

A Postcolonial Approach to Social Science?



How can academia decolonize the social sciences? **Lay Sheng**, winner of the **2016 GovBlog writing competition**, explores the possibilities in his competition winning article.

It is a paradox that despite the many conceptual flaws of positivist social science, no new theories have been able to unseat its dominance. The postmodern critique, for example, attempts to generate particularistic accounts of social thought, while failing to devise micro-level theories that can contest the universal applicability of positivist knowledge (Storper, 2002). This essay will focus on recent works dealing with the “decolonization of social science”, by Uday Chandra (2013) and others, which are gaining traction as a critique of positivism. The problem of social science today is the weakness of contending theories to raise alternatives. One such project – postcoloniality in social science – is similarly held back by its methodological flaws.

Point zero

Postcolonialists are suspicious of the analytic neutrality claimed by positivist methodology. Positivist social science, for postcolonial scholars, is a project of imperialism disguised as a methodological objectivity that enables the constitution of universally valid truths applicable across space and time. This is what the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez (2007) calls “point zero”, a point of view that masks itself as an objective vantage point when, in fact, it can be situated and traced back to the specific terrain of western-centric scholarship.

No scholarship can successfully dissociate itself from biases located within heterogeneous social structures and cultural identities. Combined with this suspicion of the ‘west’, post-colonialists also seek to contest western-centric knowledge with the production of indigenous ones. The goal, according to postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), is to contest the “absolute ignorance of the majority of humankind” insinuated by positivist social science. In order to do so, postcolonialist academics encourage the production of knowledge not only by indigenous scholars, but from an indigenous point of view. The goal is therefore not merely to encourage cultural diversity in knowledge production, but to steer knowledge production away from the dominant western-centric mode of reasoning implicitly accepted across continents.



I am sceptical of such a grandiose project. Despite postcolonialism's attempt to promote the radical heterogeneity inherent in the 'colonized' subject itself, its proponents are unwilling or reluctant to concede that the subject-position of 'colonizer' is just as radically heterogeneous. As a result, we find, in postcolonial critiques of positivism, the same homogenizing tendencies that postcolonial scholars so virulently reject. What results is again the binary model of 'colonizer' and 'colonized' because of this uneven dismantling of homogenizing structures.

In other words, postcolonial theorists cannot survive their own critique of colonialism. Their systematic portrayal of the 'West' as a unified concept is precisely the method of "othering" imposed upon the subjugated colonized subjects. Even as postcolonial scholars passionately attempt to deconstruct the colonized subject in order to reclaim its subjecthood outside of Western-centric modes of reasoning, they fail to orchestrate the same operation on the concept of the 'West' itself.

The 'West' as an untenable concept

Postcolonial scholars fail to realize that the 'West' as a categorical and geographical concept is no longer tenable. The "internationalization of class structures" has rendered differentiation between the first world (primarily former colonizers from the 'West') and third world (of many former colonized states) increasingly obsolete (Berger, 1994). The notion of a 'Third World' promotes "a dubious homogeneity" just as differentiation amongst the economic elites and working class poor are emerging within these states. Frequently, these class distinctions coincide with ethnic cleavages. The international colonizer/colonized paradigm has been displaced and localized within former colonized states. Internal exploitation that occurs at the 'state' level is as severe a problem as the asymmetry of power between the traditional North/South divide which occurs at the 'global' level. Even as scholars dismantle the oppressive Western models of reasoning through indigenizing knowledge, a simultaneous possibility for opportunism has opened up for internal colonization and exploitation.

Can the subaltern speak?

Gayatri Spivak (1995), who is often lauded as the doyenne of postcolonial studies, rejects the tendency of hegemonic theorizing from both a Western and indigenous perspective. To the now well-known problem she posed – "Can the subaltern speak?" – her answer is affirmative. Through the examination of widow sacrifice in India and its subsequent abolition by British colonials, she exposes the impossibility of constituting the subject (of the Indian widow), who is perpetually stuck in a double bind of comprehension between "patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation" (Spivak, 1995). What Spivak reveals is the violent tendency that even a perspective of indigeneity would do to the figure of the 'subaltern':

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced . . . both as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow. (p. 28)

The attempt at representing subaltern female is futile because to lend her direct representation, even though through an indigenous perspective is to immediately conceal and efface her "even more deeply in shadow", because the subaltern female inscribed in whichever discourse remains the exploited. Consequently, she is often misunderstood. The postcolonial project of indigenizing knowledge is dealt with a fatal blow because even an indigenous knowledge can sometimes conceal and efface more than it reveals in the colonized subject. Is this not the attack postcolonialism first launched against positivist social science?

The solution to our predicament?



The movement within academia to decolonize the social sciences, despite its pretence of radicalism, fails to grapple with its own methodological flaws. The postcolonial critique is revealed to have the same “homogenizing”, “effacing” effects on individual subjecthood as positivist social science does. The solution to our predicament will possibly not come from within the discipline. As Spivak (2003) says most eloquently:

The social science fears the radical impulse in literary studies, and over the decades, we in the humanities have trivialized the social sciences into their rational expectation straitjackets, not recognizing that, whatever the state of the social sciences in our own institution, strong tendencies toward acknowledging the silent but central role of the humanities in the area studies paradigm are now around.

Perhaps the way forward is to welcome the challenge from the humanists.

Reading list

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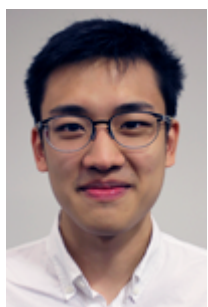
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Note: this article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.

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