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COMMENTARY

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Standpoint theory and middle-range theorizing in International Sociology

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Abstract

This paper responds to Julian Go's Lecture "Thinking against Empire. Anti-colonial Thought and Social Theory." It proceeds in two parts: I first follow Go's invitation to read and reread Mabel Dove Danquah and Frantz Fanon and explore what their work contributes to our understanding of state-forms. I then examine the terms of Go's invitation more closely. I contrast Go's juxtaposition of imperial sociology on the one hand and anti-colonial sociology on the other hand, with the broader range of theoretical traditions and methods, which a practice-oriented sociology of sociology and an international history of sociology would highlight. I raise the question what "standpoint" adds to the authors Go discusses and the broader range of scholars who have engaged with post-colonial contexts in their research at this point in time. Calling for consideration of the anti-colonial standpoint is a particular choice, which has a distinctive heritage in Hegelian-Marxian projections of the social whole and is in tension with either deep exploration of particular thinkers or the middle-range theorizing that Go also seems to endorse. Defined at a level of abstraction that is "above" (or underneath) actual conversations in a range of fields and subfields, it can appear as a "test" for scholars who have long engaged with post-colonial contexts, which can have unintended consequences when coupled with the institutional power and asymmetric insularity of Anglo-American academia.

KEYWORDS
critical theory, field theory, post-colonial theory, standpoint theory, state theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

I am reading Julian Go's lecture "Thinking against Empire" (Go, 2023) as an invitation to read and reread Mabel Dove Danquah and Frantz Fanon and other thinkers associated with anti-colonial thought. My response proceeds in two parts. I first follow a specific interpretation of Go's invitation and explore what Dove and Fanon contribute to an international political sociology that builds on critiques of methodological nationalism but takes institutions seriously. I am interested in what their work offers for a typology of state forms, which I would argue deserves renewed attention despite a problematic history. The political analysis of post-colonial societies by authors like Dove, and the concept of the "comprador bourgeoisie" in Marxist and post-colonial thought, highlights the role of transnational dependencies in particularly subtle ways, which demand analysis for all kinds of states.

In a second part, I return to Go's lecture to reflect on the choices I have made in my comments and, through that, on the precise terms of the invitation Go has issued. Within research informed by attention to empire and postcolonial contexts, standpoint theory is a particular choice, the advantages and disadvantages of which we could consider further. Go's emphasis on the anti-colonial standpoint is in tension with deep exploration of the concerns of particular thinkers. It could also be in tension with middle-range theorizing, which he also seems to endorse, and with a deeper engagement with ongoing research on and especially in post-colonial societies.

2 | PART I: ANTI-COLONIAL THOUGHT AND POST-NATIONAL THEORIES OF THE STATE

2.1 | Whether and why to typologies states

The analysis of different types of forms of governance has a long tradition in political thinking. Indeed, it could be said to be an important element of the origins and the very nature of political thinking.

Allow me to put on the table some of the thoughtful objections that can be raised against the entire project of typologising forms of governance. The question "what kind of form of governance is this?" (directed at any particular social context) and the specific version "what kind of state is this?" tends to focus on an object that is stabilised for investigation as if frozen in time. In a recent contribution Atef Said (2021) has called this mode of analysis "presentist" but I note that the procedure can in principle also be applied to historical cases and might then be more appropriately called "synchronic".

The analysis of different state types also tends to focus on any state as a separate unit. The assumption of separation is in tension with the widely accepted advantages of relational approaches in a range of theoretical traditions, including systems theory, world systems theory, network theory, field theory, actor-network theory and a connected histories approach; this assumption of (national) separation was never realistic as historical sociology of state formation in Europe has shown (Albert, 2016; Sassen, 2006) and as analyses focusing on colonial histories have also made clear (Bhambra, 2014; Mitchell, 1991a; Said, 2021). The assumption of separation is arguably less defensible now given new forms of transnational connections and ongoing transformations of systems of governance (Jessop, 2000).

There is another fundamental problem for any theory of the state, which can have particularly problematic effects in typologies of states: States claim autonomy and efficacy but are not in fact entirely - or even very - autonomous and efficacious. Scholarship on the state has long grappled with the problem as to how to take these claims seriously as an essential element of what states are and take seriously the real effects of these claims without, however, taking them at face value (e.g., Mitchell, 1991b).

When this problem is not solved, it creates especially problematic effects for when states are compared. Given the close historical connection between the formation of western states and dominant theoretizations of states, a failure to face that challenge has created a tendency to compare the claims of some states to the reality of other states in some versions of political science.

But, despite these problems, I would argue that the comparative description of state forms remains an important task. Asking about types of states and types of governance does indeed tend to focus on an object that is stabilised for investigation as if frozen in time, but I would argue we cannot wish away the tension between synchronic (i.e., structuralist) and diachronic (i.e., historical) analysis and the specific and distinct advantages of the former. What can seem like "presentism" allows us (at some analytical cost, to be sure) to highlight the structural and structuring features of states, which have a capacity to pose constraints as they process claims and resources in patterned ways relatively independently of other factors.

As for the problem of separating the state as a unit of analysis and what we might name the problem of naivité (with regard to the problem of taking states' claims at face value), we need to look for ways of constructing typologies that consider transnational ties and are not naive. I would also note that both of these problems are more manageable (and I mean this in the sense of "we do have to manage them") when we try to develop a language for the comparative description or contextual explanation of different cases. They become hidden, baked-in and particularly pronounced if and when typologies of states are used to explain a range of outcomes in a causal-linear manner.

There are analytical costs in some forms of typologizing; there are also costs in not typologizing: The rejection of (western) "methodological nationalism" has in some authors led to a neglect of national institutions and indeed sometimes institutions altogether. Theoretically, some versions of post-colonial theory have encouraged a shift to the analysis of cultural discourses, which can be institutionally under-specified. Looking to social movements and global imaginaries, some analysts seem also to assume that "upshifting" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2020) from any particular issue to a global opposition between the oppressors and oppressed is always positive in political terms.

Politically, important rights and protections are won and lost at the level of (national) states, which is highlighted by political changes in (among many other examples that could be named Hungary, India, Brazil, USA, Britain, and Poland. I return to some of the thinkers discussed by Go to look for resources for a comparative postnational analysis of state structures.

2.2 | Mabel Dove Danquah and Frantz Fanon on the comprador bourgeoisie

Mabel Dove Danquah' writings appeared in the decades between 1930 and 1970 under various pseudonyms, spanning journalism, fiction and commentary. Her commentaries provide a sharp cultural analysis and critique of West African society, a critique that places her objects of analysis seemingly effortlessly and consistently in an international colonial or postcolonial context at the same time as in a national and an African context. Her columns provide social and political commentary on a wide range of issues including women's education and employment, divorce laws, and the extreme violence of apartheid in South Africa.

Active as an organizer for nationalist causes, she was also critical of nationalist elites. In a passage that Go also cites (Dove Danquah does not elaborate much further in works documented in Dove, 2004), she makes the following remarks about Kwame Nkrumah following a coup against him in 1966, which she calls a "healing tonic", a chance for moral and social improvement: "Kwame Nkrumah, his gang, and his followers, taught people that the best type of citizen in the community was the man who lives in luxurious surroundings, owned long expensive cars, whose palaces or flats were so furnished that the visitor feared to walk on the soft carpet or sit on the comfortable chair. […] Their greed, cruelty, cowardice and callous indifference to pain and suffering show them to be what they really are—ignoble despicable contemptible, men and women totally unfit for public serve. Their sole motive in pushing themselves into political power was gain and profit" (Dove, 2004, p. 118).

This rhymes with Fanon's analysis of the "national bourgeosie of underdeveloped countries" (Fanon, 1961, p. 150), which he describes in very harsh terms, while, crucially, situating it in the transnational context of an opportunity

structure that leaves global power structures intact and fosters intermediaries or "middlemen": "The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket" (Fanon, 1961, p. 150). "The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent, and it will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner (Fanon, 1961, p. 153).

Economically this bourgeoisie profits from activities that perpetuate inequality and dependency: "Find[ing] it impossible to set up factories that would be more profit-earning both for themselves and for the country as a whole, they will surround the artisan class with a chauvinistic tenderness in keeping with the new awareness of national dignity, and which moreover will bring them in quite a lot of money." Fanon uses the example of Latin America to warn newly decolonizing nations of the dangers of a lack of agricultural reform and an overreliance on luxury tourism (Fanon, 1961, pp. 153–155).

Politically, he notes the alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the party; as a tool of the bourgeoisie, the party prevents an independent role for the masses and the establishment of new, truly post-colonial geographical and political centers. He observes the way racial distinctions are used by anti-colonial elites somewhat cynically to secure positions that were previously held by colonial elites; this, he argues, contributes to racialised conflicts among Africans themselves. The party can turn from being a tool of the bourgeoisie to a tool of tribalism, which in turn can provoke ethnic separatism (Fanon, 1961, pp. 155–162).

The concept of the comprador bourgeoisie appears earlier in Mao (1926) and Trotzky (1927) but in these texts the analysis focuses on how these groups stand in the way of revolutionary movements in contexts like China, whose "semi-colonial" status is discussed. Later authors like Dove, Fanon, Guha (1997), Desai (in Patel, 2014) and others add a discussion of its role in and after successful anti-colonial revolutions, and at different historical moments (Salem, 2018); they also add a cultural dimension to their analysis.

2.3 | The varying dependencies within state-fields

These analysis of national bourgeoisies and states highlights the ways in which transnational resources and constraints structure political relations within a state. This transforms well into a set of questions that we can ask of any case, without implying an answer for any case.

We can try to bring this together with an understanding of the national state as a field in the terms of the approach developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1994): In this view, state has some relative autonomy to the extent that it can invite actors to claim field-specific stakes, which are to some limited extent independent from other stakes and which mediate access to other stakes to some extent. In sketching states as institutions that have an effect of their own without being separate from their environment, this conception is similar and seems compatible with an emphasis on the "structural selectivity" as an effect (Jessop, 1999). Claims to these stakes are enacted through exposing various forms of "pollution" or heteronomy. We can then ask how states vary according to what sources of heteronomy structure the ongoing struggles in the field (Krause, 2018).

In Bourdieu, the relative autonomy of fields was originally conceived mainly in national terms. With regard to the state, it is the autonomy of a state from "its" classes and social groups and from the economic field. Building on the relational foundations of Bourdieu, subsequent work has considered fields on other scales (Go, 2008; Go & Krause, 2016; Krause, 2014; Sapiro, 2013). It has also been extended to consider how fields on different scales co-exist (Buchholz, 2016; Fourcade, 2006; Krause, 2018, 2020). Expectations of autonomy have also been reduced significantly.

We can then ask how national states are structured by resources from other fields, including national and transnational, mediated also by the national state's dependency on social groups. This sounds terribly formal and abstract and cannot be fully developed here. Readers might rightly object that part of the insight and the joy provided in

reading Fanon is the insight and joy we find also in other Marxian authors who offer historically specific conjunctural analysis, like Gramsci and Hall.

But, writing in 2022, I think we can very well imagine an analysis of the current British state and its relationship to the British bourgeoisie and to different types of "foreign" investment that retains some of the virtues of Fanonian analysis while also placing the case of the British state in a comparative framework. Such a comparison could take Fanon's analysis and his analysis of the Algerian case seriously without overlooking the differences between foreign capital in a post-colonial and foreign capital in a post-metropolitan context or the enduring international legacies of actual colonialism.

3 | PART II: STANDPOINT THEORY AND THEORIZING IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

I have discussed the contribution of intellectuals engaged in anti-colonial struggle to the analysis of state forms. Including a focus on transnational dependencies can improve our understanding of state forms in all parts of the world. When we start thinking the state from previously neglected cases, drawing on authors who have analyzed them, we gain a more symmetrical concept for all types of dependencies.

In a second part of my comments, I want to observe the response I have given so far to Julian Go's lecture in light of some alternatives. I have taken up his invitation to engage with thinkers associated with anti-colonial struggle but have done so in particular and selective ways, reflecting I think not just my personal interests but also an underlying multi-valence of Go's text - one of the criteria sometimes given for why a text should be "canonical." Go brings together different elements, which I don't think are necessary to bring together and I want to try to discuss some of these elements with a view to highlighting choices we might have in terms of taking his invitation forward.

I have accepted many elements of Go's invitation: I have accepted (but it is of course ridiculously presumptuous on my part to say so) that Fanon has a social theory. I have followed Go's invitation to group authors together under the label "anti-colonial thought"—in my case Dove and Fanon. Because of the historical reality of colonialism and the historical reality of the anti-colonial struggle, which captured the minds of generations of writers and intellectuals, this is a meaningful label, as Go's analysis of the themes of the self, of solidarity, and the global also shows. That this label is meaningful, that it reveals shared concerns might not be a surprise for any macro-sociologist but I take the micro-sociological challenge to macro-sociology seriously enough to find it worth noting.

I have gone the route of middle-range theorizing, which Go also endorses (Go, 2023, p. 9). In any domain, certainly in political sociology, this type of theorizing has to learn from critiques of eurocentrism, modernization theory and other elements of the imperial heritage of the social sciences. In that sense, it presupposes a debt to what Go would call the standpoint of anti-colonial thought. My critical comments—critical in the sense of highlighting alternatives to my own path and to some elements of Go's - will focus on the status of individual authors in theorizing, the opposition between imperial and anti-colonial sociology, and on the notion of "the standpoint".

I would firstly point out that it I do not think it is necessary (empirically in terms of the available writing strategies and analytical strategies or normatively) to group authors as Go seems to suggest when he writes "rather, if we are to redo the canon at all, we should overcome the existing "Mt. Rushmore" model which valorizes individuals and instead attend to broader sets of ideas or traditions, organized around distinct themes" (Go, 2023, p. 12), or to group them in this particular way.

I have been critical in the past of a focus on "important theorists" (Krause, 2012, 2021 84–101) and am generally inclined to agree with Go and others (Bargheer, 2017; Connell, 1997; Puwar, 2020) in their critique of what we might call "authorization." But on the other hand, I must admit I have not fully gone beyond this in my own teaching of theory and I am not sure it would be entirely desirable or possible for me to do this. I am mindful also of what we might stand to lose when we focus instead mostly on "themes" and "traditions": We might lose the voices of individual authors, who respond to a specific world in the unit of "lifetime" and across a set of texts. Having read some

of the range of Dove Danquah's writing and some work about her, I am very aware that we miss a lot about what is interesting and also what is sociologically interesting about Mabel Dove Danquah not only in my own extremely limited discussion here but in any discussion that would subsume her under "anti-colonial thought." She has a clearly distinctive voice -this is not just a question of style-as an individual. Her work can be read in the context of discussions of gender, of Ghana, of urban life or of popular culture (Gadzekpo, 2005; Newell, 2017).

To call a focus on authors the "Mount Rushmore" model is a powerful visual framing, which provokes an almost visceral reaction and makes it sound immediately attractive to overcome it for me at least, but when we are asked to "instead attend to broader sets of ideas or traditions, organized around distinct themes" (Go, 2023, p. 12) we also risk devaluing a range of humanistic forms of expertise about texts, which I would not want to see devalued even within the discipline of sociology, which is not its most natural home. With that we might lose also respect for interpretative debates about texts and for previous interpretations of texts. There certainly is already a substantive body of secondary works on Fanon and Du Bois, for example, which we can learn from.

I have said that "anti-colonial" is a meaningful label or theme, but like any theme or label it comes with a particular decontextualization of the authors and of the cases that have informed their work. Henry Louis Gates's critique of Said's reading of Fanon points to some of the risks involved: "While calling for a recognition of the situatedness of all discourses, the critic delivers Fanon as a global theorist in vacuo; in the course of an appeal for the specificity of the Other, we discover that his global theory of alterity is emptied of his own specificity" (Gates, 1991, p. 58). I particularly appreciate secondary analysis that restores the importance of the original cases to work of authors circulating as theorists, such as Vasquez' recent analysis of the role of Mexico in and for Du Bois (Vasquez, 2022).

In this context of being appreciative but also wary of groupings and labels, I note that Go's notion of a standpoint adds additional weight to the label and I worry that the notion of the standpoint and the opposition between imperial and anti-colonial sociology might hinder a more open-ended interpretation of both the thinkers Go mentions and the range of other voices who have long engaged with post-colonial contexts in their own research.

I find Go's diagnosis overly homogenising in its construction of the two camps of "disciplinary imperialist sociology" and "anti-colonial sociology". His diagnosis also somewhat ironically seems based on a vision of what "sociology" is that excludes real-existing current Latin American sociology, real existing sociology in and of South Asia (Patel, 2014), the Arab World, long-standing contributions from area studies (which has a long history of being critical of itself and its enforced isolation), and the work of scholars associated with cultural studies and critical development studies in the UK (Puwar, 2020). When we look at contemporary sociological production itself from a global and transnational perspective we encounter a diverse set of overlapping fields, some of which have already come much further in addressing colonial legacies in their research than Go seems to acknowledge in the framing of his contribution.

I am not questioning here what Fanon or Dove add to social theory, but raise the question what "standpoint" adds to Fanon and Dove and to the range of scholars who have engaged with post-colonial contexts in their research at this point in time. Within post-colonial approaches and research informed by attention to empire and postcolonial contexts, standpoint theory is a particular choice, the advantages and disadvantages of which we could consider more.

Go certainly makes a unique intervention in debates within the philosophy of science, within a conversation between positivism and its various opponents, and among critical realists (inspired by Marxism, feminism and black feminism). But I must admit I have never quite understood the quest for foundations or what I would even call the flight into epistemology associated with the original project of critical realism, which Go builds on and extends. Critical realism seems to have been particularly attractive in contexts where either theory and theorists have developed relatively separately from research, namely the UK (see ESRC, 2010) or where a range of qualitative forms of inquiry have been put in an unusually defensive position (the USA).

Perhaps within standpoint theory, there are further choices. There seems to me to be a weak notion of the anti-colonial "standpoint", which entails routinely including questions about the legacy of transnational oppression and racialised hierarchies. But there is a deeper intellectual heritage to the notion of standpoint that we have a

chance to consider here. If I understand this correctly, standpoint-theory more specifically is in its origins a Hegelian project (brought forward by the modernization theoretical strands in Marx, tied to a sense of history unfolding as a whole toward the better, with the agent of salvation within the whole. The agent of salvation is understood in epistemic and in practical terms at the same time, which makes it more Hegelian than Marxist. This has always appealed to the left but has always also created problems, because of its wholism, its idealism, its links to notions of progress and in that if it was taken too seriously it could tend to be pre-empirical and pre-dialogical, that is not always open to or curious about findings about the empirical world or to the actual voices of those it identified as the source of the insight.

The history of sociology broadly understood shows the contribution of Marxist analysis of the commodity form which became most a standpoint theory in Lukacs, of standpoint theory in feminism and black feminism, and of post-colonial theory. But precisely when we consider knowledge production with a sensitivity to global inequality, we need to consider additional intersectionalities, which we might call inner-academic intersectionalities.

With the opposition between "imperial sociology" on the one hand and "anti-colonial" sociology on the other hand. Go strikes me as a heir to Adorno and Horkheimer programme for a critical theory of society, and he is indeed perhaps their leading heir. But like their opposition between "traditional" and "critical theory", the opposition between "imperial" and "anti-colonial" sociology seems to offer a sociology of sociology but does not really do so. It does not draw on the range of conceptual tools, which sociology offers for analyzing cultural domains and makes no allowance for institutional contexts, research practices, a theory of intellectuals or for symbolic and material struggles within fields. A practice-oriented approach would paint a much more loosely integrated set of practices, which are diverse along a range of axis and with are shaped also by diverse national histories.

Recognizing this diversity of research traditions is important in the context of the inequalities within the scientific field (see e.g., Beigel, 2014). The inequality between national fields of sociology, is linked to histories of colonial domination but the precise ways in which it is linked to these histories today is not reducible to an opposition of "imperial" versus "anti-colonial" content. Scholars in Latin America and Asia, for example, deal with a range of actual imperial legacies; they also find themselves in a subordinated position within the global field of science, where the US (and to some extent the UK mostly due to the power of its language and its journals) are in a central position. If scholars anywhere want to do work that is or is counted as "internationally visible", they face a journal system dominated by scholarly communities in the US and the UK (Beigel, 2014), who are at the least no less parochial than other scholarly communities. It is genuinely hard to learn about other contexts and master other literatures, so not all of this parochialism will be overcome by the commitment to anti-imperialism. The parochialism has as its effect an additional dimension of cultural imperialism, which are important to consider precisely as we are engaging the legacy of colonialism on knowledge-production itself. Reviewers can tend to ask what is generally relevant about non-US and UK cases; reviewers can also tend to enforce references to current conversations in the literature that they are most familiar with; reviewers can reinforce dominant versions of what it means to be "scientific" or "objective; but they can also tend to enforce specific, possible "metrocentric" (Go, 2013) notions of what it means to be "critical."

Go proposes to replace a standpoint theory based on what he calls "geoepistemic essentialism", which privileges thinkers based on their location of origin by a less essentialist criterion of whether "they embed the standpoint of relatively subordinated positions within global hierarchies of power" (Go, 2023, p. 13). But both versions engage at a level of abstraction that allows to jump over actual conversations in a range of subfields, which can appear to confront researchers with a sort of "test" before they qualify as anti-colonial (where the only alternative is "imperialist"). In fact, this "test" can seem *more* demanding when it is *not* based on a definition that is in some ways independent of the observer ("researchers with deep engagement with post-colonial contexts", e.g.,), where it is decided in advance who it is that should be listened to independently of what the observer has decided about the standpoint (and with that what the observer has decided about which power relations are most important to address in a given situation and ultimately where history is going). I note that these "tests", which would seem to be part of the defining contribution of a strong notion of the standpoint within a range of critical approaches, can have unintended consequences when coupled with the institutional power and asymmetric insularity of Anglo-American academia.

As my observations on state forms have shown as a good or bad example, middle-range theorizing and empirical research with and within anti-colonial sociology can be separated from the opposition between imperialist and anti-colonial social theory. Middle-range theorizing, or research, presumably takes us into specific areas of investigation, where we want to find connections (and disagreements) with the full range of colleagues, who have engaged with the reality of the range of post-colonial and the range of post-imperial contexts (and those that are not really either) from a range of perspectives. I think in a context where we need to both rethink epistemological legacies of empire and improve our knowledge by learning from a range of voices and cases across the world, there are good reasons to proceed in this way. If this is compatible with the identification of the anti-colonial standpoint, the question arises on what terms the standpoint can be combined not just with other standpoints but with other elements of theorizing and with other elements of diversity in sociological research in different contexts and traditions.

Like with other "epistemically radical" currents (Cole & Zuckerman, 1975), such as feminism and some versions of STS, middle-range theorizing and research will not be able to speak to all of the intellectual and political ambitions of the programme of anti-colonial thought. Yet, looking at the history of debates within feminism in recent decades, it seems that also within the scholarship most fully committed to taking the insights of feminist critique forward in science, there are debates to be had and choices to be made about how much to "standpointise" in a strong way, that is how much further to push into epistemology "behind" the actual-existing dialog between scholars, their materials and activists and how much to explore alternatives that speak more to the ways concrete practices are materially, situationally and institutionally located.

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