

## For a postcolonial sociology

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**Abstract** Postcolonial theory has enjoyed wide influence in the humanities but it has left sociology comparatively unscathed. Does this mean that postcolonial theory is not relevant to sociology? Focusing upon social theory and historical sociology in particular, this article considers if and how postcolonial theory in the humanities might be imported into North American sociology. It argues that postcolonial theory offers a substantial critique of sociology because it alerts us to sociology's tendency to *analytically bifurcate* social relations. The article also suggests that a postcolonial sociology can overcome these problems by incorporating *relational* social theories to give new accounts of modernity. Rather than simply studying non-Western postcolonial societies or only examining colonialism, this approach insists upon the interactional constitution of social units, processes, and practices across space. To illustrate, the article draws upon relational theories (actor-network theory and field theory) to offer postcolonial accounts of two conventional research areas in historical sociology: the industrial revolution in England and the French Revolution.

**Keywords** Eurocentrism · Historical sociology · Relationalism · Actor-network · Field theory

In 1995, Russell Jacoby wrote that the term “postcolonial” had become “the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind” (Jacoby 1995). No doubt, “postcolonial theory” (aka “postcolonial studies”) has been a major intellectual trend in the humanities in the United States. Driven by theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha (just to name a few early proponents), postcolonial theory since the late 1980s has “taken its place with theories such as poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and feminism as a major critical discourse in the humanities” (Gandhi 1998: viii). The same could be said for its influence in adjacent disciplines like history or anthropology (e.g., Loomba et al. 2006).

Not so for sociology. On the one hand, postcolonial theory has recently had some influence on sociology in Europe and elsewhere in the world (e.g., Bhabra 2007a; Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al. 2010; Kempel and Mawani 2009). And postcolonial

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themes have recently surfaced in the form of “indigenous” or “Southern” sociologies (Akiwowo 1986; Alatas 2006a; Connell 2007; Keim 2011; Patel 2010), in new interest in thinkers such as W.E.B. DuBois (e.g., Morris 2007), and in new historical sociologies of empire and colonialism (Go 2009, 2011a). But North American sociology has yet to engage directly the sort of postcolonial theory that has had such a profound influence in humanities. For example, Homi Bhabha, one of the more popular postcolonial theorists in the humanities, is referred to at least 50 times in the main humanities journal *The Modern Language Review* (from 1980 to 2007) but only twice in the *American Sociological Review* (and one of those references is from a study of intellectuals). Even the *New York Times* paid more attention to Bhabha than the *ASR*, referring to him at least 11 times since 1980.

Bhabha may not be the best reference point for assessing postcolonial theory’s influence in sociology, given his controversial and murky writing style. But other information is telling. Edward Said is considered one of the founders of postcolonial studies and his writing is much more accessible than Homi Bhabha. But as Steven Seidman notes, “[Edward] Said has had, sad to say, little influence in sociology” (1996, 315). While Seidman registered this claim some years ago, citation numbers reveal its persistent validity. The number of references in the two major sociology journals to Said’s founding postcolonial work *Orientalism* are dwarfed by the number of references in the *Modern Language Review* and the *American Historical Review*. The same goes for references to the phrase “postcolonial theory” or “postcolonial studies” or “postcolonialism” (see Table 1).

Other indicators tell the same story. For example, at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association (the major professional association for the humanities), there were at least 100 paper session titles that included the term “postcolonial” from 2004 to 2011. These included sessions titled “Is the Postcolonial South Asian?,” “Postcolonial Diasporas,” and “Postcolonial Theory and the Pressures of Comparison” and within each session there were three or four papers, meaning that there were at least 300 to 400 papers on postcolonial theory. However, from 2003 to 2011, there were *no* sessions of the American Sociological Association with the term “postcolonial” in the title and only 11 paper titles with the term “postcolonial” (early all of which used the term “postcolonial” as a descriptor of a time period rather than a set of theories or distinct intellectual movement)—even as there were 661 papers at the

**Table 1** Indices of postcolonial studies’ influence in major journals across disciplines

	Literature		History	Sociology	
	Modern language review (1980–2007)	Victorian studies (1980–2011)	American historical review (1980–2011)	American journal of sociology <sup>a</sup> (1980–2011)	American sociological review (1980–2011)
No. Articles referring to <i>Orientalism</i> by E. Said	131	162	270	47	9
No. Articles using the phrase “postcolonial theory”, “postcolonial studies” or “postcolonialism”	127	86	149	109 <sup>a</sup>	2

<sup>a</sup> Majority from book review section

American Sociological Meetings with the term “race” in the title. Similarly, the Modern Language Association’s list of “executive committees,” which represent “the primary scholarly and professional concerns of the association,” shows at least one committee with the term “postcolonial” in it: “Postcolonial Studies in Literature and Culture.” The American Sociological Association’s parallel committees (aka ASA “sections”) have none.

Academic job lines are also indicative. From the late 1980s through early 1990s, jobs in the humanities with titles or descriptors that included “postcolonial studies” or “postcolonial literature” became increasingly common (Hasseler and Krebs 2003, p. 94). In contrast, a search of the American Sociological Association’s job listings (in the online ASA *Job Bank*) reveal that while job lines include everything from “comparative-historical” and “race and ethnicity” to “gender” there is nothing for postcolonial studies. It follows that while courses on “postcolonialism,” “postcolonial literature,” or “postcolonial theory” could be found in most literature, language, and history departments, parallel courses in sociology are relatively absent.<sup>1</sup> None of the five best-selling introductory textbooks in sociology have sections on postcolonialism or have postcolonialism or postcolonial theory in their indices (even though they have entries on “postmodernism”). None lists Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in their bibliography or include Edward Said in their indices; nor do they include other postcolonial thinkers like Homi Bhabha or Frantz Fanon.<sup>2</sup> Texts and readers on contemporary theory, which would seem the natural candidates for discussions of postcolonial theory, are also lacking. The best-selling top five contemporary theory readers devote lengthy separate sections to “Feminist Theory,” “Postmodern Theory,” or “The Body” but they have no comparable sections on postcolonial theories and thinkers.<sup>3</sup> In short, Jacoby’s (1995) claim that the term “postcolonial” had become “the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind” cannot be said to apply to sociology.

Sociology’s relative indifference to postcolonial theory in the humanities is probably unsurprising. Sociology is under no obligation to follow trends in other disciplines. More importantly, some have suggested that sociology and postcolonial theory are essentially incompatible; and postcolonial theory in fact contains a strong critique of sociology (Seth 2009). Still, there are elements to postcolonial theory that would make it a potentially fruitful area for sociologists to mine. Postcolonial theory addresses matters such as colonialism, race and ethnicity, identity, inequality, and global structures just as sociology does. Furthermore, a large part of postcolonial

<sup>1</sup> A simple google search of “postcolonial theory” and “syllabus” shows a huge number of literature courses. Alternatively, this author has only found two sociology courses in the U.S. devoted to postcolonial theory.

<sup>2</sup> The American Sociological Association does not have data on best selling introductory textbooks. I used the best-selling lists from Amazon.com. The textbooks I consulted are Conley (2008), Henslin (2009), Macionis (2008), Schaeffer (2011), Ferris and Stein (2009), and for comparison Giddens et al. (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Top five best sellers are from Amazon.com’s sales rankings. They are Calhoun et al. (2007), Ritzer (2009), Applerouth and Edles (2007), Allan (2010) and Johnson (2010). One exception (Applerouth and Edles 2007) includes E. Said and G. Spivak, but this is not a separate section on postcolonial theory; rather just a subsection of the section on “The Global Society,” which is about globalization and includes Wallerstein and Sklair (Applerouth and Edles 2007). I have found one book, Seidman and Alexander’s *New Social Theory Reader* (2008), that has a brief section on “postcoloniality.” But this is not a best-seller nor is it a standard textbook on sociological theory; its purpose is explicitly to cover niche areas of social theory such as “performativity” and “biopolitics.”

theory has been aimed at assessing, rethinking, and analytically reconstructing the historical formation and dilemmas of modernity. Sociology was founded upon the same goal. As Adams et al. (2005) poignantly remind us, one of the questions driving sociology has long been: “How did societies come to be recognizably ‘modern’?” (Adams et al. 2005, p. 3). Given such commonalities, perhaps sociology and post-colonial theory might productively interact.

Building upon recent calls for a postcolonial sociology from Bhabra (2007a) and Magubane (2005), the goal of this article is to see what postcolonial theory might have to say for sociology. As noted, some scholars outside of the United States have already been influenced by postcolonial themes. But as indicated in the information given above, few if any direct dialogues between postcolonial theory in the humanities and sociology can be found.<sup>4</sup> So what exactly is postcolonial theory and how might it be relevant for sociology? And how might sociologists interested in taking up the postcolonial challenge do so effectively? As it is difficult if not impossible in the space of a single article to speak of “sociology” in its entirety, the discussion here focuses upon social theory and historical sociology in particular in the United States. Historical sociology is of special relevance because it is one of the more likely candidates in sociology for engaging postcolonial theory. Historical sociology has been long interested in “how people and societies became modern or not—what it was that changed in the series of the ‘great transformations’ and how these manifold processes are continuing to reshape the contemporary world” (Adams et al. 2005, p. 2); and this is one of the issues that postcolonial theory also takes up. So how might postcolonial theory be relevant for historical sociology’s longstanding interest in these and related issues? Furthermore, a new literature has begun to reinvestigate questions of colonialism and empire (Go 2009), which would seem to make historical sociology even more amenable to postcolonial theory. But does this new work meet the challenge posed by postcolonial theory?

I argue that while a certain strand of postcolonial theory sees sociology and postcolonial studies as fundamentally incompatible, this claim about incompatibility is untenable and other elements of postcolonial theory have direct relevance. Specifically, I argue that postcolonial theory offers a powerful critique of sociology, helping us recognize sociology’s tendencies towards *analytic bifurcation*. I further suggest that a postcolonial sociology can overcome these problems by incorporating *relational* theories to give new postcolonial accounts of modernity. This sort of postcolonial sociology does not entail only studying non-Western societies, postcolonial social formations, or imperialism and colonialism but rather insists upon an overarching theoretical approach and ontology that emphasizes the interactional constitution of social units, processes, and practices across space. The argument concludes with brief examples, using actor-network theory and field theory to show how

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<sup>4</sup> Calls for postcolonial sociologies have emerged in the European context (Bhabra 2007a; Boatcă and Costa 2010). Other sociologies informed by postcolonial theory, such as “indigenized” or “Southern” sociologies that I discuss later, have been largely restricted to the non-North American context, finding most relevance, for instance, in journals such as *Current Sociology* and *International Sociology* rather than the dominant U.S. journals. As noted, the dominant U.S. journals in sociology have not paid serious attention to postcolonial theory, though one notable exception is the works by Connell (Connell 2006, 1997).

relational theories can lead to postcolonial accounts of industrialization in England and the French Revolution.

But first, what *is* postcolonial theory anyway?

### What is postcolonial theory?

The delineation of “postcolonial theory” in this article should be clear: I am interested in postcolonial theory as it has emerged in the humanities (including history) and its influence on sociology in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Alternative genealogies can be traced, such as the indigenous sociology schools (see Alatas 1974, 2006a) or critical race studies in England (e.g., Gilroy 1993). These are discussed below. However, the goal of the present article is to consider postcolonial theory in the humanities. This is of primary interest here partly because, as I discuss below, postcolonial theory in the humanities articulates a strong critique of sociology but as yet few sociologists have responded (cf. McLennan 2003). Thus, presumably, postcolonial theory remains something for humanists with social scientists remaining the passive targets of critique. The goal of this article is to take up this particular challenge posed by cross-disciplinary interaction.

So what exactly is postcolonial theory? While it is difficult to boil it down to simple terms, postcolonial theory/postcolonial studies as it emerged in the humanities can be defined as a *loosely coherent body of writing and thought that critiques and aims to transcend the structures supportive of Western colonialism and its legacies*. The structures targeted by postcolonial theory are economic and political structures, which is where postcolonial theory shares ground with Marxist theories of dependency and the world-system. But one of postcolonial theory’s distinct contributions is to emphasize cultural, ideological, epistemic, or even psychological structures (Gandhi 1998; Go 2006; Young 1990; Young 2001, pp. 337–426).

The work of two theorists considered to be among the founders of postcolonial studies, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, exemplify this innovation. Fanon’s innovation was to highlight the cultural and psychological dimensions of colonialism. He was particularly interested in the virulent racism of colonialism, racism’s psychological impact upon colonized peoples and colonizing agents, and the mutual constitution of the colonizer and colonized (Fanon 1965, 1967[1952], 1968 [1961]). In this way Fanon, joining others like Memmi (1965) and Mannoni (1964), brought questions of culture and identity to the table. Years later, Edward Said took up the mantle, arguing that Marxist stories of imperialism overlooked “the privileged role of culture in the modern imperial experience” (Said 1993, p. 5). *Orientalism* accordingly unearthed how epistemic structures representing the Orient (as regressive, static, singular) served to support Western imperialism (Said 1979). Rather than epiphenomenal or a sideshow to imperialism, binary categories of Orientalist knowledge facilitated and enabled it in the first place. Thus, one of the key elements of postcolonial theory is that it critically discloses the cultural logics attendant with empire. In fact, it examines all types of discourses, *epistemes*, cultural schemas,

<sup>5</sup> I therefore follow the lineages and discussions of postcolonial theory by Ashcroft et al. (1995, 2002), Gandhi (1998), Loomba (1998), Williams and Chrisman (1994) and Young (2003) among others.

representations, and ideologies that were part and parcel of Western imperialism—whether embodied in everyday discourse, novels, works of art, scientific tracts, or ethnographies. In this sense, postcolonial theory mounts an assault upon the entire culture of western global dominance—or as Edward Said puts it in a different context, upon all the “impressive ideological formations” and “forms of knowledge affiliated with [colonial domination]” (Said 1993, p. 9).

Postcolonial theory’s emphasis upon culture, knowledge, and representation partially explains postcolonial theory’s growth within the humanities. If imperialism is also about culture, then cultural expertise is necessary for critiquing it. It also puts postcolonial theory in dialogue with the poststructuralist and postmodern turns. Said’s *Orientalism* famously owes its origins to Foucault’s theory of discourse and power/knowledge. Other sectors of postcolonial studies share the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment and its grand narratives, totalizing schemas, and identitarian thinking. Just as Lyotard’s critique of grand narratives worries about Western knowledge’s universalizing gestures—or “overcoming” (*dépassement*)—at the expense of particularity, so does postcolonial studies “join postmodernism in an attempt to analyse and to resist this *dépassement*” (Gandhi 1998, p. 41). Postcolonial studies of colonial discourse (typically known as “colonial discourse analysis”) critique the essentializing representations in colonizers’ imaginations and speech but also treat this critique not as a “specialized activity only for minorities or for historians of imperialism and colonialism” but rather as a starting point for questioning all of “Western knowledge’s categories and assumptions” (Young 1990, p. 11). As Young puts it, postcolonial studies joins in the postmodern claim “that all knowledge may be variously contaminated, implicated in its very formal or ‘objective’ structures” (Young 1990, p. 11).

The work of Homi Bhabha most clearly represents this strand. Drawing from Derrida and deconstruction as much as Foucault, Bhabha’s analyses of colonial discourse imply that colonial knowledge is merely an instance of Enlightenment rationalism more broadly. As postmodern thought criticizes the Habermasian belief in Reason because “any universal or normative postulation of rational unanimity is totalitarian and hostile to the challenges of otherness and difference”(Gandhi 1998, p. 27), Bhabha similarly suggests that all types of “knowing” are essentializing and dangerously universalizing (Bhabha 1994).

Enter the other important aspect of postcolonial theory/studies: while it takes aim at imperial knowledge and colonialism’s multidimensional structures, it is motivated by present concerns (Gandhi 1998, p. 4; Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, p. 4; Venn 2006, p. 3). From the perspective of postcolonial theory, the political decolonization of Asia and Africa in the twentieth century or in other parts of the world was a monumental disappointment. It did not bring equality between metropolitan and ex-colonial countries; nor did it bring a decolonization of consciousness or culture. “We live,” says Gayatri Spivak, “in a post-colonial neo-colonized world” (Spivak and Harasym 1990, p. 166) This means that the cultures of imperialism persist into the present period. And they contribute to and help sustain global inequalities between the global South and North.

Postcolonial theory here finds motivation. As the cultures of imperialism persist, new and different sorts of knowledge must be produced to help decolonize consciousness. Postcolonial theory grapples with colonialism’s legacies and seeks

alternative representations or knowledge that do not fall prey to colonialist knowledge's misrepresentations and epistemic violence. This is why it is labeled *post-colonial theory*: it seeks theories (knowledges), ways of representing the world, and histories that critique rather than authorize or sustain imperialistic ways of knowing. Postcolonial theory seeks to elaborate “theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western ways of seeing things” (Young 2003, p. 4). This is also why postcolonial theory in the humanities has resonance with and parallels critiques of Eurocentrism in the social sciences (e.g., Amin 1989; Wallerstein 1997) and attempts to formulate “indigenous” social science knowledges that transcend the “captive mind” created by Western domination (Alatas 1974, 2006a; Connell 2006; Patel 2010, 2011; Sitas 2006).

How, then, does postcolonial theory in the humanities contest the “dominant western ways”? One strategy has been to follow Said's *Orientalism* and critique colonial discourse and knowledge. Thus arises the emphasis in postcolonial studies on analyzing “colonial discourse” (Parry 1987; Williams and Chrisman 1994). But other analytic strategies can also be found. In literary studies, initial attempts took the form of “Commonwealth Studies,” referring to the study and promotion of literary texts from the Caribbean or Africa to highlight non-Western voices and perspectives (Ashcroft et al. 2002). Other strands of postcolonial research involve critical readings of canonical Western texts to reveal how imperialism or colonialism serves as the silent backdrop or enabling condition for the narrative. Spivak's (1986) search for the hidden imperialist assumptions and meanings in Jane Austen novels and Edward Said's (1993) studies of various British novels are exemplary. The implication is critical: modernity is constituted through colonialism but Eurocentric knowledge represses or hides modernity's imperial constitution, reserving modernity instead for westerners.

Finally, postcolonial scholars have offered new critical concepts meant to destabilize the assumptions of western imperial culture or disclose the limits of the imperial *episteme*. Bhabha's theoretical musings and readings of the colonial archive celebrates ambiguity, liminality, or “hybridity” which, according to Bhabha, unsettles the categorical binaries typical of colonial discourse and Western rationalism (Bhabha 1994). While imperial discourse aimed to “know” a foreign culture in order to dominate it, Bhabha's postcolonial theory aims to recognize and to deploy the “insurmountable ambivalence” in any such representational apparatus (Bhabha 1994, pp., 154–157; McLennan 2003m pp. 73–75). Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty calls for histories that “provincialize Europe.” This does not just mean a critique of Eurocentrism in historiography; it also means showing the limits of universal categories by which history itself is represented. Provincializing Europe means decentering Europe: showing how Europe has come to be taken as universal while disclosing how un-universal—indeed provincial—that history is (Chakrabarty 2000).

Other postcolonial theorists have drawn upon Fanon and related thinkers for insights into the colonial mentality and how colonizer and colonized were mutually influenced by the colonial encounter (Hall 1996b, p. 246; see also in anthropology Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Stoler 1992, 1995). One of the theoretical strands arising from the work of Fanon and Said, for instance, is the anti-essentialist notion that identities are constructed dialogically (in Bakhtin's sense) or dialectically (in the Hegelian-Marxist sense) (Bakhtin 1981). Various postcolonial scholars, working in

literature, anthropology, or history thereby aim to show how “Europe” or the identities of western agents have been shaped in and by their relations with colonized and non-European peoples. While pretending not to, Orientalist discourse constructs the Occident as much as it does the Orient. The fact that non-western colonized peoples have helped to constitute the history of the West and indeed of modernity therefore needs to be reintegrated into our histories and narratives. As the historian Catherine Hall summarizes, postcolonial scholarship seeks to demonstrate that “the political and institutional histories of ‘the centre’ and its outer circles [are] more mutually constituted than we think” (Hall 1996a quoted in Magubane 2005, p. 101; see also Magubane 2004). In these and various other ways, postcolonial theory aims to produce new histories, narratives, and knowledges and thereby “shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed” (Young 2003, p. 2).

### The postcolonial critique of sociology

What does any of this mean for sociology? Not all postcolonial theorists have failed to discuss the discipline of sociology. Edward Said (1989) levels a criticism of Bourdieu, but beyond that most postcolonial scholars have discussed social science at a more general level (Chakrabarty 1997; Seth 2009). Others have leveled criticisms of sociology that align with the postcolonial critique, even as this scholarship might not always go under the label of *postcolonial theory*. Some of it, for example, takes aim at Eurocentrism (Alatas 2006a; Amin 1989; Connell 2006). From this wider body of work I suggest that postcolonial theory does in fact contain a critique of sociology. Specifically, it helps to disclose sociology’s *Orientalism*, *Eurocentric universalism*, *imperial repression*, and *Enlightenment scientism*. The first three of these issues I call *metrocriticism*. Later I add a final critique of sociology’s *analytic bifurcations*.

The first issue is sociology’s *Orientalism*, typified in much of classical sociology. Postcolonial theory helps alert us to the fact that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—far from simply providing neutral observations on society—effectually portrayed non-Western societies in their theories as homogeneous essences, blanketing over “inter-group complexity and differences” and transforming the non-West into a “generalized ‘other’” (Chua 2008, p. 1183; Connell 1997). They likewise portrayed non-Western societies as static and backwards, hence reserving dynamism, social creativity, energy, and enlightenment for European societies alone – e.g., the common term Weber used to describe India is “absence” (Magubane 2005, p. 94; Thapar 1980; Zimmerman 2006). Classical sociology has also carried the marks of *Eurocentric universalism*. Early theories posited a presumably universal template of development and theoretical categories based upon Europe’s experience; these templates and categories in turn reduced cultural difference to temporal difference and presupposed the superiority of the western experience (Bhambra 2007b; Connell 2007; Magubane 2005). Sociology achieves this while implying that the particular European experience upon which it is based is *not* in fact particular (Alatas 2006a; Bhambra 2007b). Postcolonial theory’s ambivalent relationship with Marxism is informative here. While some postcolonial theorists often draw from Marxist thought and sometimes lean upon its critique of imperialism’s economic practices and impact, most are

critical of Marx's Orientalism and historicism.<sup>6</sup> Joining poststructural and postmodern critiques, some postcolonial theorists fault Marx's historicism for a western-focused telos and universalism typical of Enlightenment historicism generally. In this view, even global or world histories in the Marxist tradition (by the likes of Braudel or Wallerstein, for instance) suffer from an Orientalist historicism; or as Edward Said (2000) puts it, they produce "universalising and self-validating" histories that depend "on a homogenizing and incorporating world historical scheme that assimilated non-synchronous developments, histories, cultures, and peoples to it" (Said 2000, p. 210). Postcolonial theorists are also critical of Marx's Eurocentric valorization of the working-class and the analytic privilege given to economic structures at the expense of serious engagement with questions of race, gender, or cultural difference (Chakrabarty 2000; Gandhi 1998, pp. 23–26).

The third critique is that sociology has worked by an elision or *repression* of colonial/imperial history. Classical sociological works were founded upon attempts to theorize modernity but occluded colonialism or imperialism's potential role in constituting modernity in the first place (Amin 1989). As Boatcă and Costa (2010: p. 16) put it, "key moments of Western modernity, for which the sociological approach was supposed to offer an explanation, were considered to be the French Revolution and the English-led Industrial Revolution, but not Western colonial politics or the accumulation of capital through the Atlantic Slave Trade and the overseas plantation economy." Sociological knowledge thus depended upon a "suppression of the colonial and imperial dynamics from the terminological toolkit of classical sociology" (Boatcă and Costa 2010, p. 16). This suppression served to abstract social relations from their wider relations, contributing to a dubious methodological nationalism wherein imperial or colonial relations have no place (Bhambra 2007b; Chernilo 2006). Exceptions prove the rule. Although some early sociologists even in the United States discussed colonialism and imperialism, it was only in support of it or as part of an evolutionary theory of racial expansion—in other words, as an outgrowth of modernity rather than constitutive of it (Go 2012).

The fourth critique is of sociology's Enlightenment scientism. Since sociology remains rooted in the very positivist Enlightenment thought that has been complicit with western imperialism, it is incompatible with the postcolonial project. This comes from the postmodern or radical poststructuralist strand of postcolonial studies that, according to Gandhi (1998, pp. 26–28), contains the real seeds of postcolonial thought. In this critique, sociology's very existence as the "science of society" is the problem. Sociology is a mode of knowledge that assumes that the social world is fully knowable, that reason alone can arrive at such knowledge, and that the subsequent knowledge is objective and universal and so can be used to control the world (foundationalist, universalist, and scientistic). Sociology is just one of other "formalized expressions" of "modern Western thought" and therefore intrinsically part of imperial culture (Seth 2009, p. 337). Sociology's founding faith in reason and

<sup>6</sup> Early thinkers often thought of as originators of postcolonial theory, such as Fanon or C.L.R. James, had strong affiliations with the Marxist critique of colonial capitalism. The Subaltern Studies group of Indian historians containing the seeds of some strands of postcolonial theory were similarly working within Marxist problematics (in this case of the failure of class-consciousness to take root in India). Contemporary thinkers like Gayatri Spivak draws upon Gramsci and Marx's analysis of capitalism. See Moore-Gilbert (1997, pp. 79–81) for more.

progress (that reason can fully know and manipulate the world) and its abstract categories based upon Western assumptions not only parallel but support Western imperialism's hostility towards difference. Sociology's enlightenment assumption of the knowability of all societies from the same "objective" standpoint and its search for totalizing, abstract, transsocietal theories express an imperialistic will to power that fails to acknowledge the socially-situated, embodied incomplete or "ambivalent" character of all knowledge (Bhabha 1994; Bhabra 2007a; Connell 2006, pp. 258–259; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010). In this view, there is an irreconcilable difference between sociology and postcolonial theory: "whereas the former assumes that the social sciences can (be made to) be applicable everywhere, postcolonial theory argues that they are fully adequate nowhere" (Seth 2009, p. 337). It follows that a postcolonial sociology is impossible. The sociological project is part of the "problem for postcolonialism, not part of the solution" (McLennan 2003, p. 72).

In short, from the standpoint of postcolonial studies, sociology is isomorphic with and likely contributes to the culture of imperialism. Exactly because of this, the postmodern variant of sociology would urge a dissolution of sociology (and probably all social science) entirely. "Ending sociology's complicity with modern empires would destroy sociology itself" (Chua 2008, p. 1186; Seth 2009, p. 338). Still, is the postcolonial challenge actually relevant? I argue that it is, however only in certain respects.

### Critiquing but also taking up the postcolonial challenge

On the one hand, the postmodern variant of postcolonial theory (the "postmodern-postcolonial" critique) that challenges sociology's scientism is not as unsettling as it might appear (de Sousa Santos 2010). As McLennan (2003) notes, the critique of social science is wildly inconsistent and ironically depends upon a "baseline sociology" itself (McLennan 2003, p. 79). The very premise of the postmodern-postcolonial critique—that is, that knowledge and power are connected—is itself a sociological assertion. In fact, the writings of postmodern-postcolonial scholars are replete with sociological claims. Even Bhabha's (1994) alternative postcolonial concepts are based upon such claims. His celebration of "hybridity," for instance, demands and depends upon sociological knowledge about global processes (McLennan 2003, p. 79; see also Reed 2010).

What about sociology's totalizing or universal categories that obliterate difference and override particularism? It is hard to reconcile this criticism of sociology with certain postcolonial gestures that are no less universalizing or totalizing. Again, Bhabha's work is instructive. Bhabha theorizes colonial discourse as "ambivalent" (as expressing both desire and derision), and therefore as "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive" (Bhabha 1994, p. 100). He likewise famously theorizes colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, p. 86). Such concepts come from psychoanalytic theory and, more precisely, from Lacan's symbolic reading of Freud (with Derrida's articulation of the logic of *differance* thrown in) (Derrida 1976; Lacan 1977). Thus are found such statements as the "fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated

as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence.” Or: “the stereotype, then, as the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defence” (1994, p. 75). But how exactly these categories circumvent totalization is unclear, as is how psychoanalytic theory more broadly (or for that matter a theory of symbolism or language) is *not* universal (McLennan 2003, p. 79; Young 1990, pp. 152–155). The Lacanian model of psychoanalytic development that Bhabha deploys presumably applies to everyone, everywhere, at all times—anyone who has a psyche. Even if such theories are deployed to refer to the specific context of colonialism, we still end up with but universal categories (desire, lack, repression) filled with local content (e.g., “colonial desire”).

All of this suggests that the postmodern-postcolonial critique of sociology’s Enlightenment scientism cannot do without the very “universal” social scientific theory it promises to dismantle. It follows that sociology and postcolonial theory are not intrinsically opposed. As Chakrabarty puts it in another context, there is a “simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of social science thought” (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 6). The real thrust of the postmodern-postcolonial critique of Enlightenment rationalism, I would argue, is not of sociology intrinsically but of traditional positivism in sociology that aims for prediction, universal covering laws, and assumes absolute independence between social scientific thought and its context.<sup>7</sup> Not all sociologists today would recognize this sort of traditional positivist sociology. By now, many sociologists have taken up various post-positivist sociological projects that do not fall prey to the postmodern-postcolonial critique. These include standpoint theory (Harding 2005); certain forms of realism and its variants like critical realism (Steinmetz 1998, 2004); forms of descriptive and historical sociology (Abbott 2001; Savage 2009); or recent articulations of interpretative social science that align with postcolonial theory’s emphasis upon subjectivity and culture (Go 2008a; Reed 2008, 2011).

On the other hand, the other charges by the postcolonial challenge remain relevant. First, sociology’s early European *metrocentrism*—i.e., its Orientalism, Eurocentric universalism, and erasure of imperialism—would be more palatable if it had subsided after the classics. But as critics point out, they persist. Connell (2006) shows how the theories of James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens reproduce Orientalist characterizations (Connell 2006). These theorists also erase colonialism from their accounts of modernity (*ibid.*). Giddens’s typology of societies includes three types: tribal society, class-divided society, and capitalist class society. But nowhere is there a notion of a “colonial society” that has its own dynamics (e.g., of ethnic or racial hierarchy, etc.), despite the fact that, since the fifteenth century through the 1960s, the world was never a world of isolated “tribes” or “capitalist class societies” but empires and colonies (by WWI, nine-tenths of the globe was occupied by imperial powers and their colonies) (Young 2001, p. 2). Similarly, while Bourdieu’s

<sup>7</sup> Seth (2009) draws upon postcolonial theory to criticize sociology on the grounds that it does not recognize how knowledge constitutes the social; that it fails to acknowledge that knowledge “can create, not merely describe” (p. 337). But this is a critique of traditional positivist sociology and does not recognize the multiple ways in which sociology has indeed problematized and theorized knowledge. Critical realism, for instance, is premised upon the idea that knowledge can both describe and constitute “the real” (see Steinmetz 1998).

early work in Algeria examined French colonialism there, his theory of habitus, structure, and reproduction occludes it. The logic of his theoretical categories and the categories themselves bear little trace of the fact of French rule or anti-colonial resistance (Connell 2007, pp. 39–44; cf. Calhoun 2006). This was Bourdieu's self-admitted goal: to reconstruct what Kabyle life was in its supposedly pristine state *without* colonialism (Goodman and Silverstein 2009, p. 22; Yacine 2004, pp. 498–499).<sup>8</sup>

Historical sociology as it emerged in the United States since the 1970s is beset with similar problems. It produces monographs on revolutions, capitalist development, or state-formation in Europe and comparably less on anti-colonial revolutions, revolutions in the postcolonial world, or colonialism and imperialism (cf. Charrad 2001; Goodwin 2001; Slater 2010). Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* incorporated China but steadfastly refused to include anti-colonial revolutions—as if those revolutions (which traversed the globe) were irrelevant in the French revolution (Skocpol 1979). To be sure, from historical sociologists we read much about the French revolution and the attendant Eurocentric claim that the French revolution was the originator of liberal political modernity (and, according to Skocpol, the first “modern social revolution”) (Skocpol and Kestnbaum 1990). But we read next to nothing about how France in the wake of its supposedly seminal declaration of liberty, equality, and fraternity proceeded to extend its violent imperial hand overseas. Nor do we read about the other significant revolution at the time that in some ways facilitated France's own revolution: that is, the Haitian revolution (Magubane 2005, pp. 101–102). We are left to resort to stories of diffusion—with Europe as the center of history and modernity (Buck-Morss 2009). As postcolonial historian Chakrabarty puts it in another context: existing historical sociology means that, from the standpoint of colonized and postcolonial peoples, the “modern” is always “something that had already happened somewhere else” (Chakrabarty 1997, p. 373).

As I discuss below, the trend of eliding imperial history in historical sociology is showing some signs of abatement. But I argue that this does not in itself resolve the final overarching problem. Drawing upon the insights of Bhabra (2007b), Magubane (2005) and Patel (2006), I contend that European metrocentrism—which includes the elision of imperial history—is problematic not just in itself but also because it leads to an *artificial bifurcation* of social relations. The issue with classical sociology's Eurocentric focus or elision of imperial history is not just that it overlooks a “truer” history but also because it analytically separates relations that might not have been separate at all. Weber's writings portray the Orient as lacking and static but the related problem is that he never considered that capitalism's origins and sustenance may have rested upon imperial accumulation rather than in Protestant beliefs alone. Durkheim postulated transitions from different types of solidarity (that he neatly mapped onto binaries like “primitive” and “modern,” preindustrial and

<sup>8</sup> It is the case, though, that Bourdieu's early work discussed colonialism (Bourdieu 1961; Goodman and Silverstein 2009) and in fact, as recent scholarship shows, Bourdieu had a theory of colonialism worth recognizing (Go 2011b). It is in his reception and his later work on practice that colonialism gets overlooked. This still demonstrates the overarching point about sociology's elision of colonialism. Other sociologists in the French context, not least George Balandier (1966), did theorize colonialism, but this was largely in the context of anthropology (Balandier was picking up the themes of his anthropologist adviser Michel Leirus) and never become canonized in North American sociology.

industrial, etc.) but never considered that one may have been dependent upon the imperial consolidation of the other. Marx saw colonialism as a mechanism for *expanding* capitalism, not as a constitutive force in its very making (Magubane 2005, pp. 94–97; Turner 1978).

More recent theories exhibit the same problems, reinscribing a methodological nationalism that occludes expansive relations across space. Not only does Giddens's typology of societies fail to include a category for "colonial society" or societies that encompass colonial variations, its theoretical articulation recognizes no dynamic *between* the societies; no recognition that "capitalist societies," for instance, often tried to maintain and keep "tribal societies" deliberately intact during colonial rule for political and economic purposes (e.g., indirect rule) (Mamdani 1996). Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the spectacle attendant with punishment in the *ancien regime* "disappears" and is replaced by the prison (Foucault 1979, pp. 7–8). Foucault restricts this "transformation" (in his words) to Europe, but the realities of imperial history upend his characterization and this reflective spatial qualifier. The British colonial state in India did not respond to the "Indian Mutiny" with a panopticon but with public brutality that involved executions, "hangings and floggings" and spectacles such as "blowing rebels from the cannon's mouth" (Connell 2006, p. 261). France's colonies from Saigon to Senegal to Algeria saw spectacular violence too. As Rosalind Morris points out, "if it is true that the 'slackening of the hold on the body' and the 'decline of spectacle' marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe ... it remained profoundly central to colonial regimes" (Morris 2002, p. 265). While Foucault qualifies his narrative spatially to Europe, this gesture itself gets at the heart of the issue: his theory arbitrarily cuts "Europe" off from its colonies—as if imperial and colonial history were *not also Europe's history*. Such separation or bifurcation may render the theoretical categories themselves inadequate. In Foucault's analytic, exactly when, where, and for whom does "disciplinary power" as opposed to the spectacle dominate? In Giddens's theory, what are the boundaries of "tribal society" or "capitalist class society" such that their interrelations can be ignored? In Durkheim's theory, are the colonial societies by which he theorized "mechanical solidarity" included in the "organic solidarity" presumably felt by the imperial metropole ruling them?

While the repression of imperial history leads to analytical separations, so too does the assumption that Europe is the sole originator and agent of history without any contributions from other places or in the absence of relations with others. One manifestation is the theory of "world society" and related studies of global diffusion that purport to give cultural accounts of global modernity (Meyer 1980, 1999; Meyer et al. 1987, 1997). Sociologists first discussed "diffusion" as a matter of "imitation." Gabriel Tarde was the founding sociologist of this approach: for him, things first spread across space as social actors blindly imitate others. His exemplars include children imitating adults and "natives" in the non-western world imitating whites (exactly because, in the classificatory scheme of Tarde's time, natives *were* children) (Tarde 1903). Current theories of world society and diffusion rehearse the same structure in their analytic logic. Meyer et al. claim forthrightly that modernity originates in the metropolitan core and *then* diffuses throughout the rest of the world-system (Meyer 1999, p. 138; Meyer et al. 1997, p. 168).

This theory, by its very categorical scheme, centers Europe as the origin of all things and makes Europe the prime agent. Eurocentric universalism in modernization theory makes its reappearance. Still, the problem is not that things actually do not “diffuse” or ideas or practices do not spread. We know (even if neoinstitutional theories of diffusion do not take seriously) that colonialism served as a mechanism through which things, practices, and ideas have flowed. The problem is what gets elided in the theoretical approach. We cannot see, for instance, the ways in which the presumably essential unchanging thing that spreads might get refashioned or reconstructed along the way or how it may have been forged through interactive relations in the first place. It may very well be that our modern notion of human rights emerges from key discourses and events in the West and that the concept of rights has diffused to other parts of the world. But what would not be captured in existing sociological theories of diffusion is how the notion of rights has been able to diffuse partly as a dialectical response to western imperial domination; or that the very reason it has been able to resonate with non-Western peoples (and therefore more easily diffuse) is because non-Western peoples *already* have their own indigenous or preexisting local discourses of rights from which to work (Go 2008a; Karlstrom 1996; Manela 2006). Also occluded is how the ostensibly diffused modern thing itself has a history that belies notions of European originality. Theories of world society insist that documents like the U.S. constitution spread to non-Western societies that unconsciously mimic it but those theories are blind to how the U.S. constitution itself was partly modeled upon and inspired by Native-American political forms (Grinde and Johansen 1991). The problematic assumption, reflected in the theory, is that diffusion always and only happens when it is from the West to the Rest; a unilinear flow. What gets lost are interactive *relations*.

In short, sociology’s Orientalism, Eurocentrism, and suppression of imperial history are problematic not just in themselves but also because they lead us to analytically bifurcate connections and thus overlook the real social relations by which sociologists’ main object—“modern society” and its boundaries—has been constituted. How, then, to proceed? What would a postcolonial sociology entail exactly?

### Postcolonial possibilities

While postcolonial theory has not been as dominant in sociology as it has been in the humanities, its subtle influence can be seen in relatively recent lines of scholarship that implicitly or explicitly offer strategies for meeting the postcolonial challenge. For example, some sociologists have directed attention away from strictly Western phenomena and towards non-Western civilizations, postcolonial societies, and social processes in the global south. This has produced valuable studies on construction of alternative modernities, appropriations of modernity in non-Western societies, new urban studies in Latin America, and debates over the “rise of the west” as compared with the supposed stagnation of the east (Amin 1989; Frank 1998; Goldstone 2000; Goody 2004, 2006 cf. Bryant 2006; for a review of some of the new historical sociology, see Adams et al. 2005). Other studies by historical sociologists have begun to explore imperialism, colonialism, and colonialism’s legacies. This work offers new insights on colonial states, colonial cultures, racialization, and postcolonial development (e.g., Barkey 2008; Mahoney 2010; Mawani 2009; Prasad 2006; Steinmetz

2007), amounting to what I (Go 2009) have called a “new sociology of empire and colonialism.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, while this new literature makes progress, not all of it is effective in meeting the postcolonial critique. New studies of non-Western societies and alternative modernities help overcome Eurocentrism, for instance, but they might also simply reverse Eurocentrism in the other direction. This would leave sociology’s analytic bifurcations intact and reinscribe metrocentrism of a new sort—perhaps exacting a “postcolonial revenge” but not effectively meeting the postcolonial challenge (Gandhi 1998, p. x; Chakrabarty 2000, p. 16). Needed, rather, are studies of the relations *between* non-Western or southern societies and other spaces (Bhambra 2007a, pp. 56–79). Furthermore, while historical sociologists have made advances by turning attention to imperialism or colonialism, some of it still focuses on such things as the metropolitan causes of imperialism, the formation of colonial policies, or the subjectivity of colonial officials. This devolves into an analysis of the colonizers alone, perilously neglecting the agency of colonized actors and the voices of subaltern peoples. The elision of imperial history is no longer a problem but Eurocentrism is reinscribed at the very point of its possible erasure (Go 2009, pp. 8–10; exceptions include Charrad 2001; Go 2008a, b; Grosfoguel 2003; Prasad 2006).

A final problem is that some studies of colonialism may end up doing little else than turning colonialism or colonial discourse into a new “independent variable.” In the event, analytic bifurcations would still persist and conventional sociology’s underlying assumptions would be maintained rather than challenged. At best, postcolonial theory is domesticated into something that only provides analysts with new causal factors to add to otherwise traditional explanatory accounts. Yet, as Bhambra (2007a, p. 143) insists, postcolonial sociology should not just rewrite traditional accounts but also rewrite the very assumptions upon which our accounts are mounted (see also Go 2009, pp. 9–10).<sup>10</sup> It remains to be seen whether just adding studies of colonialism into our mix can accomplish this.<sup>11</sup> Just as studying women does not itself make for feminist theory, neither does studying colonialism in itself make for meeting the postcolonial challenge.

A different approach influenced by postcolonial theory is “indigenization,” as Alatas (2006a) and Sitas (2006, pp. 364–366) call it; and a related strand of “Southern Theory” (Connell 2007). The goal of indigenization is to craft new theory and research that is based upon non-Western thinkers and postcolonial experiences. Here scholars indeed look at colonialism or postcolonial and non-western societies but in ways that do not reinscribe Eurocentrism or merely reverse it. For instance, rather than just studying imperialists and colonizers or adding colonialism as a variable into standard sociological accounts, scholars creatively mine and deploy non-Western

<sup>9</sup> Some of this work has even been lauded professionally, as books on colonialism or empire have won book awards from the Comparative-Historical Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association (e.g., Barkey 2008; Steinmetz 2007)

<sup>10</sup> This applies to the tendency among some sociologists to reduce postcolonial theory’s contribution down to its analysis of representations of the colonized or to colonial discourse. As I have argued, postcolonial theory offers sociology much more than this. For an early critique of studies of “colonial discourse” in history, see Parry (1987).

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, though scholars like W.E.B. DuBois wrote much about postcolonial themes, and while sociologists have begun to pay DuBois new attention, much of the new work remains focused on North America and it overlooks Dubois’s global focus, as Morris (2007) argues.

knowledges in order to capture the felt experiences of colonialism, the voice and agency of colonized peoples, and the dilemmas and pathways of postcolonial societies. Scholars look to the nascent sociologies of underrepresented thinkers and traditions, like Jose Rizal in the Philippines, Rabindranath Tagore in India, or the African oral tradition (Akiwowo 1986; Alatas 2006a; Connell 2007; Patel 2010). Rather than relying on Max Weber alone for insights on the societies of the Middle East, they might instead turn to Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn (Alatas 2006b). Or rather than just Karl Marx to think about Latin America, they might instead look at Simon Bolivar, Jose Martí, or more recently Nestor García Canclini (García Canclini 1995; Sosa Elizaga 2006).

Scholars working in this approach implicitly take up the tradition of standpoint theory (e.g., Harding and Hintikka 2003), recapturing the voices and experiences of common colonized subjects and postcolonial peoples as well as theorists writing in colonial or postcolonial contexts. In this sense, indigenized sociology is arguably akin to Spivak's methodological approach known as "strategic essentialism" (Spivak and Harasym 1990). It is also what makes it akin to what Connell calls "Southern Theory" or "subaltern" sociology (Burawoy 2008; Connell 2007; Mignolo 2000, 2009). As Connell (2007) notes, this is a sociology that produces "dirty theory": rather than theories such as Bourdieu's or Coleman's that posit abstract universal actors and structures devoid of particular experiences, these are theories that aim "to illuminate a situation in its concreteness" (p. 207). It would thus overcome sociology's universalizing abstractions and redirect theoretical attention to experiences such as "dispossession and loss" (Connell 2007, pp. 222, 224).<sup>12</sup> Or as Alatas (2006a, p. 22) suggests, an indigenous sociology would ensure that sociology, which "mostly originated in the West," can actually meet the "needs and problems of Third World societies." Unlike some of the new historical sociology on colonialism that only focuses on colonizers, attention is finally paid to the agency and voice of colonized and postcolonial actors.

### Another route: relations and reconstructions

While the strategy of indigenizing sociology is one route towards a new postcolonial sociology, I draw upon insights by Bhabra (2007a), Magubane (2005) and Patel (2006) to propose another. In this approach, at stake is not just whether we study colonialism or whether our theories are "European" but also whether our studies overcome sociology's analytic bifurcations. The idea is straightforward enough: if one of the limits of conventional sociology is that it analytically bifurcates social relations, a postcolonial sociology might also seek to *reconnect those relations* that have been covered up in standard sociological accounts—regardless of whether those theories are of the north or of the south, or whether they are about colonialism or not. More specifically, I suggest that this strategy of reconnection would involve, at the

<sup>12</sup> There is a parallel here with postcolonial approaches in literary studies, that is, the call for non-Western authors and texts that make up the study of non-Anglophone "Commonwealth" literature. On this count too Southern Theory is akin to feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding and Hintikka 2003) or Black Feminist Theory (Hill Collins 2000) that makes the concrete experiences of actors the starting point of inquiry.

level of social theory, *relational* over substantialist understandings of the social world; and, as historical sociology, the deployment of these relational theories to *reconstruct* otherwise bifurcated histories and connections.

Edward Said's insistence that postcolonial studies should attend to "overlapping territories" and "intertwined histories" offers initial insight into this strategy of a relationally-based postcolonial sociology. For Said, this means narratives that are "common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and the peripheries, past as well as present and future." It means recognizing that the "experiences of ruler and ruled [colonizer and colonized] were not so easily disentangled" (Said 2003, 1993, p. 20; see also Bhabra 2007b, p. 31).<sup>13</sup> I suggest that a postcolonial sociology would proceed similarly. Rather than focusing narrowly upon processes within societies (western, colonized, or non-Western) or even just *between* them (as in *inter-national* studies), it *would track the processes and relations between diverse but connected spaces in the making and remaking of modernity*.

In taking this stance I draw upon ideas in Patel (2006), Magubane (2005) and Bhabra (2007a). Patel (2006, p. 392) argues that sociology's goal should not be to study "the colonizers *or* the natives, rather the interrelationship *between* them" (emphasis added). Magubane (2005) likewise suggests that attending to overlapping territories and intertwined histories can help restore sociology's "global imagination" (to play upon C. Wright Mills). Bhabra (2007a) enlists Said's notion of "interdependent histories" and the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (2005) concept of "connected histories" in order to articulate her novel and important project for postcolonial sociology. Still, to realize the full potential of these insights, further clarification and elaboration is needed. For instance, both world-systems and dependency theory already offer approaches for reconnecting histories. Frank's dependency theory critiqued development studies and offered a notion of the social as a chain of metropole-satellite relations (where metropolises and satellites were social places not necessarily nation-states) (Frank 1967). Wallerstein's world-systems approach also theorized connections across spaces on a global scale (Wallerstein 1980, 1974). So why not just enlist these theories for reconnecting relations?

While both world-systems and dependency offer respectively different yet crucial insights for a postcolonial project, they also carry their limitations—not least their exclusive focus upon economic processes and their comparative elision of race/ethnicity or gender relations. They pay some attention to ideology and culture but the primary categories remain strictly economic ("metropole," "satellite," "core," "periphery," etc.). And when gender or race appears, it is subsumed into the category of socioeconomic class. This runs against the grain of much postcolonial theory that is interested in culture, ideology, and racial relations as much as economic relations (Grosfoguel 2002, pp. 218–220).

A different way to ground a postcolonial sociology is to first recognize theories premised upon *relationalism* as opposed to substantialism. Substantialism insists that the basic units and actors of sociological inquiry are substances or essences: as in things, beings or even "systems." These substances are treated as static agents; they do the acting and reacting and retain their identity throughout (Emirbayer 1997, pp. 283–286). The starting point for substantialism, then, is to posit durable and coherent

<sup>13</sup> Said noted that Fanon's and Césaire's work set the groundwork for this strategy (Said 2003).

entities that “possess emergent properties” such as groups, nations, cultures, and other reified substances (Emirbayer 1997, p. 285). In this sense, world-systems theory, which posits a single global structure, would be considered substantialist. So too would classical sociological theories that posit a unified “culture” or single “society” containing intrinsic properties to which any analysis must reduce. Methodological nationalism as well as methodological individualism could also be considered two variants of substantialist methodology (Chernilo 2006).

In contrast, a relational ontology does not posit essences but relations that constitute the ostensible essences in the first place. Things “are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but ... again their whole being ... first in and with the relations which are predicated of them” (Cassirer 1953, p. 36; Emirbayer 1997, p. 287). Anything that appears as an essential trait is seen only as “a *relational* property existing only in and through its relation with other properties.” (Bourdieu 1998). As Emirbayer summarizes: “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 287). Therefore, rather than presuming an abstract essence or substance in which agency and identity is located, relationalism insists that connections or interactions between terms or units are constitutive. These relations accordingly assume analytic priority. Relationalism, as Dewey and Bentley (1949, p. 112) put it, entails “the seeing together ... of what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart.”

The relevance for postcolonial theory might already be evident. For instance, Said’s master work *Orientalism* and subsequent critiques of “colonial discourse” are implicit critiques of substantialist ontologies from the standpoint of relationalism. Discourse that essentializes and homogenizes the Other are forms of substantialist thinking; the counter-claim that the Orient is constructed through discourse in opposition to the Occident (and attendant poststructuralist claim about the resulting instability of identity) is a relationalist claim. Similarly, the insight that metropole and colony were mutually constituted is a relationalist understanding, as opposed to methodological nationalism—a substantialist approach—which presumes that a metropolitan nation or Europe is an isolated coherent agent abstracted from wider relations. Furthermore, existing accounts of diffusion assume an original thing or substance that diffuses from Europe to the Rest, while relationalism would insist that the presumed thing was first constituted and continually reconstituted through concrete relations as it ostensibly diffuses. In relational thought, there would be precious little allowance for metrocentrism.

It follows that relational theories might help for developing a postcolonial sociology that aims to overcome metrocentrism and analytic bifurcation. In other words, whether or not we study colonialism or whether our theories are written by non-Westerners is not what matters; what matters rather is whether our accounts capture *relations*. To illustrate this, I discuss two existing relational theories in sociology that have been forged in and for Western sociology but which, I show, can redeployed to critically illuminate areas of traditional interest to historical sociology. I first discuss actor-network theory (ANT) and illustrate how it offers a postcolonial account of cotton textile production and industrialization in Britain. I then discuss field theory, which I argue can reorient existing approaches to the French Revolution.

## Actor-networks and industrialization

Actor-network theory is typically known for its emphasis upon non-human agents.<sup>14</sup> But I would argue that it offers other insights that make it especially amenable to a postcolonial sociology. First, exemplifying a relational perspective, ANT does not assume that societies, groups, nations, or any social entities are substances. Instead “the social” consists of networks of relations (or “connections”) among humans, materials, and ideas. They are “patterned networks of heterogeneous materials” that are continually in formation and contestation (Latour 2005, pp. 25–28; Law 1992, p. 2). This relationalist approach circumvents the confining lenses of methodological nationalism or substantialist theories like world-systems theory. The unit would not be a nation-state or a world-system; instead ANT would urge us to follow transnational relations and networks that might cut across metropole and colony, East and West, or center and periphery. While this makes ANT akin to, say, dependency theory, it also means that ANT goes further and incorporates the cultural/semiotic dimensions of colonialism of interest to postcolonial studies. ANT defines actor-networks as consisting of people, things, and concepts; they are material and semiotic, human and non-human. Unlike economic studies of imperialism, therefore, the focus is not just upon economic relations (this also makes ANT different from social network theory, where ideas or material elements do not play a part in the network).

A proper enlistment of ANT has relevance for a postcolonial sociology in other ways.<sup>15</sup> First, given its relational premises, ANT would be critical of narratives asserting European originality or that confine agency to colonizers or metropolitan actors. Agency is not a trait but “an effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting, materials” (Law 1992, p. 4). Likewise, it would allow us to consider processes across boundaries in terms other than diffusion. Rather than a Eurocentric narrative that locates modern capitalism, democracy, or civilization in a core that then spreads outwards, actor-network theory invites us to consider how preexisting chains of relations (“heterogeneous networks”) are “consolidated” from their diverse points into an overarching whole (Law 1992). As actor-network theory would have it, the effect of this is the appearance of an entity or actor that has agentic characteristics and that seems to have come from a single geographic origin (Bockman and Eyal 2002). But this is only an *appearance*; an effect of the network itself. Extended in this manner, ANT facilitates a critique of and alternative to metrocentric accounts that attribute agency and innovation in modernity to the metropole alone.

An examination of cotton textile production and industrialization in Britain illustrates these potential contributions of ANT. Historians and historical sociologists have long been interested in the mechanization of cotton textiles production in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because it marks the beginnings of the industrial revolution. Mechanization, which began in Lancashire and Manchester,

<sup>14</sup> The body of literature that goes under “actor-network theory” is large and there are varieties within. Seminal or illustrative works include Callon (1986), Latour (2005) and Law (1986).

<sup>15</sup> Prakash accuses Latour of failing “to take into account empire’s constitutive role in the formation of the West,” but this does not mean that the conceptual apparatus of actor-network theory could not be useful for postcolonial studies (Prakash 1999, p. 12). Prakash here attacks the *empirical* account Latour offers but this is distinct from its theoretical potentiality. Kempel and Mawani (2009) and Bhambra (2007b) also highlight the potential of ANT for postcolonial studies though my deployment differs in its focus upon relationality.

initiated England's industrial "take-off" (Hobsbawm 1968, p. 63). Existing accounts of this foundational process have taken at least two forms. One is to emphasize the importance of inventions like Hargreaves' cotton-spinning jenny, Arkwright's water frame, or Crompton's subsequent mule and then trace the spread of these machines across England and eventually around the West. This is the story of English ingenuity and subsequent diffusion that puts Europe at the center of modernity and assumes European agency. Another is to explain why England industrialized first. These often explain English success with internalist accounts. Ever since Arnold Toynbee's conventional analysis (Toynbee 1884), these accounts emphasize either English ingenuity or various conditions within England such as demography (Crafts 1977; Crouzet 1990; Mann 1993, pp. 93–96; O'Brien 2006). Related stories compare England with other countries. India is a favored example, because it had been the dominant manufacturer of textiles through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries up until England overtook it. The comparative strategy here has been to pinpoint what India lacked that prevented it from industrializing (Landes 1999).

An actor-network approach would lead us in different directions. Foremost, it would urge us to consider the wider actor-networks in which English textile production had been embedded. To be sure, as Bhambra (2007b, pp. 135–138) highlights, the problem with the paired comparison between English and Indian cotton textile production is that it assumes the two industries were separated when in fact they had been connected for a long time (i.e., a variant of "Galton's problem"). This connection is not analytically reducible to Wallerstein's core-periphery relationship. It was not unidimensionally hierarchical (in fact India's industry initially dominated the English home market) and did not just involve material exchange. The connection consisted of ideas and knowledge too. While Indian textiles initially dominated the market, India also supplied the fabric for Britain's nascent industry and the technological knowledge (such as weaving and dyeing) for producing the finish products (Goody 2006, pp. 86–90; Washbrook 1997). Rather than two separate sites that could be abstracted and compared, then, the two industries formed but two parts of a wider heterogeneous network stretching between Britain and India and beyond. The *appearance* of a single English industry with its own internal dynamics outside of its relations with India was a practical accomplishment of "network ordering" that an actor-network approach would problematize rather than leave unattended (Law 1992).

An ANT approach likewise facilitates a postcolonial account of the emergence of machine-intensive technologies in England and, therefore, why mechanization happened in England in the first place. While existing internalist accounts might stress English ingenuity or special domestic factors, ANT's relational lens would alert us to a wider heterogeneous network that enabled ingenuity and in which domestic factors were embedded. First, textile imports to England from India and elsewhere in Asia helped transfer knowledge that set the conditions for England's own domestic cotton industry; their introduction served as "actants"—in ANT terms—which expanded European markets for textiles (Berg 2004, pp. 102–104, 122–124). Second, competition within the transnational actor-network sparked the search for the labor-saving technologies (the jenny and the water-frame) in the first place. While domestic markets were partially protected by tariffs beginning in the early eighteenth century, English producers still had to compete with Indian producers in the European market

as well as with illicit Indian imports in the domestic market. Yet labor was notoriously less expensive in India than in England; this price difference and subsequent competition then compelled the search for and spread of labor saving technologies in England (Bayly 2004, pp. 173–176; Broadberry and Bishnupriya 2009). “Lancashire mill owners synchronized the use they made of machinery tended by child pauper apprentice spinners and the spun yarn of India’s thousands of rural female spinners” (Berg 2007, p. 338). In this sense, industrialization “was an Indian ... achievement” as much as an English innovation (ibid.).<sup>16</sup>

The point is not that ANT explains everything that we would want to know. The point is that it alerts us to relations and connections that existing approaches would occlude by their analytic bifurcations. Even Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis of industrialization, for instance, overlooks India’s contributions. This is due to its categorical scheme and its substantialist ontology. In the world-systems approach, India was “external” to the European world-system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Therefore, it did not play a significant role in the formation of European capitalism. Only when areas became “incorporated” into the world-system as “peripheries” do they warrant attention. In Wallerstein’s account, India only becomes fully incorporated after 1800, i.e., *after* mechanization in England had already been initiated (Wallerstein 1989, pp. 137–140). Therefore India has no place in the account of English mechanization. The theoretical categories of world-system analysis, which sees transnational relations only in terms of its strict core-periphery hierarchy, blind us to the actor-networks that enabled English achievement. The virtue of ANT’s categories and relational ontology is to facilitate rather than obstruct analyses of these networks. In this way it helps fulfill an examination of “intertwined histories” (to return to Said’s phrasing) in the making of modernity while showing how relations from afar were not external to the formation of European modernity but instead “deeply inscribed” in it (Hall 1996b, p. 246; Magubane 2005).

### Fields, Haiti, and the French Revolution

Another example to explore is the French Revolution of 1789–1799. Historians and social scientists alike have long heralded the French Revolution as a monumental event in modern history (Sewell 1996a; Skocpol 1979; Skocpol and Kestnbaum 1990; Wallerstein 1990). The French Revolution has figured as a “story of the origins of the modern world” that establishes European identity as modern (Bhambra 2007b, p. 107). Brubaker (1992) summarizes the long-standing view that the French Revolution “invented” modern national citizenship, bringing “together for the first time” ideals of civil equality, political rights, and the “link between citizenship and nationhood” (Brubaker 1992, p. 35). Others highlight how the Revolution was the first to have “granted equal political rights to free blacks and emancipated the slaves (1794) long before any other slaveholding nation” (Hunt 2007, p. 160). This story of the Revolution could sit happily with conventional sociological accounts of diffusion that treat France as the “mother and repository of the universalist language of rights”

<sup>16</sup> Some have argued that import-substitution in England with tariffs against Indian calicoes explains mechanization (O’Brien et al. 1991), but this overlooks the wider network, which included the European and not just English markets.

(Dubois 2000, p. 22). Once the valiant French revolutionaries invented and codified this universalist language, it then spread to other parts of the globe to make the modern world (Fehér 1990; Skocpol and Kestnbaum 1990, p. 27).

C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1963) offers a different perspective. Rather than putting the French revolution, or indeed European revolutions, at the center of history, James puts the Haitian revolution at the center, thus inviting a reconsideration of the French revolution itself by virtue of his analysis of the Haitian revolution. James reminds us that France was economically dependent upon its overseas colonies like Saint Domingue that, along with Guadeloupe and St. Martinique, had been among the world's most lucrative slave-holding colonies. He explains that the fortunes created from the slave trade supported the revolutionary bourgeoisie; and many of the National Assembly members relied upon colonial trade for their own wealth (James 1963, pp. 31–61; see also Magubane 2005, p. 107). In this sense, liberty in Paris depended upon slavery in the colonies. But James further explains how the French revolution was connected to the Haitian slave revolt in critical ways, showing how the slave revolt compelled the French revolutionaries to rethink their own beloved concepts of freedom and liberty (James 1963, pp. 119–121).

As a historical narrative, James's story fulfills the postcolonial challenge of overcoming analytic bifurcations. Hence Magubane (2005, p. 101) rightly refers to *The Black Jacobins* as one of the founding texts of postcolonial studies. But as a social theory rather than a particular story, what might we learn? What type of social theory, transposable to other contexts, does James's analysis summon? One way to think about James's narrative is to consider it for its relational aspects. Specifically, I would suggest that Pierre Bourdieu's field theory can be deployed to do justice to James's account (Bourdieu 1984; see also Martin 2003). In Bourdieu's approach, fields are arenas of struggle over species of capital. The actors, their habitus, and the capital at stake in distinct fields can only be understood in relation to each other. A field is a "network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 97). While the field concept has typically been used to refer to intra-national or local arenas of action (like a professional field), one of its possible virtues is to alert us to terrains of action that cut across national boundaries. The boundaries of fields are at times blurry but always potentially extensive; the boundaries themselves are often the site of struggle and therefore can expand, contract, or be redrawn (Swartz 1997, p. 121). This means that, analytically, fields might not just be restricted to sites *within* a single society or nation. We might thus think of *transnational* or trans-, intra- or inter-imperial fields; fields of interaction and struggle between actors (over different species of capital) that extend across conventional nation-state boundaries. Recognizing wider transnational fields of action is thus another analytic move away from methodological nationalism (Go 2008b).

In terms of the French Revolution, a fields approach offers an angle that more closely approximates James's analysis than conventional metrocentric accounts. Rather than seeing unilateral flows of influence from France outward, a fields approach urges us to consider revolutionary actors in wide arenas of struggle and conflict, interacting and (re)shaping each other. To be sure, the Parisian revolutionaries were not just struggling against conservative loyalists at home. They were embedded in wider transnational, inter- and intra-imperial fields of interaction that

included challenges from imperial rivals like Britain and potential problems in France's colonies in the Caribbean, not least Saint Domingue. Expanding the lens to include these wider fields is exactly James's approach. First, the intra-imperial economic field that included the Caribbean colonies was vital for the Revolution, as James (1963) points out. Second, there was a political-ideological intra-imperial field wherein Parisian revolutionaries interacted with a wide range of political actors, including groups in the Caribbean like the *gens de couleur* (freemen of African descent), French settlers and planters, bureaucrats, and slaves. From Paris to Nantes to Saint Domingue, all these groups were engaged in various "struggles for position" (in Bourdieu's famous phrase) to define and shape the Revolution.

One of the key issues at stake in this latter struggle amidst the Revolution was citizenship. As the Parisian assemblies and Enlightenment intellectuals debated the rights of man, the *gens de couleur* pushed the race question on the table. They argued that the new French citizenship status should not be restricted by color. The assemblies initially tried to silence the question, but the slave revolt in 1791 in Saint Domingue changed everything. The Paris assemblies "now had to take seriously the question they had initially avoided: *gens de couleur* should be treated as citizens independent of their race" (Cooper 2007, p. 51). Thus, while the *gens de couleur* mobilized, so too did the rebelling slaves indirectly push the question of "whose rights?" onto the Revolutions' agenda. And as loyalists in Saint Domingue flirted with the English, French Republicans realized that they needed not only the *gens de couleur* on their side but also the slave insurgents if they were to maintain their position vis-à-vis both the English and their enemy loyalists. Accordingly, local officials in Saint Domingue finally freed the slaves (1793) and the National Convention (1794) ratified the act. The result was a new colonial order "in which the principles of universalism were put into effect through regimes that applied the same constitution in the metropole and the colony." In short, it was not Parisian intellectuals or revolutionaries themselves but their colonial subjects who gave the French revolution a "universalizing" character. The "slave insurgents claiming Republican citizenship and racial equality during the early 1790s ultimately expanded—and 'universalized'—the idea of rights." The actions of slave insurgents "brought about the institutionalization of the idea that the rights of citizens were universally applicable to all people within the nation, regardless of race" (Dubois 2000, p. 22).

Standard sociological accounts of diffusion would compel us to think of the Parisian revolutionaries as the center from which novel modern ideas emanated. It is true that Enlightenment thinkers in France played a part in conceiving of the idea of universal rights. But whereas diffusion stories are obliged to stop there, a fields approach in the spirit of James's analysis enables us to see this and subsequent processes for their relational aspects. A field is not a space wherein ideas or action flows unidirectionally from one point to another. Rather than searching for origins, it has us map *relational* stances and positions. And rather than an outward flow it posits *interactions* between actors engaged in struggle and exchange, alliance and confrontation. While not denying power differentials (i.e., differential access to economic, social, or symbolic capital) across actors, it nonetheless highlights mutual constitution and interdependent action *between* them. Unlike conventional diffusionist accounts, therefore, recognizing the wider field of discourse and interaction in which the Parisian revolutionaries were embedded alerts us to the "overlapping territories" (in

Said's sense) that made the “French” Revolution both French *and* Haitian; a story of master *and* slave, metropole as well as colony.<sup>17</sup>

### Reconsidering theory

The foregoing empirical examinations are not meant to be exhaustive or conclusive. The point is to illustrate how these relational theories might illuminate existing historical sociological problems in ways that better meet the postcolonial challenge. As shown, the relational ontologies of actor-network theory and field theory can alert us to important relations and connections across space that conventional narratives and theories occlude but that have been critical for the making and remaking of modernity. This is not to *assume* that there have always been important connections between events or processes in metropolitan centers and those elsewhere in the making of modernity. The relations between metropole and colony, East and West, or center and periphery remain matters of empirical investigation. And exactly *how* those relations matter is an empirical question. The point here is that sociology's European metrocentrism has led historical sociologists to close off these questions. We are led to close them off by substantialist thinking; that is, by *assuming* that Europe is the center of modernity, the originator and agent of all things, and that its metropolises act outside of wider global relations and networks. And we are led to close off the questions by using these assumptions as premises for middle-range theories of diffusion, world society, industrialization, revolutions, or states. Alternatively, a redeployment of relational thinking for a postcolonial historical sociology would reorient our lenses and open up new questions about overlapping territories and intertwined histories that have been conventionally occluded.

Relational theories such as ANT and field theory are tools for meeting this goal. Of course, neither ANT nor field theory are “theories” in the conventional sense that they offer positivist explanations entailing universal covering laws or specifying distinct variables. But inasmuch as they open up the possibility of analyzing expansive relations that would otherwise be analytically bifurcated, they can guide us towards novel explanations that help challenge conventional ways of explanation in the first place. For example, enlisting field theory does not necessarily propose a new explanation for the French Revolution. But it does help us understand why revolutionaries abolished slavery: they did so in *reaction* to colonial actors in Saint Domingue and against royalist enemies and the British alike. The slave revolt would then not be seen as a “variable” but rather as an event that made for a significant turning point in the Revolution. Rather than a positivist sociology, a postcolonial sociology of the Revolution would help serve an “eventful sociology” (Sewell 1996a, b), yet one that does not restrict important events to their European origin.

Similarly, theorizing the British and Indian textile industries as part of an actor-network does not lead us to argue that India alone somehow “caused” the Industrial

<sup>17</sup> Recent work on colonialism and imperialism has employed Bourdieu's field concept also (e.g., Go 2008b; Steinmetz 2007, 2008). But whereas some of this work uses field theory to incorporate the agency of colonized peoples and relations between metropole and colony, others only use it to focus on colonizers themselves (e.g., the field of relations among colonial officials), thereby neglecting how colonized peoples should also be incorporated into the analysis as more than objects but as actors.

Revolution. Historians and social scientists have debated similar questions about causes, but the debates remain trapped in a statistical ontology of causation where causes are additive: if the contributions in capital or technology from India to the Industrial Revolution are not greater than from within Britain, Britain's relations with India are not important enough and can be dismissed. Thinking of the actor-network, though, more closely corresponds with an alternative approach to causation: causes are conjunctural, equifinal, and follow the logic of necessary/sufficient (Goertz and Starr 2003; Mahoney and Goertz 2006, pp. 232–233; Mahoney et al. 2009). In this case, recognizing the actor-network suggests that while Britain's relationship with India may not have "caused" British take-off, it was a necessary condition for it; and so we are able to see how the two histories of India and Britain were intertwined rather than separated. In this sense, ANT theory enables us not to add just another cause in an otherwise standard additive account but rather to offer "descriptive assemblages" that need not reduce to the confines of statistical thinking about causation (Savage 2009).

Still, skeptics might wonder whether the use of relational theories and especially European theories like ANT or field theory is counter-productive. Would not a true postcolonial sociology look elsewhere, beyond the West? As noted, the project of localizing or "indigenizing" sociology meets this challenge. Yet one of the goals of this article has been to show that a postcolonial sociology might also redeploy theory for its own ends—assuming, that is, that the theory deployed does not fall into the trap of substantialist ontologies. Regardless of their geographical origins or their abstractions, relational theories like ANT or field theory—when used to analyze transnational, interimperial, or intra-imperial dynamics or processes—permit a transcendence of metrocentrism and can help us meet the postcolonial challenge.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that postcolonial theory offers a challenge to sociology—and social theory and historical sociology in particular—by highlighting sociology's imperialistic unconscious. By its European metrocentrism (Orientalism, Eurocentric universalism, and occlusion of imperialism) and analytic bifurcations, much of sociology reproduces and mirrors the wider culture of Northern dominance. If it is true that sociology in Europe and the United States originated as a rationalist attempt to grasp the new social relations attendant with the transition to modernity, then it has failed in this founding endeavor, precisely because of its tendency to bifurcate in theory the relations and processes—the "intertwined histories"—that have been fundamental to modernity in history.

Yet this article has argued that, contrary to the claims of skeptical strands within postcolonial studies, postcolonial theory and sociology are not fundamentally incompatible. Implicitly at least, postcolonial theory already depends upon sociological thinking. And social theory and historical sociology can meet the postcolonial challenge not by eschewing sociological thought altogether but with analyses that circumvent European metrocentrism, analytic bifurcation, and their epistemological ally: substantialism. Specifically, by deploying relational theories such as ANT and field theory, historical sociology can analytically reconnect ostensibly bifurcated

relations and thus produce new postcolonial accounts of the making and continual remaking of modernity. This postcolonial approach, therefore, is not defined by whether it focuses upon non-Western societies. Nor is it defined by whether it studies colonialism or imperialism, or whether it originates in the postcolony. It is defined by its relational assumptions and its attempt to apply relational thinking to apprehend social relations around the globe. This, I have argued, would make for a proper postcolonial sociology. It would be a postcolonial sociology that remains *sociological*; that does not, in other words, cast off sociological thought altogether (as the postmodern-poststructuralist variant of postcolonial theory would have it) but rather reenlists it for transcending its own colonialist legacy. It would also be a *postcolonial* sociology because it would analytically reconnect rather than bifurcate into false dichotomies the very social relations that sociological theory purports to apprehend (cf. Boatcă and Costa 2010). In this way, sociology can contribute to the postcolonial project of creating postcolonial knowledge and representations of the world while retaining its own intellectual identity. A postcolonial sociology that enlists sociology's own tools can help maintain sociology itself.

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