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RETRACTED:

Decolonization and the Ontological Turn of Sociology

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This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor in Chief due to accusations of plagiarism. The Editorial Board found necessary evidence to support those accusations.

The Editorial Board would like to extend its sincere apology for any inconvenience this retraction may have caused.

Decolonization and the Ontological Turn of Sociology

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Decolonization of Sociology

Over the past 40-odd years, scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences have presented powerful and elaborate postcolonial and decolonial critiques of the relationship between the conceptual, epistemological, and methodological premises of Western modes of knowledge production and Western projects of colonial rule (most representatively, Said [1978]2015; Spivak 1988; Wallerstein 1996; Chakrabarty [2000]2014; Mignolo [2011]2017; Kang 2004, 2016). These critical lessons, however, were not so readily accepted in sociology. Regarding why this was the case, renowned British postcolonial sociologist, Gurminder Bhambra (2007), argued that sociology has historically and stringently adhered to the core values of modernity. Due to this, sociology's involvement in postcolonial thought was reduced to a liberalist gesture of pluralizing Others—other sociological traditions and other modernities (e.g. Eisenstadt 2000)—leaving sociologists insensitive to the decentralizing and transformational challenges of postcolonial thought, which were raised to the core premises of sociological forms of understanding, explaining, and theorizing. Following Bhambra's assertion that sociology should accept these challenges, this paper argues that accepting the differences created by postcolonial thought will not only make us question how sociological knowledge is produced, but, more fundamentally, transform how we understand what exactly sociology is and can be.

The diagnosis made by Bhambra mentioned above is still generally valid for describing the current relationship between sociology and postcolonial thought, but it is also true that over the past decade or so, sociological disinterest in postcolonial thought has started to wane. Sociologists from

diverse regions of the world have brought up daring challenges to the Eurocentrism of sociology, including breaking down classical social theory (Connell 2007), dissecting the relationship between sociology and imperialism (Steinmetz 2013), decolonizing social research methodologies (Denzin et al. 2008), challenging sociology's historical explanations of modernity (Bhambra 2007, 2014), as well as fundamentally questioning sociology's epistemological premises (Go 2013; Gutierrez Rodriguez et al. 2010; Keim et al. 2014).

Yet the common problematic which penetrates these varied attempts and other numerous postcolonial works is a question of epistemology, which asks: how does Western sociology—and the social sciences in general—know and represent its own object? That is, from an epistemological perspective, these attempts have endeavored to highlight the irrelevance, exclusion, and marginalization which inevitably arises from imposing Western sociology's epistemological categories upon efforts to produce knowledge about non-Western experiences. They have asserted the necessity of developing alternative theories of knowledge based on and deduced from non-Western experiences.

However, there is a risk inherent in placing the emphasis of the politics of knowledge, which permeates postcolonial critiques both within sociology and beyond, on epistemology. The reason being that it can succeed in challenging the epistemological Eurocentrism widely entrenched in modern Western sociology (in addition to modern sciences in general), but this depends on a very modern Western mode of thought which takes for granted the existence of a fundamental division between epistemology and ontology. This division, tracing back to Immanuel Kant's "Copernican revolution", formed the majority of Western philosophical imaginations on which the traditional and critical approaches of not only modern sciences, but social sciences as well, were premised.

Thus, I want to demonstrate that postcolonial thought's reliance on such a division carries the risk of producing ontological Eurocentrism. In order to avoid these risks which will be cast over a possible future in which we must bring into being a sincere global sociology, I want to use the space of this paper to call on sociologists to find the route to truly escaping this Western division: the cultivation of a postcolonial imagination which can traverse the divide between epistemology and ontology. I believe that this type of global sociology can overcome the Western division which separates knowledge from reality—that is, epistemology from ontology—and allows us to decolonize not only knowledge, but strive towards decolonizing reality as

well.

For this reason, I intend to focus on the recent paradigm shift in cultural anthropology, known as the ontological turn, and overview the implications it has for the cultivation of a decolonial sociological imagination (Viveiros de Castro 1998, [2014]2018; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Lee 2018). It is my belief that this recent paradigm shift in anthropology illustrates that a more intimate relationship between sociology and anthropology is of vital necessity to the project of constructing a decolonial imagination for global sociology. If it is the duty of a decolonial sociology to learn from the social and political practices of subaltern resistance movements active in the Global South in the struggle for social and cognitive justice, then the ontological turn can contribute to making sociology sensitive to the fact that at stake in many of such struggles is the constructive, political affirmation of ‘alter-ontologies’—alternative realities which are often oppressed, silenced, and marginalized (Papadopoulos 2010). To put it differently, the decolonial imagination includes the understanding that without existential justice, neither social nor cognitive justice can exist.

Epistemological Problematique of Postcolonial Critiques

The concept of knowledge actively *representing* reality is an essentially modern and Western one. The importance of epistemology and its central question—“what can we know?”—are rooted in this concept. The origins of this concept can be traced back to the so-called “Copernican revolution” of Immanuel Kant (Kant [1998]2006). Kant attempted to reconcile the division between empiricism and rationalism, and in proposing the transcendental principle that the mind does not passively reflect independent things, but actively represents experience and constructs knowledge, he came to dominate the 18th-century European philosophy.

However, in producing this synthesis, a different deep rift was formed: the line dividing all knowledge on “this side”, and all reality on the other. As such, rather than rationalists revealing eternal truth or the essence of god, or empiricists revealing the real properties of the world, knowledge became a “correlation” between the world and human subjects (Meillassoux [2008]2010). Therefore, the question of what we know, rather than what can we know, came to have a secondary importance. In this way, there is nothing that can be said of the world as such that is not said about the world as *represented* by human subjects..

The shockwave caused by this dividing line in the modern West's imagination was astounding. In their seminal study on the history of objectivity, historians of science, Daston and Galison remark that Kant's synthesis reformulated the academic categories of objectivity and subjectivity in to a modern separation what we would later take as obvious, describing it as having "reverberated with seismic intensity in every domain of nineteenth-century intellectual life, from science to literature" (Daston and Galison 2007, p. 205). The repercussions of Kant's revolution sparked an immense shift in the ethos of scientific research, in which scholars left behind phenomenological pursuits of truth, and instead pursued objectivity as the unique epistemological aim, where objectivity assured that the inevitable activity of the knowing subject would not threaten the objective validity of scientific discovery.

The formation of Western sociological tradition proves to be no exception to this Kantian legacy. Rather, it reappropriated Kant's insights, which emphasized the transcendental, a priori condition of the knowing subject, into neo-Kantian concepts, which stressed the knowing subject's historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions. For example, we can find traces of Kant's legacy in Max Weber, who defined sociology as the science of interpretive understanding of human action. The foundation of this definition is none other than the a priori precondition of all cultural sciences: the fact that humans are cultural beings, who impart meaning and importance to a world without inherent meaning (Weber [1949]1992, p. 81). As for Durkheim, he oscillated between the positivist legacy which called social facts *things* and neo-Kantianism, which saw society as the substratum made up of all forms of personal and collective *representations* (Durkheim [1965]2017). Indeed traces of Kantian methods appear in Marx and Engels in the form of the materialist inversion, but we can also see his legacy in their consideration of the historical means of production as the *condition* for the development of socio-cultural forms (including the formation of consciousness and ideology) (Marx and Engels [1998]2019, p. 42).

Furthermore, the importance of the metaphysical divide, which Kant's *correlational* synthesis created, is that it is located at the core of Western traditions of critical thought—phenomenology, structuralism, poststructuralism, and others—which are often evoked for epistemological critiques of modern science's Eurocentrism. Of course, postcolonial projects criticize the epistemological privileges afforded to modern forms of knowledge, and in doing so, have criticized the Eurocentric assumption that modernity provides the sufficiently developed conditions for forms of

knowledge which have universal rationality (unlike non-modern thought which confuses nature and culture, humans and non-humans, and subjectivity and objectivity). But by doing so, they have adopted the very same Kantian metaphysical framework that viewed epistemology as a distinct problem – namely, that any and all production of knowledge stems from individual or collective subjects that infuse what they see with their own conditioned presuppositions.

In truth, postcolonial scholars criticize Eurocentric suppositions which view “knowing subjects [are] also universal” (Mignolo 2009, p. 160), and the resultant exclusion as “ultimately epistemological” (Chakrabarty [2000]2014, p. 98). These criticisms assume that colonial oppression is exerted, “above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification over resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual” (Quijano 2007, p. 169). However, while these criticisms question the epistemological privileges of the modern West, at the same time they are limited by their concern over what, in fact, knowledge is, and how it is (or is not) connected to the real—questions shared by the Western imagination.

If, like these postcolonial critiques, attempts to pluralize not only Western, but non-Western knowledge as well, do not call into question the metaphysical structure of the imagination which maintains the divide between epistemology and ontology, I believe that they will never be sufficient. Any attempt which does not do so will face even greater risk of deepening this divide than attempts which endeavor to traverse the epistemological divide. This is to say, such attempts run the risk of relying on varied types of Eurocentrism, which affect all modes of imagining the relationship between knowledge and reality, not only the structures and categories of knowledge. Within these varied types of Eurocentrism, without a more fundamental engagement with the fact that non-Western knowledge and *reality* can exist without division between them, we can facilitate sociological engagement with non-Western *knowledge* alone. Therefore, in order to not fall into the trap of such metaphysical Eurocentrism, which prolongs Kant’s legacy, we must venture to *imagine* an entirely new relationship between knowledge and reality. In order to help cultivate an imagination for decolonial sociology, I want to discuss the recent ontological turn in anthropology, an effort by cultural anthropologists to reform the anthropological imagination, which was facing questions similar to those in sociology.

Anthropology's Ontological Turn: Implications for Decolonial Sociology

Anthropology as a field emerged as a direct product of colonialism, and, as such, devoted effort to the study of non-European societies which were being ruled by European powers, carried out by European researchers, with a European audience in mind. However, over the past 40 years, anthropology has not only acknowledged its own deep-rooted relationship with colonialism, but has actively and critically reexamined its very foundations. The groundbreaking text, *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), published in the 80s, is considered to have brought about the *reflexive turn* (or *postmodern turn*) in anthropology, and the impetus for this is said to have been the self-awareness that anthropology has existed within a world of importunate yet shifting power inequality. Though I welcome the effects that such a turn had on anthropology, if we think about it through the lens of our earlier discussion, we should take care to notice that the *crisis of representation* within anthropology made anthropologists pay attention to the epistemological premises by which knowledge of other cultures is produced.

It is a fact that the reflexive turn made anthropology question the existing method of mobilizing the West's modern truths to explaining the beliefs of primitive Others, and made them circumspect about the modes of representation of anthropology itself. However, because anthropology cannot "provincialize" (Chakrabarty [2000]2014) its knowledge without "universalizing" the epistemological problems of anthropology itself, it would not be unfit to call the reflexive turn a Kantian turn. In other words, anthropology is no longer able to be a field which places its interest in unearthing some truth about human nature which transcends all cultures, but now we can see it as a field which studies how diverse cultures and peoples *interpret* and *represent* the world.

Despite the overwhelming success of the reflexive turn, in recent years anthropology has been swept up in a storm of ontological alternatives to the epistemological obsession (Lee 2018), and at the fore of these is Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's pioneering ethnography of Amerindian perspectivism. In many respects this alternative, that has received the name of the 'ontological turn', shares a common purpose with other decolonial projects. That is, through attempting to learn from these Others, who Western thought has considered irrational or incapable of being understood, and by considering these Others not only the cultural subjects of Western thought and knowledge but rather their own theoretical actors who provide

the most novel concepts, problems, and wells of truth, he is transforming anthropology into a “permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro [2014]2018, pp. 40-48).

However, unlike the decolonial projects which extend Kant’s epistemological legacy, a different type of imagination is instilling this alternative with life. By using the thoughts of the Other (that is, the reality of the Other), delineating the results, and asserting the effects that they will have on modern Western thought, we can engage in thoughtful treatment of the thoughts of Others. Therefore, more than thinking *about* the difference between Western and non-Western thought, we can think *with* this difference; we can borrow the perspective of native peoples in order to view the world in a novel way.

Thus, the role of anthropology is no longer to take modern Western thought and assess non-Western thought and reality by its measure. It is also not to raise all concepts to the status of *representations* as in the reflexive turn, flattening the playing field by making the Others participate in epistemological relativism. This type of ontological decolonization project, rather, takes non-modern, non-Western realities and applies them to assessing modern, Western thought, and attempts to have us experience a transformation of Western imagination by means of the differences of radical decolonization created by the reality, concepts, and truths of Others.

Viveiros de Castro’s study allows us to discern a few important implications about the possibilities of an alliance between anthropology and sociology for the sake of decolonial imagination. First, we can say that it illustrated that not only other epistemologies, but other realities are possible, and that these types of ontological anthropological studies can bring about the end of epistemology (along with the representational understanding of knowledge). All apologies to the Kantian tradition, but we, ultimately, are not living in trap of epistemology. According to Bhambra, “the very separation of sociology and anthropology has facilitated sociology’s self-understanding as brought about in the European production of modernity distinct from its colonial entanglements” (Bhambra 2014, p. 2). If this is true, in order for sociology to avoid the trap of Kantian epistemology and cultivate a decolonial imagination, I believe that its new alliance with ontological anthropological studies has become crucial.

Second, an important implication of carrying out such an imagined leap towards thinking beyond epistemology is that it affects what we view sociology and anthropology as being. In truth, Viveiros de Castro’s ethnography was not only not carried out in order to apply or check Western

concepts of modern scholarship on a non-Western context, but his analysis was also not carried out for the purpose of surveying the *epistemological* assumptions presented by both Amerindians and anthropologists when attempting to explain non-Western practices. When anthropology, and the social sciences in general, pursue thought through the differences yielded by non-Western practices, it can become a practice that is oriented towards constructing the conditions for people's ontological self-determination, by affirming, magnifying, and making resonate the myriad *realities* which make up our world. That is, it can become a field which helps people choose and live in different worlds, not only the world of the modern West.

Finally, there are crucial political implications to how sociology will take part in such alter-ontologies. Sociology has a long history of studying and explaining through theory varied socio-political struggles, such as the World Social Forum, Latin America's Buen Viver movement, as well as anti-globalization movements, feminist movements, immigrant movements, and radical eco-movements. What is important here is not just 'peoples' in general, but that forming theoretical tools for the ontological self-determination of the realities that countermovements and collectives already participating in the socio-political struggle for existential justice belong to. That is, "they establish forms of life that are simultaneously the effect and the precondition for the continuation of existence of marginalized actors" (Papadopoulos 2010, p. 193). Thus the imagination of decolonial sociology is not only interested in affirming the realities of others, but, especially since these realities are in the midst of formation themselves, it is interested in affirming the realities for others, for which the cry of "another worlds are possible!" cannot be reduced to pithy metaphors.

Towards an Ontological Politics of Decolonial Sociology

In these pages I have endeavored to challenge the assumption that epistemology is necessary for the transformational potential that postcolonial thought has for sociology. I have argued that what is more important goes beyond an interest in how the Others *know* the world, and is rather interested in cultivating an ontological imagination which can affirm the *realities* of important socio-political movements for an actual realization of 'another world'. Our duty is thus to sincerely accept the differences which such movements have been making, and continue to strive for, in the attempt to realize the possibilities of other worlds and to use these differences in our

thinking going forward. To sincerely accept their struggle simultaneously prevents us from becoming ontologists, while also transforming ontology itself. Said differently, practicing a new postcolonial, pluralist, alter-ontology which allows us to affirm not only the realities of the West, but also of those being formed through the struggles of Others. In such an ontology, *reality* is, first and foremost, a question of ethics and politics.

Therefore, the project for decolonial sociology which involves itself in the politics of reality is to cultivate a plural and alter-ontology which accepts the risk of thinking about the still forming realities and futures we must achieve and acting on them. In turn, the possibility of global sociology (or, social thought and practices free from the Western divide) requires a new type of imagination. This is an imagination which allows us to imagine in our minds realities seemingly without epistemologies, and affirm them politically. In order to cultivate this decolonial imagination, we must dare to think about the differences which can be yielded by the realities of the Global South, and make sociology work in service of the politics of these realities which are enacting socio-political movements. What precisely 'sociology' will become in the process of performing such a task remains an open question. For what thought originating in the Global South can do in sociology is something we can not *know* ahead of time, and will only come as the result of the politics which form alternative realities.

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