

Editorial

Is Critique Global?: Interlocutions from Ex-centric Sites of Enunciation

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Recent attempts to planetarize critique or critical theory in the light of growing demands for unseating theory from its Anglophonic or Euro-American monopoly have produced new constellations of decolonizing ideas (Bhambra 2021; Nigam 2020; Fernando 2019; Deutscher and Lafont 2017; Ciccariello-Meher, 2017; Dabashi 2016, Allen 2015; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Rabaka 2010; Asad et al., 2009). Quite interestingly, even the new *Routledge Companion to Frankfurt School* (Gordon, Hammer and Honneth 2018) incorporates a chapter on “Critical Theory and Postcolonialism”, imagining the “Frankfurt School Critical Theory and postcolonialism to be kindred, allied, or overlapping projects” (Ingram 2018, 500). This is both unassuming and reassuring given Edward Said’s critique, despite his calculated admiration for Adorno and the Frankfurt School critical theory in general, that it was “silent” on imperialist relations of dominance and resistance, questions of race and colonialism (see Allen 2017, 183).

Theory, therefore, in these “critical times” demands radical perspectival shifts, necessitating the query on how to “change the way we do theory?” (Nigam 2020, 1) – this happens to be the core and initial area of interrogation for Aditya Nigam in his *Decolonizing Theory: Thinking Across Traditions* (2020). The subtitle of Nigam’s book invokes both the grounds; eliciting a critical inquiry and the directions this transformed critical quest needs to adopt for reformulating the way we “do theory”. It posits for a republic of theories spanning “across traditions”, representing what Sudipta Kaviraj describes in his essay in this issue of *Kairos* as various “thought geographies” of the former colonies. This exercise of widening the theoretic cartography unmakes the usual hegemony of Anglophonic or Euro-American theory. Nigam commences his

theoretical interlocution with Marx's *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* that invoked the transition from abstract metaphysics or abstruse theory to the materialist task of "changing the world". Marx's insistence on explaining the human essence as "the ensemble of social relations" constitutes according to Nigam, his *Aufhebung* of philosophy" (Nigam, 2). 'Being' in this transformed theoretic configuration was to be deciphered only in its "relation to the socio-historical", hence this historical context or historicism assumed theoretic centrality and "posed a critical challenge to universalism in any form" (Nigam, 2), urging for a complete break from the tradition of mere metaphysical speculations, aligning rather more with contingencies of specific social and political life-worlds. Normative philosophy on the other hand, as Nigam posits, "rooted in the analytical tradition has long managed to insulate itself from the empirical historical world and argued strongly against any intrusion of the question of power or the empirical into its world, as philosophically illegitimate" (Nigam 2020, 3).

Export-led Model of Theory and Import Substitution

Critical theory, therefore, has so far predominantly flown from the West, scarcely accommodating any "reverse traffic" (ibid., 5) from the rest of the world, which has mostly been treated as "fields" for the collection of academic "raw materials" or the so-called ethnographic archive to forge theories to be produced in Euro-American academy. Nigam calls this practice "the colonial mode of knowledge production" (ibid., inquiring how to establish our "own manufactories, our own infrastructure" (ibid.) of knowledge production. Postcolonial theory according to Nigam has largely failed in doing this as it has for the most part stayed "within the terrain of Western social theory and very rarely, if at all, draws upon genealogies of intellection from the decolonized world" (ibid., 6) and that has been the "predicament of the Global South" leading to "cultural mutilation and epistemic dispossession" (ibid., 5). Put metaphorically, the obvious fall out of these developments has been, Prospero speaking through Caliban – "intellection in the colonized domains henceforth, takes place in the colonizer's language" (ibid., 6).

Global South academics, according to Nigam, are therefore confronted with two options – they can either produce theories tailor-made for the western or global market and Nigam called this first option the "export-led model" (ibid., 6). The alternative model on the other hand, can be:

an intellectual version of the import-substituting industrialization model, where we recognize that there cannot be an overnight transition to a new kind of social science and new theories to take the place of the old colonial ones, but nevertheless prioritize the requirements of our "home market", while working towards building the required theoretical infrastructure. We can call this the strategy of 'import substituting theorization' [...] theory should be first and foremost about our being as such, our specific conditions of existence, our choices, our ways of co-living, our relationship with

our larger ecology – and only secondarily about being saleable in the global market. (ibid., 6)

Nigam refers to the proposed model of Arindam Chakrabarty and Janardan Ganeri, proposing for what they call, “fusion philosophy”, “comparative philosophy without borders”, or “philosophy across the traditions” (ibid., 8). For Nigam, an argument that rallies for the philosophies of praxis, of the everyday, of *Bhat Kapoerer Bhabna O Koekti Aatpoure Darshon* (A. Chakrabarty, 2013), is one that draws upon:

philosophies from every region of the world, locally grounded in lived experience and reflection upon it, are finding new autonomous and authentic forms of articulation. Second, the philosophical industry, leaving behind a centre periphery mode of production, is becoming again polycentric: the philosophical world is returning to a plural and diverse network of productive sites. Third, Europe and other colonial powers have been provincialized, no longer mandatory conversation partners or points of comparison but rather unprivileged participants in a global dialogue. (Nigam 2000, 10)

This polycentric world with prospects for diverse networks of productive theoretic or philosophical sites prompts Nigam to look for an “outside” of the “all enveloping totalities of [Euro]modernity and capitalism”, reclining even to the corridors of the “paramodern” or the “puranic” to understand the local and the native reality (Nigam 2020, 12). One may recall here similar attempts of proposed decolonization in the recent volume titled *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Ciccariello-Maher 2017). In this compelling work, Ciccariello-Maher sets the tone for a reformulation of “old-fashioned” Hegelian dialectical thought, making it germane once again to the formation of anticolonial critical theory. At its core, *Decolonizing Dialectics* foregrounds the importance of dialectical thinking, providing a philosophical framework to ascertain the ground realities of anticolonial and anti-imperialist politics:

A decolonized dialectics recognizes both the historical source of that motion outside Europe in the colonies as well as the brutal reality that for colonial subjects, history often seems to move backward rather than forward, if it moves at all. If a radicalized dialectics questions the fixed linearity of dialectical movement and recognizes the subjective capacity to set relations into motion and change course, a decolonized dialectics sets out from the historical experience of those who have been instructed to either catch up with Europe by completing the necessary “stages” or to await “objective conditions” that are possible only under a full-fledged capitalism [...] I hope to [...] decolonizing Hegel himself. (Ciccariello-Maher 2017, 11)

As opposed to conventional and “stodgy ideas of dialectical materialism” (Etherington 2019, n.p.), Ciccariello-Maher offers alternative models, arguing how dialectical political theory predicated on the axiom of mutual recognition and relation among different classes is inapplicable in a hierarchic system and such relations of non-reciprocity are endemic to ideologies of colonial control. This requires new counter-currents of decolonization of the Hegelian-Marxian

tradition, “critiquing the assumption that all politics is one or another manifestation of the dialectic of capital and labour” (Etherington, 2019, n.p.). For Ciccariello-Maher, the classic dialectical model premised on the idea of the oppressor and the oppressed needs to be combined now with various identity-based political acts or decolonial politics prescribed by Fanon that confronts the problem of ontological denial. Given that, while commenting on Ciccariello-Maher’s argument, Ben Etherington (2019) has asked the pertinent question in the South Asian context whether “Gandhi’s program of satyagraha, built as it was on the strong assertion of precolonial Indian identity, obey a decolonised dialectic more so than that of a rationalist communist like M.N. Roy” (Etherington 2019, n.p.)? Critical scholars like Susan Buck-Morss have already excavated the Eurocentric proclivities of Hegel’s philosophy of dialectics. So, if critique is to be situated within the decolonized-dialectic, what about other foundational categories such as the “modern” and the “secular”?

Is Critique Secular?

If critique has exclusive Eurocentric inflections and stays un beholden to non-Western realities, how can it claim the status of normativity? That encourages further questions about its universal valence and presumptions, prompting, for instance, the likes of Talal Asad et al. (2009), to ask “Is Critique Secular?” Rallying around the question of ‘blasphemy’, ‘injury’, ‘Free Speech’, and other critical theoretical issues plaguing the post-9/11 world have motivated six thought-provoking contributions in the form of a book in 2009, with an introduction by Wendy Brown, two essays written by the leading thinkers Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, a response on these essays by Judith Butler, followed by the replies to Butler by Asad and Mahmood. This dialogic rendezvous probed into the “presumed secularism of [Euro-centric] critique” and tried to “bridge conventional divides between modern European critical theory and non-Western and post-Enlightenment critical theoretical projects” (ibid., 7). Issues of modernity, reason, and secularism have mostly consolidated the *otherization* of the non-West, stigmatizing them *en bloc* as ‘fundamentalist’, ‘retrogressive’ and ‘non-democratic’(ibid., 13-15; 23-24). Asad and his co-authors have militated against such normative presumptions of Euro-American critical theory.

In her introductory chapter to the book that emerged as a fall out of this dialogue, Wendy Brown argues how Western conception of “critique” remains strongly rooted in Enlightenment projects and carries a problematic “tacit presumption of reason’s capacity to unveil error” (2009, 9). The key question that arises in this process is how critical theory should re-define itself once secular conceptions of critique, its “founding planks” (ibid., 13), are challenged. Such foundational doubts demand, as Talal Asad claims, a “critique of “critique”, something that must begin with the genealogy of critique itself (2009, 144). In the same spirit, Saba Mahmood rallied for a critical theory

which is aware of its own deficient understanding of religious issues. Mahmood called for a critical dialogue, even from a postsecular perspective, across “the putative divide between Western and non-Western traditions of critique and practice” (2009, 91). To extend this enterprise further, Judith Butler concretized the task ahead for theory in the following way:

The ways to do this are various: through tracing internal contradictions, through comparing and contrasting alternative cultural lexicons for similar concepts, through offering a historical account of how a set of culturally specific assumptions became recast as universal and post-cultural. (2009, 116)

If colonialism entailed epistemic coercion of this “culturally specific assumptions recast as the universal” (ibid.), then decoloniality invokes the need for exposing the fallacies and cultural politics involved in this exercise, demanding for a theory from the fringe:

Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, uppercase; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West – variously known as the ancient world, the orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and now the global south – primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions [...] of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths, its axioms and certitudes, its premises, postulates, and principles. Euro-American social theory, as writers from the south have often observed (e.g., Chatterjee 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe 2001), has tended to treat modernity as though it were inseparable from *Aufklärung*, the rise of Enlightenment reason. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 1.2)

This is a reiterated plea for “provincializing Europe” (Chakrabarty, 2008), for a “globolectical” argument (wa Thiong’o, 2014), forging a republic of theories – something, easier said than done, keeping in mind the political economy of “export-led” Euro-American theory, to use the words of Nigam. Volumes like Jean-Michel Rabate’s *The Future of Theory* (2002) and other similar texts in this domain continue to wallow in old fashioned obsession with Western theory while prescribing a future road map of theory itself. We scarcely come across terms like “Africana Critical Theory” (Rabaka, 2010), “Global South Critical Theory” (Rehbein, 2015) in these attempts of forging an inclusive theoretic future. Earlier, the Subaltern Studies School attempted a critical historiography of the local and the everyday, forging their theoretic plexus from the heuristic and the grounded. Gayatri Spivak’s staunch critique of ‘theoretical catachresis’ performed by ‘hegemonic intellectuals’ of the Western academy in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) remains equally relevant even today. What is passed off as critique are, therefore, doubly-deferred readings of the World and that induced Spivak to bring in the distinction between “*vertreten*” and “*darstellen*” (both imply representation, but elides the politics of intellectual representation of the subaltern). Theory has to emanate from the world (in the Saidean sense

of “worlding”) and only then can it truly represent the realities of life, lending some perspectival arsenal to the wretched of the earth. Amilcar Cabral had exactly that in his mind when he delivered his speech entitled, “The Weapon of Theory” to the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America held in Havana in January 1966:

When the African peoples say in their simple language that “no matter how hot the water from your well, it will not cook your rice,” they express with singular simplicity a fundamental principle, not only of physics, but also of political science. We know that the development of a phenomenon in movement, whatever its external appearance, depends mainly on its internal characteristics. We also know that on the political level our own reality – however fine and attractive the reality of others may be — can only be transformed by detailed knowledge of it, by our own efforts, by our own sacrifices. It is useful to recall in this Tricontinental gathering, so rich in experience and example, that however great the similarity between our various cases and however identical our enemies, national liberation and social revolution are not exportable commodities; they are, and increasingly so every day, the outcome of local and national elaboration, more or less influenced by external factors (be they favorable or unfavorable) but essentially determined and formed by the historical reality of each people, and carried to success by the overcoming or correct solution of the internal contradictions between the various categories characterising this reality. The success of the Cuban revolution, taking place only 90 miles from the greatest imperialist and anti-socialist power of all time, seems to us, in its content and its way of evolution, to be a practical and conclusive illustration of the validity of this principle. (Cabral 1966, n.p.)

Of late one witnesses the slow rise of similar attempts to expand the theoretic horizon, looking at Global history from the perspectives of the South (Amin, 2011) and critical theory after the rise of the Global South, asks for a “Kaleidoscopic Dialectic” (Rehbein, 2015), and an epistemic restructuring that calls for “Global Hermeneutics” replacing Euro-centric models of hermeneutical thinking:

Hegel laid the foundations for critical theory when he alluded to the social conditionality of thinking: only the reciprocal development of knowledge, society, epistemology and reflection on their connectedness forms a dialectical advance in knowledge. The hermeneutical construction of configurations is insufficient, because it overlooks the conditionality of its own existence. The development of an existence is only possible within the framework of the prevailing social conditions. That idea must be thoroughly worked out in connection with critical theory. Truth is relative to the respective society – to its concepts of truth, to its theories and to its possibilities for verification. Atomic theory, as has been alluded to, was developed by the ancient Greeks, but it could not be tested by them. The demonstration of the correlation of knowledge, society, epistemology and reflection on their connectedness is relative to society and to the prevailing perspectives within it. Hegel’s divine perspective and a conclusive definition of the good life simply cannot exist. (Rehbein 2015, 129)

The contingencies of theory predicated on “social conditionality” therefore raises serious questions on the “problems of foundations” and new interventions in this context like *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem*

of *Foundations* (Kohn and McBride, 2011) poses this problem of epistemic “disobedience” (Mignolo, 2009) the other name of decolonization. Postcolonial thinkers so far have successfully offered radical critiques of global power imbalances that still resonate today, but the need of the hour is to develop more effective strategies for attaining independence of thinking. Recent studies in political theory have pointed out on the treatment of colonialism in the writings of canonical thinkers such as Locke, Burke, Mill, Diderot, Tocqueville, Smith, and Kant (MacBride and Kohn (2011, 3-4) exposing in a significant way how the theme of colonialism and imperialism dominated the minds of great thinkers as the colonial project consolidated itself. Such studies offer important insight into the dialectics of enlightenment thought, but they ignore the peripheral voices of thinkers who spoke from the position of the colonized. MacBride and Kohn (2011) tried to compensate that absence by providing a decolonial political critique, by introducing theorists “who struggled with the question of how to found a new political order when the existing ideas and institutions were implicated in a history of domination” (2011, 9). Focusing on the writings of Gandhi, Ngugi, al-Afghani, and Mariategui, among several others, MacBride and Kohn demonstrate how the works of these thinkers offer fresh perspectives which demand greater academic engagement.

This new issue of *Kairos* was planned as a critical discussion forum on Aditya Nigam’s book *Decolonizing Theory: Thinking Across Traditions* (2020). Four prominent commentators have looked into Nigam’s book from different perspectives, throwing open valuable new insights on the book which have been followed by the author’s own response. All the five commentators have contributed to this ongoing enterprise of decolonizing theory from the Global South, or from what Homi Bhabha described as “ex-centric” sites of experience or enunciation – “an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha 2004, 6). These expanded and ex-centric sites of empowerment have deflated the Anglophone clout of theory:

The disciplinary outcomes of ‘mov[ing] the project of theory-making to an “ex-centric site”’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011: 3, quoting the postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha, 1994: 6) is being considered in a number of intellectual communities. Among them are feminist and minoritized scholars often working as ‘outsiders within’ dominant North Atlantic traditions [...] which is embedded in a global context marked by deep epistemological and structural ‘knowledge divides’ (ISSC/UNESCO, 2010; Harrison, 2012a). The divides and unequal development of knowledges documented in the International Social Science Council’s 2010 world report are also manifest in the production, validation, and mobility or circulation of theory. (Harrison, 2016 161)

Other recent interventions from the ‘Global South’ include Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s argument for ‘poor theory’, meaning not “impoverished theory” but modes of interpretation and explanation that “exemplify critically creative demonstrations that density of words is not equivalent to profundity of thought”(Harrison 2016, 161) and understanding. These are serious attempts to redress epistemic coloniality, to equalize the “landscape of knowledge

production” and “[unsettle] the mega structure of the academy”, producing what Arturo Escobar calls “other knowledges and knowledge otherwise” (Escobar quoted in Harrison 2016, 161).

Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell’s *Southern Theory* (2007) makes identical interventions, foregrounding ideas and key thinkers from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australia where “histories of social theory have been silenced vis-a`-vis the Northern canon”(Connell in Harrison 2016, 166). Connell closes her argument with a discussion on world social sciences, raising questions about the relations among knowledges and their relevance for the ongoing moves for epistemic resistance from the Global South (Connell 2007, 230; Harrison 2016). It is gratifying to see this issue of *Kairos* raising similar points of resisting “poor theory” from the South. Talking of theoretic resistance, it may be befitting to end by recalling W. E. B. Du Bois’s haunting words in his pathbreaking, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields to him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (DuBois, 2007, 8-9)

The problem of the twenty first century too continues to remain “the problem of the color line” (DuBois 1903) or of the religious line. Our decolonial theoretic “strife” and “strivings” perhaps emanate from this overarching “twoness” – this cursed “double consciousness”, or this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. Aditya Nigam’s recent book under discussion in this special issue of *Kairos* underscores this very “split” or “twoness” of doing theory.

Acknowledgement

* I have benefitted greatly from discussions with Pavan Kumar Malreddy while drafting this editorial. I am also thankful for his critical feedback.

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