekovi 2010). Xiaoyong Qi (2014) has analysed some of these asymmetries and has paid particular attention to the flows of conceptual exchange across the West/East border of global social theory. She asserts the relevance of Eastern concepts, mainly Chinese, showing the way the vocabulary of the social sciences could become, according to her, more adequate to global social change. For her, the way consists in exploring the spaces of non-coincidence between two concepts that would engage with the same process. This non-coincidental space, however, is not neutral; therefore, the very problem of choosing between the two forces to think to two non-reconcilable alternatives. Qi maintains that in certain cases, Chinese concepts are not only more effective in explaining Chinese social change. Rather, she claims universal applicability for them, since «they tend to be concrete rather than abstract and sensitive to the relational properties of association» (Qi 2014, 2). From a methodological vantage point, Qi conceives the reciprocal interpellation among concepts across cultures, by reducing the explanatory logic of the asymmetries of power in concept formation to ideational influence. Influence is a quite fascinating notion in the realm of the history of ideas. Particularly when exchanges across civilizational borders are concerned (Goonatilake 1998). Moreover, from a historiographical point of view, influence is useful to disclose new territories of inquiry that had been previously ignored: influence is a clue in historical investigation that is able to uncover hidden historical records. Unfortunately, though, in terms of the methodology of concept formation, influence limits the inquiry between philological research, on the one hand, and thematic analogies, on the other hand, whose outcome consists in the struggle for genealogical primacy between civilizations or cultures. A struggle whose quintessence consists in competing ethnocentrisms, eurocentric versus sinocentric in this case, thereby avoiding the systematic approach to cross-cultural translation as an explicit tool for conceptualization. Influence is a deflective way of characterizing relations (Ascione 2016a).

Rather, the relevant methodological problem consists in qualifying relations between concepts in a different manner.

3) *How* to unthink «relation», then? Decolonial theory offer some frontier insights to this question. In their latest work, Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 1) mobilize several non-hegemonic knowledges to this conundrum: from the Andean region to ancient Persia, they explores concepts that help to overcome the limits of the Western heuristics of relationality. They rediscover the notion, in Spanish language, of *vincularidad*. For them,

> *Vincularidad* is the awareness of the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos. It is a relation and interdependence in search of balance and harmony of life in the planet. As such, *vincularidad*/relationality unsettles the singular authoritativeness and universal character typically assumed and portrayed in academic thought. Relationality/*vincularidad* seeks connections and correlations.

Here «relationality and/or *vincularidad*» expresses a heuristic approach that is different from the way we have graphically expressed relation through the hyphen symbol. The slash here signifies a juxtaposition that does not form a new single concept out of the two words used, rather it designs a space where the two concepts used overlap but, at the same time, it leaves open two distinctive paths emanating from each of them. The slash, here, powerfully symbolizes the colonial border that separates and connect different logics that are not mutually exclusive, yet never coincident nor symmetrical[15]. «Relationality» refers to the Western conceptual archive. *Vincularidad* conjoins either indigenous knowledge, or the Spanish colonial idiom, or the constellation of marginalized Renaissance pantheistic knowledge; these three are all forms of knowledges, (parts, in the methodological terms elaborated throughout this entire argument), which became subaltern during modernity. Indigenous knowledge about the planet were, and still are, destroyed or relegated to primitive ecological phantasies. English overcome the Spanish language. «Vinculum» disappeared as a word and as a category: Latin, that was the dominant language of Science, became obsolete; the gnoseological world behind the transformation of the Aristotelian notion of relation into the pantheistic notion of vinculum was destroyed

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[15] Border thinking as a gnoseological strategy was developed first by Mignolo (2000) on the base of the analysis of the different linguistic languages colonial, Marxist and indigenous used in their rhetoric by the Zapatistas in Mexico during the 1990s.

in Europe by the interplay of three powerful ideologies: the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the scientific method (Ascione 2020).

Vincularidad expands relationality and transforms the latter in something other than what the hegemonic modern knowledge made us familiar with. It involves the idea of the world as an integrated living organism rather than a systemic whole governed by the overwhelming singular logic of the accumulation of capital. Methodologically, relation/vinculum invokes enhanced translation strategies across languages and logics that are able to enrich the conceptual lexicon available to the social sciences. For this reason, let us follow Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 166) traveling from ancient Persian language to Andean Kechua, through the noun «Runa».

> *Runa* was and still is conceived in relation to and in *convivencia* (a literal translation would be «living-with-other-living-organisms», but the term is generally translated as «coexistence» or «conviviality») with *huacas* (deities, entities of the sacred sphere), *sallqa* (all living organisms), and the *Apu* (the tutelary spirit that inhabits the snowed peaks of the mountains). These organisms are all weaved together, for the metaphor of *tejido* (weaving) is commonly invoked to express *convivencia* and *vincularidad* (translated as «relationality») (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 166).

The lexicographic movement described herewith could appear a circular one: from relationality to *vincularidad* back to relationality. Yet, relationality we come up with after this process of elaboration results different; it is augmented by the exploration into the semantic field inhabited by the tensions that translation enhances. Mignolo and Walsh provide a strong case for applying a more articulated formulation of the issue of cross-cultural translation in methodological terms. Such a formulation has developed during the last forty years, beneath the surface of the steady crystallization of the dichotomy staged by eurocentric hegemonic knowledges, on the one hand, and their counter-part, which Wallerstein (1997) brilliantly baptized «eurocentric anti-eurocentrism».

Such a more articulated cross-cultural translation of concepts remains invisible to most of the social sciences, while it is more immediately urgent in the field of the sociology of law. Here human rights as well as indigenous rights continuously incur in definitional impasses that call for taxonomic solutions

since concepts serve the need to codify processes, groups and conditions, through particular words that candidate to become cornerstones for building jurisdictional architectures that inform the life and histories of existing human beings. Often, in the modern multicultural states of the postcolonial world shaped by global migrations, cultural identity is framed in religious terms that condition identity politics, citizenship, socioeconomic conditions and cultural mediation. This is where the social sciences interface with the theory of inter-religious dialogue. For this reason, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's decolonial option in the sociology of law is methodologically relevant.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains that the process of exchange involves concepts across knowledges and cultures[16].

A diatopical hermeneutics is based on the idea that the *topoi* of an individual culture, no matter how strong they may be, are as incomplete as the culture itself. Such incompleteness is not visible from inside the culture itself, since aspiration to the totality induces taking *pars pro toto*. The objective of a diatopical hermeneutics is, therefore, not to achieve completeness – that being an unachievable goal – but, on the contrary, to raise consciousness of reciprocal incompleteness to its possible maximum engaging in the dialogue, as it were with one foot in one culture and the other in another, accounting for its diatopical character. A diatopical hermeneutics requires not only a different kind of knowledge, but also a different process of knowledge creation. It requires the production of a collective and participatory knowledge based on equal cognitive and emotional exchanges, *a knowledge-as-emancipation rather than knowledge-as-regulation* [Italics added] (Sousa Santos 2002, 48).

This proposal expresses a sharable commitment and formulates it in explicit manner. Nonetheless, the very last phrase in italics raises disagreement from a methodological point of view: it is not necessarily true that knowledge-as-regulation is alternative to knowledge-as-emancipation. Surely, it is true that the effort toward the elaboration of new concepts through cross-cultural dialogue requires participatory knowledge based on equality. Yet,

[16] De Sousa Santos appropriates diatopic hermeneutics from theologian Raimon Panikkar to cope with issues of space. Analogously, Immanuel Wallerstein appropriated the notion of Kairos from the theologian Paul Tillich, to cope with issues of time (see Wallerstein 2001, 155). Panikkar calls it «Diatopical hermeneutics because the distance to be overcome is not merely temporal, within one broad tradition, but the gap existing between two human topoi, 'places' of understanding and self-understanding, between two – or more – cultures that have not developed their patterns of intelligibility. Diatopical hermeneutics stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other without assuming that the other has the same basic self-understanding» (Panikkar 1979, 49).

regulation is the theoretical and political space where methodology intervenes. Regulation is precisely where the collective ability to create the conditions for conceptualization moves global social sciences towards equality, whereas equality is an objective to reach and not the illusory premise of European Enlightenment that hides the colonial eurocentric history of the modern capitalist world, which is the cause for global inequalities (Chakrabarty 2000). Making explicit the rules that regulate concept formation aims at rendering these rules openly debatable rather than leaving concepts free to fluctuate across unequal cross-cultural *tropoi* whose power differentials mortify emancipatory theory and practice *a priori*. The attempt at formalizing a method for concept formation does not mean to occlude thinking. It means placing a milestone along a route to trace collectively while walking by rather than placing a tombstone in the cemetery where the myriad of epistemic genocides of Modernity rest in anger.

5. *Formalization: six procedural directives*

Formalization, in this specific case, expresses the will to articulate a protocol of concept formation that enables active engagement with the process of deforming, informing and transforming existing notions for the social sciences or to creating concepts anew. Formalization, at this stage, involves six procedural directives.

1) The first procedural directive is genealogical. It pertains to the possibility of extending in space and time the genealogy of a concept. It sets out to produce a global cross-genealogy oriented to look into other civilizational and cultural conceptual archives. The aim is to find out if and how analogous conceptions exist and in what way they differ from those elaborated within European knowledge. This terminological analysis will put particular emphasis on the processes of construction and marginalization of otherness – that is, whatever does not conform to the colonizer's image of the world – which lies at the foundation of European-born notions. Its specific scope is to create a porous semantic field that works as a premise for the reciprocal interpellation of concepts across cultures, which allows alternative narratives, histories and experiences, rather than analysing the way notions relates or differ from each other.

2) Following such a global cross-genealogy, the second directive is more strictly semantic. It consists in resignification. Resignification alludes to a specific semiotic process, where concepts are lifted from their usual contexts and relocated within new realms of understanding. This strategy opens up new paths to sociological imagination and, at the same time, it calls for further interventions to clarify and outline the aim and adequacy of such proposed semantic slippages, overlapping, and coming to terms with the discrepancies between ongoing global transformations and the provincial existing vocabulary devoted to their understanding. For example, the attempt at using Asia or Border as method, exemplifies this path.

3) The third directive is epistemological. It consists in reconceptualization. It is the main, most synthetic and complex procedural directive. Reconceptualization can be oriented to enlarge the connotative space of the term as well as the historical-social dimensions it can legitimately claim to be referring to. Nonetheless, it should be noted, reconceptualization does not necessarily ends up in an incremental path. In fact, concepts can also result disempowered from reconceptualization and their adequacy, meaningfulness and scope, therefore reduced.

4) The fourth directive is taxonomic. Taxonomy, most of the times, is evitable. Unfortunately, very often, social theory indulges in taxonomy because of the pressures that capitalism puts on concept formation in the attempt to transform conceptualization in the production of academic branded terms to be sold, bought, grabbed, consumed, or imposed, by the global market of scientific idea, academic fashions, and intellectualistic simulacra. Nonetheless, when useful, taxonomy remains the most creative part in concept formation for the social sciences.

When resignification, reconceptualization or taxonomy result effective, the objective of transforming and improving the conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences is achievable; in this case, the possible reiteration of the new meaning or concept through theoretical praxis relatively stabilizes relevance and multiplies usages, disclosing new and unforeseen paths. Then, the collective use of concepts through research and teaching produces canonization of the associated notions. Whereas, instead, resignification or reconceptualization are not possible or effective, and taxonomical intervention is not even an option, there results that the concept in question does not return to the status of

legitimation it had before undergoing these procedures. It may appear increasingly inadequate and obsolete.

5) Therefore, the fifth directive is dismissal. It relates to philology as a powerful politics of theory. Inadequacy and obsolescence need to be motivated through thought and debatable rationales as much as adequacy does. Moreover, the changing linguistic, political and historical context for why inadequacy and obsolesce occur needs to be explained and the rationales argued, so that the concept can be accurately stored: in the future, obsolescence and inadequacy can become anachronism, and anachronism may transform into a new, renewed or different adequacy in another spacetime responding to other organizational needs. This thoughtful dismissal contributes to construct a conceptual archive other than the Eurocentric conceptual archive we inherited. The conceptual archive of the global social science will belong to all the different subjectivities and forms of knowledge that had participated in its collective process of knowledge production, with their respective understanding but also reciprocal irreducibility.

6) There follows that the sixth directive consists in living with untranslatability. It relates to communication in its deepest sense. It means assuming the working hypothesis that not always translation is possible. Nonetheless, an equally cogent working hypothesis complements untranslatability: it consists in the assumption that, instead, communication is always possible. Even when conversation terminates in a *cul-de-sac* and exchange materializes in nothing but a pneumatic vacuum. For even when the space of impossibility speaks the language of conceptual silence whereas worded concepts are expected to talk the language of reciprocal understanding, communication is not interrupted. It is just suspended: an interlocutory pause of indeterminacy or a silence to be accurately registered in the uninterrupted dialogue that flows among humans across the secret routes of the long-term and large-scale processes of planetary knowledge formation.

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The unbearable lightness of method. Concept formation in global social science

Four decades of radical criticisms against eurocentrism in historical sociology manifest today through a side effect: the allergy to elaborate a more adequate method enabling global studies to cope with multiplex challenges coming from heterogeneous geohistorical as well as epistemological standpoints. To be sure, the task of placing new methodological cornerstones urges, even though it remains inexplicit. For it solicits automatic suspicion of neo-positivist «conspiracies» or «neo-colonialism» of knowledge whereas scrutinized from postcolonial, decolonial or post-Western perspectives. In turn, these same critical perspectives do not acknowledge their own inability to steam an appropriate methodology out of a pressing demand: struggling against the prejudice that the instances they express are in fact exclusively confined to provincial, exotic or solipsistic particularisms; therefore never as universalistic as the dominant ones. Here contradiction arises that calls for theoretical formulation in terms of methodological problem. The problem is enunciated as follows: how should research about large-scale/long-term processes of social change be conducted once agreed upon the world as a single yet multi-layered spacetime of analysis, in order to cope with the asymmetrical power relations that materialize colonial history

through heterarchies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, knowledge, cosmology and ecology? To answer this question, the paper herewith faces one major issue among the many this formulation raises: concept formation. The argument develops in four steps: formulating the limits of Eurocentrism in terms of methodological issues within the social sciences at large; unthinking conceptualization in historical sociology; exploring heuristic pathways in postcolonial and decolonial thinking; formalize six methodological directions toward a protocol of concept formation for global social sciences.

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