

Coloniality

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Introduction

The western-centric epistemic monopoly of theoretical thought, with the related theoretical vocabulary, has been brought into question since the second part of the twentieth century, mainly in an attempt to highlight the global and transcontinental genesis of modern thought for so long time almost completely blind to colonialism. This questioning has been conducted by different disciplines, from literary studies to history, from philosophy to sociology, and it has been transversal to diverse themes. For example, the de-neutralization of social theory is just as paramount for gender studies as it is for the constellation of postcolonial and decolonial studies (Bhambra, 2007, 2016). The analyses of racism, patriarchy, stereotyping, and naturalization of all subjects different from the white, male, bourgeois, Western model converge in many ways on the necessity to pluralize and supersede the classic dualisms of social thought. Indeed, while only some post-/decolonial¹ approaches have explicitly placed the intertwining of modernity and coloniality at the very centre of this discussion, the entire constellation of these studies recognizes the basic notions of theoretical modern thought – such as subjectivity, civilization or emancipation – as intellectual products entangled with the historical relations between Europe and the rest of the world, rather than as exclusively endogenous products (Bhambra, 2009).

As a result, post-/decolonial studies arise from the apparently incoherent intersection of analyses that originated in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles with the analytical tools of Western theory, especially those used to analyse social struggles in the West. This produced a globalized intellectual approach, deeply rooted in this paradoxical gaze, able to investigate the extent to which the development of sociological theory has been a geo-cultural product. Indeed, only recently has world history helped to better situate social theory in a specific and not universalizable narrative, highlighting that the way in which the notion of the subject or the idea of emancipation has been conceptualized – within the framework of European Enlightenment, Marxian critique or the liberal approach – is not automatically applicable elsewhere and needs some sort of cultural translation (Dussel, 1996).

This observation is not as trivial as it might seem. Even when it is not explicitly at the forefront of the analysis, the post-/decolonial critique has opened a space within social theory for reflexive thinking about the genealogy of its fundamental categories. The existence of academic labels like ‘post- and de-colonial studies’ evidences the need for an external gaze, while the real issue at stake is not that of ethnocentric distinctions among continental, national or local traditions, but on the contrary the capacity to highlight the impact of history, particularly of colonial history, and of other social actors, different from Western ones, on disciplinary frameworks and theoretical elaboration. In terms of sociology of knowledge, the main concern of the post-/decolonial turn is to highlight how the understanding of the present is based on conceptual tools configured at a time where the only voice was the Western one. Consequently, the way in which we learn to think about agency, universality, identifications, or about the best moral qualities, are rooted in a geohistorical time characterized by the different phases of globalization and by the encounter of the Western world with other cultures. As long as colonialism was a globalized experience creating a set of notions based on original contradictions (Dirlik, 2007), a post-/decolonial perspective could only be achieved by putting the varieties of colonial histories at the centre of the theoretical understanding of the present, ‘working backwards in terms of reconstructing historical representations, as well as forwards to the creation of future projects’ (Bhambra, 2022: 231).

Even though it is impossible to describe in a few pages the rich and heterogeneous ensemble of post-/decolonial studies, as well as to establish boundaries which are extremely porous in thematic and theoretical terms, it is possible at least to underscore the role that they have in questioning the foundations of Euro-American social theory. In the following sections, we outline post-/decolonial studies and their specific role in rethinking social theory.

Epistemological challenges

Despite their heterogeneity, post-/decolonial approaches employ a common set of conceptual tools and have a recognizable core of critical observations on how Western societies imposed their system of domination and their epistemological canon. They ‘have been constituted to interrogate hegemonic knowledges and thereby develop new research agendas and conceptualize new ways of thinking, recast the old and create new methodologies and present new paradigms’ (Patel, 2021: 18).

In line with the cultural turn in the social sciences, post-/decolonial theory alleges that the Western system of domination concerns not only the economic dimension but also, and above all, the political and cultural ones (Young, 1990, 2001; Go, 2013; Gandhi, 2019). Colonialism was not just a form of physical violence, exploitation and appropriation of the material resources, labour and lives of the colonized; it was also a form of symbolic violence that imposed the Western

world view – partial and rooted in specific historical experiences – as a universal model, the ‘true’ and ‘right’ interpretation of reality. It instituted a form of cultural and intellectual domination by the Global North that imprisoned the lives of the subalterns in representations of the world that diminished them, deprived them of value, and forced them to assume as their own the categories of thought of the dominant group; categories of thought that legitimized the forms of Western domination (Fanon, 1986).

By developing the concept of hegemony introduced by Gramsci (2011) and articulating it with Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge (2020), the aim of post-/decolonial approaches is to show and denounce how the modern hegemonic knowledge system was built by appropriating the knowledge of colonized peoples and the epistemologies of the Global South (Santos, 2016). Although the current hegemonic knowledge system presents itself as the autonomous evolution of Western thought, it is instead the result of an imperial science which constantly plundered data, information and knowledge produced in the colonies. ‘Information from the colonized world was crucial for the growth of – among other fields – botany, linguistics, geography, geology, evolutionary biology, astronomy, atmospheric science, oceanography, and of course sociology’ (Connell, 2018: 399). As Go (2020: 87) observes, ‘The modern West and its imperial metropolises were classified as the source of all objective and universal knowledge, and the rest of the world was condemned to serve as sites of empirical excavation to validate the former’. Moreover, colonialism is not only at the basis of Western scientific development; it is also central to its identity – as opposed to the ‘difference’ of those who constitute the ‘Rest’ (Hall, 1992) – and its social organization, with the institutions of democracy (Gordon, 2010), welfare state (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018) and capitalism (Blaut, 1989).

This epistemological denunciation – flanked by feminist theory (Rajan and Park, 2000), deconstructionism (Bhabha, 1990) and critical social theory (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008) – is focused on the internal contradictions of the Global North’s universalism and wages open war on its ‘canon’ (Derrida, 1974), which reduces the plurality of voices and experiences to a single normative and normalizing model. Therefore, key notions of modernity such as progress, development, science or emancipation are accused of a parochialism concealing the needs of the male, white, Western, bourgeois symbolic domination. The implications of this criticism are twofold. On the one hand, it recalls the value of ‘other knowledges’ excluded from the logic of the Western epistemological domain, and it highlights their capacity to provide cognitive tools indispensable for understanding human experience and for expanding our knowledge. On the other hand, it helps to provincialize the West (Chakrabarty, 2000), to show

how exotic [the West’s] constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how

their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the world.

(Rabinow, 1986: 241)

The search for universal, trans-societal and totalizing theories is accused of being ‘an imperialistic will to power that fails to acknowledge the socially-situated, embodied incomplete or “ambivalent” character of all knowledge’ (Go, 2013: 34).

This literature also underscores that this hegemonic epistemic power produced ‘captive minds’ (Alatas, 1974), uncritical and imitative attitudes that were dominated by an external source, unable to achieve autonomy and independence because they could only use the language and the concepts of the dominators. It produced pathological identities, sick minds, forced to make unhealthy choices between becoming what the dominant model would like – but always seeing their own irreducible difference and inferiority reproached – or claiming, in turn, a superiority founded in tradition and valuing their own diversity, but thus only ending up by reinforcing the dichotomy and therefore favouring the hegemonic logic (Fanon, 1986). This created structural forms of social discrimination that outlasted classic forms of colonialism and became integrated into current social orders in postcolonial societies. Decolonial Latin American studies describe this as the *coloniality of power* (Quijano, 2000). More particularly, in this process of othering (see Chapter 6), the idea of race was – and still is – a way to produce social classifications for the unequal distribution of social, political, material and symbolic resources and assuring privileges for those who exercised hegemonic control over the production of those classifications. To sum up, post-/decolonial critique is inseparable from a critique of Western historicism and the representations of otherness that it has produced to assert its superiority (Martuccelli, 2017).

Epistemological troubles: a nuanced cartography

Besides more general epistemological denunciations, post-/decolonial studies can be related to specific topics such as literature or historical research, or they may focus on the events of a geographical area. While most of these studies originated from anti-colonial struggles after World War II, some of them are rooted in different historical events; this is the case of postcolonial approaches in China or Japan, as well as decolonial studies in Latin America, which are rooted in a different experience and timing of colonization. Certainly, for all of them, decolonization processes were a crucial moment of reflection about how they were using Western references to think about themselves or organize political struggle.

To outline the contribution of post-/decolonial studies in social theory, we can start by adopting the geographical gaze, but warning that such spatial references are faint and blurred, and that they mainly relate to the specificities of the colonial past in each region. Also, alongside local perspectives, at the beginning of the interest in coloniality there was a wider international interest in social theory led

by some scholars who opened up the field of discussion. At the end of the 1970s, Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) was a first turning point. The international success of this book fostered a debate on a postcolonial translation of modern theoretical tools – such as the Marxian interpretation of emancipation – and an alternative gaze on modern history. Published just one year before Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, *Orientalism* was in tune with the linguistic turn of that time. The focus shifted to the discourse of modernity, to symbolic forms of hegemony rooted in the narratives and aesthetics of the past, to scientific rhetoric and falsification practices, as well as to the 'epistemic violence' of a model of education entirely based on the Western one (Spivak, 1988). The Gramscian notion of hegemony became paramount in almost all the analyses, from more psychological investigations (Nandy, 1983), to the more economic and historical ones of Subaltern Studies. This provoked polemics with other postcolonial approaches more rooted in Marxian economics legacy and in the analysis of global inequalities (Mohanty, 2003; Chibber, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s the importation and translation of Foucault, Gramsci, Derrida, mixed with Fanon's and Du Bois' legacy, psychoanalysis, and literary studies, marked a first phase of postcolonial studies mainly rooted in American universities and their departments of humanities. Thereafter, postcolonial thought spread around the world mainly as a form of critical cultural analysis (Bhabha, 1994). However, this way of doing postcoloniality was profoundly different from the ones that were arising in other parts of the world, such as in India with the Subaltern Studies group, in Latin America with the first studies on decoloniality, or in Africa with reflection on the cultural displacement and the racial legacy left by colonization. As already mentioned, these different standpoints often discussed similar theoretical references – such as Marx, Gramsci, Foucault and other modern and contemporary European philosophers – but blended them with a literature related to local problems, such as nationalism and the role of local élites in India, or theories of development and world-system in Latin America. The result was a specific discussion of theoretical references that were simultaneously under scrutiny in Europe as well, albeit with different aims and results. Post-/decolonial studies are a too scattered field to be considered a theoretical frame in itself, but they at least converge on some common topics such as the necessity to decentre the question of humanities and the modern thinking about the subject, or to foster critical reflection on globalization and its forms of human and environmental exploitation.

The coloniality of subjects

These convergences are probably more evident in the way in which postcolonial studies discuss the problem of 'race' and blackness, its intersection with class in creating political subjects, and hence more explicitly in the analyses of scholars interested in postcolonial Africa, Atlantic diaspora, Caribbean cultural connections (Virdee, 2019).

Here, any critical reflection on coloniality starts by taking into account the chasms of 'race', colour line and the legacy of slavery and the plantations economy (Mbembe, 2003; Gilroy, 2010; Appiah, 2014). In the cultural *Black Atlantic* space, connecting the African and American continents in the same history (Gilroy, 1993), the main analytical focus in the discussion of social theory is that of the status of the black subject, where colour becomes a catalyst of alienation (Appiah, 1992). Such questioning had already started with the seminal works of Fanon (1952) and Du Bois (1903): the black subject cannot merely imitate the white one, or think of her/himself as a lacking subjectivity awaiting Western emancipation. Discussion of the black subject must necessarily start by analysing the connection between black and white identifications and the history of violence behind that relation. Of all the historical colonial figures, the black subject is the one that has been most violently affected by dehumanization and images of abjection; as Fanon claims, the black person lives in a 'non-being zone'. Consequently, the way in which we conceptualize the subject, his/her rationality, autonomy and emancipation cannot be separated from reflection on racialization, and on the way in which these notions have been elaborated in dualisms, such as mind/body, which have been drawn on the black/white dualism, where the black subject is first of all a disposable body (Mbembe, 2013, 2000).

The universalistic ideal purity of the modern subject cannot be critically analysed without taking the background of colonial racism into account. More than being a simple auto-refuting critique of the subject – as it is in the European post-structuralism and deconstruction of logocentrism – the critique arising from the historical role of the black subject has similarities with the analysis of the position of *homo sacer*, reduced to bare life, always poised between exploitation and extermination (Agamben, 1998). According to Mbembe (2000), behind a discussion on biopolitics and necropolitics, the question posed by the black subject is first of all a way to unhinge the Western illusion of a self-referential subjectivity. In this case, the postcolonial contribution centres on a conceptualization of subjectivity arising from contradictions, dispersions and ambivalent encounters, rather than being a linear pathway emerging from a local form of enlightenment. Basic theoretical notions such as emancipation or subjectivation cannot be univocal, rooted in binarisms, or extrapolated from their historical context.

Again, following the seminal work of Fanon, where the body of the black person was the starting point of all questions (Fanon, 1952), this section of postcolonial studies – in a similar way to what happened in gender studies – put the naturalized and racialized body at the core of a new idea of the subject. Only by superseding the binarism between a productive, reproductive and sexualized body, on the one hand, and a creative cultivated mind on the other is it possible to deconstruct and sidestep the symbolic and physical violence always intimidating the subjective construction of the non-white person (Mbembe, 2013).

It is for this reason that the Atlantic diaspora is not a concern for only black subjects, but is genealogically part of the modern conceptualization of the emancipated subject. This places the notion of emancipation, the story of globalization,

immigration, multiculturalism, creolization, social struggles outside the Western world (Gilroy, 2010). This reading of subjectivation processes sheds light on the close interweaving between radical violence and progress; and it seeks to offer new perspectives beyond auto-confutative attitudes characteristic of the Western self-criticism of modernity. Listening to the voices of black subjects, recognizing their rights, condemning past and present discriminations is necessary but not enough. This is not a matter of problem-solving: the historical experience of black subjects is an issue for the entire contemporary system of social relations and globalized production (Mbembe, 2013).

The coloniality of knowledge

Similar ambitions to outline a theory of power/knowledge, but from different standpoints and with different aims, can be found in the tradition of Latin American decolonial studies that, starting from more political and economic analysis, have attempted ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2009) mainly by focusing on the ‘epistemologies of the South’ and the ‘ecologies of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007, 2009), where different bodies of cultural knowledge can be reassembled to address old issues like social inequalities, and emerging ones like the environmental crisis. As a whole, the decolonial approach is the one most focused on the critique of eurocentrism and occidentalism as the informing principle of the construction of cultural and historical narratives, although it is also the one more open to and interested in theoretical relations with other areas of postcolonial studies adopting other continental perspectives, fostering the notion of ‘transmodernity’ (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Taking into account the history of the Latin American area, and the earlier colonization in the sixteenth century, this analysis considers Europe – and then the Euro-American space – as an entity simultaneously within and outside the construction of the analytical tools with which Latin American scholars analyse the history, social relations and economic situations of the continent. Key notions of modernity such as emancipation, progress, enlightenment, rationality, critique cannot be adopted as such by simply importing them from European theoretical discussion. They have to be analysed in terms of their genealogical intercultural production, as well as their local translations (Dussel, 1996; Bhabra and Santos, 2017). In analytical terms, the aim is to highlight a history of inequalities in the genesis of theoretical tools related to academic centralities and peripheries, in a sort of geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), or a ‘coloniality of knowledge’ that must be recognized when theoretical tools are used (Connell, 2007, 2015).

The first Latin American decolonial analyses began soon after the academic success of postcolonial humanities in American universities but followed local paths. An early focus was on the violent transformative aspirations that arrived with colonization, through the discussion of development and dependency theory and world-system theory (Wallerstein, 1984). Hence, a part of decolonial analysis

is focused on a revision of the Marxian legacy in the investigation of social and economic inequalities in the Latin American continent and the latter's relations with the Western world (Dussel, 2000; Quijano, 2000, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007; Escobar, 2007). In this case, one of the main theoretical issues – besides a more specific discussion of the Marxian analytical apparatus – is to analyse the relation between coloniality and modernity, for which there is no modernity without coloniality. The term 'coloniality' – often presented as *modernity/coloniality* – was first suggested by Annibal Quijano, who, on considering the early history of colonization of the area, including the Caribbean region, raised the problem of a power/knowledge rooted in the link between race and class – that is, in a 'racial axis' of capitalism characteristic of colonial culture (Quijano, 2000). Whilst in the African and African-American perspectives on postcolonialism the focus is more on the subject and his/her body, in this case it is instead on the systemic notions of development and growth, with their genealogies of oppression and where the ambivalences of conceptual tools such as emancipation or civilization play a central role. Through the analysis of Marx, Gramsci, Braudel and Wallerstein's world-system theory, there is the enucleation of their original Western locus and the effort to reveal how the analysis of hegemonies and inequalities must necessarily start from a critical history of relations between the Euro-American and Latin American areas (Quijano, 2007).

With some variations, this path has been followed by Latin-American scholars working in different countries of the continent and forming a loose network of committed scholars. The presence of some of them in American universities has fostered the internationalization of the perspective initially outlined mainly by Quijano, strengthening the epistemological and cultural critique alongside the socio-economic critique of capitalism. Moreover, the analysis of decolonial practices, and the 'coloniality of knowledge', is related to past and present mobilizations in an attempt to establish new conceptual foundations, where key notions of social theory could be analysed in a context different from the Western one. It is for this reason that the observation of local practices is considered as a basis for a new theory/practice relation where decoloniality is signified by the everyday practices of specific actors (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). In comparison to other areas of postcolonial studies, the decolonial approach conducts a much more generalized analysis of the five centuries of 'coloniality of power', often considering them as a compact legacy rather than an intertwining of responsibilities. Yet, given the ambitiousness of the endeavour, the attempt to construct a 'pluriversal knowledge' is more often announced than realized; in spite of the research on local cultural production, such as *Buen vivir* or indigenous *Vincularidad*, in many cases the epistemological investigation remains focused on a denunciation of eurocentrism, and on the original sin of capitalism in Western modernity, a critique to some extent outdated by current forms of globalization and geopolitical superpowers, where many hegemonic actors and capitalist approaches are no longer exclusively Western (Martuccelli, 2017).

The coloniality of history

A last and even more heterogeneous area of postcolonial studies pertains to the Asiatic continent, where various powerful cultural traditions have reacted, first to colonial aggression and Western cultural hegemony and then to the new equilibriums of globalization, in very different ways. Reassembling Eastern postcolonialities in a single framework is more an analytical fiction than the definition of a precise theoretical perspective, even though at least some general common features can be identified. As said, the discursive critical examination of *Orientalism* has been the first step towards a postcolonial analysis of the historical-cultural encounter between Europe and the East; and the success of Said's book has triggered postcolonial discussions in this part of the world. Nevertheless, Middle-East regions, India, China or Japan have developed very different approaches to a critical dialogue with Western modernity that can by no means be summarized as an 'Asiatic' postcolonial approach.

Reflections similar to those developed by Latin American decoloniality are present also in the Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Malaysian universities, even though they are not always related to a colonial past (and sometimes to an intra-continental coloniality), but rather to the strong influence of Western culture since the nineteenth century, including the influence of American social sciences, especially on Korean and Japanese universities, on the wave of the Americanization that followed World War II. This has fostered discussions on a 'post-Western' social science, in terms of a dialogue between different epistemological traditions and ways of treating common issues, such as capitalism, globalization, instrumental rationality or social inequalities, where, for example, Confucian analysis can be compared to the Weberian one (Lizhong and Roulleau-Berger, 2017; Yu, 2018; Roulleau-Berger, 2021). This also includes discussions on the psychological assimilation of Western culture, such as in Alatas's analysis of the 'captive mind' (Alatas, 1974), or Nandy's investigation of 'psychological colonialism' (Nandy, 1983).

In organizing a post-Western approach, this area of Asia has developed its own sociological space, with associations and networks, able to develop an internal discussion on the theoretical tools coming from European social sciences, intertwining them with similar local analytical notions related to local philosophical traditions. However, the internationalization of these debates is still limited, at least compared to the resonance achieved by scholars in India, who – also for linguistic reasons – have been present on the international stage since the beginning of postcolonial discussions.

As a former colonized country, India was obliged to develop a much closer relation with Western culture and its theoretical notions; the country was introduced to sociology very early on, almost at the same time as Europe, together with other classic academic disciplines such as philosophy and history, so that Indian intellectuals were imbued with Western humanities while they were developing their national struggle for independence (Patel, 2017). Colonial modernity

was criticized mainly with analytical notions taken from Europe, even though the figure of Gandhi represented a fundamental turning point in the capacity to rediscover local intellectual notions, such as *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*, in discussing power relations and political issues.

The ambivalence in using theoretical notions imported from the West clearly emerged with the discussion on the colonial legacy fostered by the Subaltern Studies group. Based mainly on historical analysis and a transversal critique of nationalist anti-colonial rhetoric, the main aim of the research programme inaugurated by Guha (2002) was to shed light on the experiences, the voices and the capabilities of the most silenced actors, such as the peasants and the Dalit community. The inability to take into account these actors – that is, the majority of the Indian population – demonstrated the complicity of Indian academic élites with a colonial governmentality based on a Western conceptualization of history and social analysis (Chatterjee, 2012; Guha, 2002; Prakash, 1994).

Indeed, the success of Subaltern Studies was related to the loss of reputation of many Marxist scholars during the 1970s (Prakash, 1994). In this case, the discussion of Marx, Gramsci, and history from below, was a way to appropriate analysis that originated in Europe in order to study the specificity of the Indian case; but it was also an opportunity to suggest an analytical use of these theoretical tools free from a cultural dependency that Subaltern Studies recognized in the political interpretation of socialism by the government élites. Thus, the concern was to reject historicism and a Western idea of modernization by offering a localized analysis of social problems like the caste system. The notions of hegemony and subalternity taken from Gramsci were ‘Western’, but the problem was not only to denounce their European parochial origin but how to translate this vocabulary for an independent analysis of local situations; in this case, to get rid of the British historiography of India, including some of its Marxian versions.

In spite of Spivak’s underscoring of the ‘epistemic violence’ of the British colonial legacy (Spivak, 1988), this perspective acknowledged the necessity to recognize both the indispensability and the inadequacy of the modern theoretical frame of analysis (Chakrabarty, 2000). Even though Indian subalterns would fully regain their voice, this would be a hybrid cultural product born from a transnational colonial history. What matter is to bring to the fore the voices of the periphery. Spivak’s well-known question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ is also a matter of ‘what’ can be said – from what knowledge-base – as well as a question of being heard. Hence, the analyses generated by the individual work of scholars, originally gathered around the Subaltern studies collective, were all shaped by a cultural and interdisciplinary pluralism whose aim was to critically interact with a set of theoretical tools, from linguistic deconstruction to Anthropocene, that were in themselves a product of a globalized history.

Overcoming dichotomies and binary thinking

As the foregoing ‘cartography’ highlights, one of the pillars of the epistemological hegemony rooted in the history of modernity is the interpretation of reality

based on the use of dichotomies, of a binary thought system that builds knowledge through radical oppositions and exclusions such as nature/culture; modern/traditional; civilized/savages; Us/Them; the West/the Rest; global/local. The logic of dichotomous thinking consists in reducing complexity and variability to a series of oppositions in which – as Durkheim already noted – one side assumes a moral value, that is, sacred and superior, while the other is residual, profane and inferior. When applied to the production of Otherness, the construction of dichotomies not only builds the moral value of one of the two parts of the distinction but also creates identity, a sense of inclusion and reasons for exclusion. The boundary that defines the binary distinction tends to create a sense of homogeneity and unity for everything that lies within that boundary and increases the sense of difference, distance and threat of what is excluded. It creates the identities of Us and Them in an antagonistic way, transferring to the identities thus created a moral judgment: Us as superior to Them (Said, 1995).

In addition to the deconstructive side, which tends to highlight the provincialism of Western interpretative concepts and how they represent constitutive elements of the privileges and dominant positions of the Global North episteme, post-/decolonial theories have produced a rich set of concepts that enhance the understanding of contemporary societies and human experience.

It is possible to identify some linking themes that underlie the theoretical development and the proposal of a different epistemology of the postcolonial perspective. They can be summarized in the re-characterization of global culture and human experience – in terms of relations (Go, 2013), flows (Appadurai, 1996), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), double consciousness (du Bois, 2008), intersectionality (Bartels et al., 2019) and interconnections (Tomlinson, 1999) – in order to undermine the simplistic colonizer/colonized (Us/Them) dualism, and more generally, binary thought. These are all useful concepts with which to highlight heterogeneity as a basic category of social reality and to introduce contingency and uncertainty into what the epistemic hegemony of the Global North tends to represent as sovereign, uncontaminated and incontestable categories.

These concepts constitute the contents of a theoretical toolbox that aspires to produce an ‘ecology of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007): the recognition of the complexity and coexistence of different forms of knowledge, as well as the need to study their affinities, divergences, complementarities and contradictions in order to maximize the effectiveness of the understanding of human existence and undermine the reductive and discriminatory hegemony of the epistemology of the Global North.

Recognizing complexity, variability and relationships, however, requires full awareness of the asymmetries among positions. The dimension of power and its implementation in the form of symbolic and cultural hegemony become essential elements of the analysis. Overcoming binary thinking requires both exploring the porosity, fluidity and instability of boundaries created to define dichotomies and recognizing the effects of domination, exclusion and inferiorization that such creation defines. Applying a post-binary perspective involves both critically analysing how the knowledge, representations and languages that define social reality

are constructed, and critically analysing the power relations that sustain and are sustained by epistemological hegemony. This entails recognizing that ways of understanding, organizing and experiencing reality are embedded in the dynamics of power/knowledge, which in turn are defined by the asymmetrical relationships that structure the possible relationships between dominants and subordinates.

Contrary to the representation of the colonized as passive, post-/decolonial thinking explores the forms of agency that subordinates put in place to resist forms of domination (Spivak, 1988). Western hegemonic epistemology tends ‘to conceive of agency as transcendental, disembodied, and rationally mediated quality of the human subject’ (Susen, 2020: 11; see also Chapter 2). The post-/decolonial perspective, on the other hand, highlights the social and situated character of agency and conceives it as the complex result of the interaction between different forces – among which power relations have a major role – and different entities – the complex relationship with other subjects but also with material, environmental and technological factors. Agency is explored as a capacity that emerges from the situation, strongly influenced by practices, structures and symbols that are culturally variable and asymmetrically organized by inequalities of power.

This idea of agency also influences the conception of identity. The latter is no longer seen as an essence, a founding characteristic of subjectivity, but instead as the mobile and continuously negotiated result of the relationships that are established with other subjects and with the context. Identity becomes the unstable result of different forms of belonging and of the specific social position that is assumed in the relationship. It is a constantly adapted, stratified and multiple identity, the result of power relations and the possibility of resisting them, rather than being a manifestation of the autonomy of people (Gilroy, 1993). To grasp the complexity and flexibility of identities in a postcolonial context, it is necessary to adopt an intersectional perspective (see Chapter 5) that highlights the joint effects of multiple social forms of categorization in asymmetrically shaping the possibility of acting in a specific situation in a specific power relationship.

Rather than focusing *exclusively* on ‘race’, ethnicity, nationality, and/or culture, post/decolonial analysis explores the degree to which these elements of modern life forms *intersect* with other sociological variables – such as class, gender, age, and ability. Arguably, all of these factors have to be taken into account if one seeks to paint a comprehensive picture of both colonial and postcolonial types of domination.

(Susen, 2020: 8)

More than unity, the characteristics of subjective experience are hybridity, constant mixing, transformation as reactions to situations and contexts, to power relations and social positioning. Because hybridity avoids the pitfalls of essentializing binary thinking, it is a particularly important concept with which to grasp the tactics that subordinates implement to restructure and destabilize forms of power. Moreover, it is an important concept with which to combat the domination of one

canon, one voice, one mode of thought, a single identity, and exclusive belonging (Prabhu, 2007).

The concept of 'hybrid' links identity and agency to contingency; it refers to specific social locations resulting from power relationships and intersections among different categorizations. It links the historical dynamic – the persistence of the past – with the spatial dimension. The hybridization process involves an encounter among different trajectories in a specific social place. Indeed, the emphasis on the spatial dimension is an epistemological contribution of the post-/decolonial perspective. It highlights the importance of social location by emphasizing the margin (bell hooks, 1991) as a 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994): a place of encounter and confrontation, of mixage and exchange, of knowledge and change. The marginal position enables a specific form of 'border thinking' (Mignolo, 2012): that is, the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the point of view of people in subordinate positions. Border thinking is a 'tool' used in the critical evaluation of Western hegemony. It allows the adoption of an eccentric, oblique gaze that re-elaborates, in an original way, the taken-for-granted, the languages, the rules and the hegemonic beliefs.

The emphasis on the local dimension is also a useful conceptual tool with which to localize the global. It highlights how the general must be understood from a local, situated perspective, and suggests that global processes must be analysed in their specific historical-spatial location in order to grasp the dynamics – always different – that define specific intersections of categorizations and power with which social actors must cope in their actions and their interpretations of reality. Hence, intercultural relations and globalization cannot be analysed using the category of development or progress. They do not constitute an inevitable linear process; they are instead the result of hybrids, resistances, conflicts and agreements that take shape in specific situations within global flows. It is especially in the 'third space' created by the colonial experience that it is possible to highlight the dynamics between global and local and to grasp how hegemonic tendencies are reworked to adapt them to local contexts, thus contributing to their contestation and transformation.

New challenges for social sciences

The critique of social sciences is an integral part of the post-/decolonial critique of the Western canon. It interrogates the categories and classification systems used by social scientists to reflect on their own disciplines and comprehend how these are related to Eurocentric assumptions. What is at issue, in this case, is not simply the denunciation of the hegemonic and privileged positions of the Global North built through the symbolic and material violence perpetrated on the Global South. Rather, it is a question of critically evaluating the role that the social sciences have had and continue to have in defining colonial relations in many areas of the world, and of discussing whether and which theoretical concepts developed in the West can be applied to understand the contemporary postcolonial and global reality.

The knowledge, epistemology and methodology developed by social sciences to understand and support the social development of the Global North are presented as universally applicable and, in this way, they conceal and repress other experiences and forms of knowledge (Gamage, 2018). The problem, in the post-/decolonial perspective, is how to adapt contemporary global sociological theories to the different contexts and situations in the Global South. Simplifying, it is possible to identify two ways to answer this question. On the one hand, a more radical position tends to consider the social sciences as inevitably situated in Western experience and therefore as unsuitable for understanding the socio-historical experience of different contexts. This position tends to suggest the necessity of rejecting Western social sciences totally and starting a different form of social knowledge from scratch – from local knowledge based on local problems. On the other hand, a less radical position considers how to rework or integrate the social sciences to strip them of their universalistic claims and make them suitable for understanding postcolonial reality. This position urges the integration of Western social sciences with *local* knowledge by mixing, translating, recovering other voices and knowledge.

In its most radical formulation, the post-/decolonial perspective holds that the social worlds are ontologically different and that the social sciences are nothing more than the appropriate interpretative tools with which to understand the Western experience. Societies are ontologically different because there are no fixed factors that limit how human beings organize the way in which they live together. Social life is an open possibility: it can assume infinite different forms, and how it is concretely constructed depends only on the socio-historical processes of its construction. Therefore, every society is ‘unique’ and cannot be interpreted or understood ‘outside’ its unique process of establishment. When the specific set of concepts and ideas developed by Western society to interpret its changes and to legitimize its actions are used to interpret other realities and experiences, it becomes evident that it is an ideological weapon used by the West to exert power over the Rest (Mignolo, 2002, 2007). A post-/decolonial, post-Western, social science should give voice to tacit histories, repressed subjectivities, subaltern knowledge and languages to generate a new set of concepts with which to understand the uniqueness of each society.

In the words of Mignolo (2014: 595),

The social sciences emerged to solve problems in Europe and contributed to make Europe what it is in terms of institutions of knowledge, actors, and categories of thoughts. It contributed to European and US imperialism. It is doubtful the social sciences would be of help to non-Europeans who want to solve their problems, one of them being Western imperialism economic, political, cultural, and epistemic. Thus, de-westernizing and decolonizing knowledge (and knowing) means to delink from the belief that there is one way of knowing and therefore of being.

From this perspective, the social sciences, as we know them today and as they are taught in undergraduate and doctoral curricula around the world, are a specialized discourse promoted by Western élites to explain the Western experience of social transformation and global colonization (Mignolo, 2009). This means that the specific field of social science as an institution – that is, an organized form of social discourse production consisting of specific words, practices, rules, methods, concepts, specialists, organizations, objects and subjects – has been established by the Western elites, using their own vocabulary. Accordingly, it has defined a specific regime of truth entitled to produce coherent and true discourses on the social. From this perspective, the social sciences are the means with which Western societies have described and legitimized their experience of modernity and their project to control and manage populations for imperial purposes. Proponents of this position warn that it is necessary to recognize that there is no single path to change, a single trajectory that sets the direction in which all societies must inevitably converge. They advocate the development of different theories, words and concepts with which to grasp the particularity of the different societies (Al-e-Ahmad, 1984).

As a matter of fact, such positions consider social sciences to be ideologies: discourses that are more prescriptive than descriptive; that justify and legitimize what they presume to study. There is no need for Western social science because there is no need for a social science at all. As Mignolo (2014: 286) bluntly concludes, ‘People around the world have been and continue to be good thinkers without recourse to the “social sciences”’. The very idea of possibility and necessity for a global social science is a deception. It is an example of academic dependency (Alatas, 2003): to be popular and accepted as part of standard curricula in universities, social science theories must be ‘global’ (i.e., Western). Emerging theories in subaltern spaces, despite their potential to provide contextual interpretations for indigenous ways of life, are ignored or devalued and find no way to enter mainstream disciplines unless they translate their language into the dominant language (i.e., Western) of the discipline (Omobowale and Akanle, 2017).

A less radical perspective proposes a selective use of Eurocentric concepts, theories and methods, integrating them with ideas stemming from the colonial encounter and the specific position on the margins of colonized subjects (Go, 2013). As Raewyn Connell writes (2007: 228), ‘it is helpful to think of social science not as a settled system of concepts, methods and findings, but an interconnected set of intellectual projects that proceed from varied social starting points into an unpredictable future’.

In this case, Western social sciences are not completely rejected. However, there is a need to extract those Western concepts, theories and methods that can be of use within ‘subaltern’ societies. This entails recognizing that social theories are all partial and specific, and that it is not possible to obtain universal and objective knowledge about the social. ‘All social knowledge is provincial’ (Go, 2020: 91).

In particular, postcolonial scholars consider the current social sciences inadequate to the task of understanding non-Western postcolonized cultures. They think that as long as the Western social sciences – as a historically constructed field of knowledge and power – remain the only possible reference frame for evaluating the truth and plausibility of a statement about the reality of the world, other non-canonical voices can only be interpreted in terms of absence, lack or incompleteness which results in inadequacy (Chakrabarty, 2000: 32).

It is possible to re-elaborate the social sciences to have conceptual tools with which to understand postcolonial realities by following at least two distinct paths (Go, 2013). A first possibility consists in the ‘indigenization’ of the social sciences (Alatas, 2006, 2014; Sitas, 2006). Scholars who propose this path recover ‘subordinate’ – and therefore excluded from the Western canon of social sciences – concepts and authors such as Ibn Khaldūn, José Rizal, Said Nursi, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati or Benoy Kumar Sarkar (Alatas and Sinha, 2017). Another proposal for the indigenization of the social sciences consists in the recovery of concepts developed by non-Western philosophical traditions. Examples are the work of D.P. Mukerji who searched Hindu/Sanskrit texts to develop a sociological perspective able to capture the reality of postcolonial India (Mukerji, 2002; Kuman Bose, 2014) or the works of Akinsola Akiwowo, who recovers the visions of society contained in tales, myths and proverbs Yoruba (Akiwowo, 1999; Patel, 2021). A more general example is the introduction into the social sciences of the concepts of *ubumbo*, *pachamama* or *buen vivir* as different formulations of society and development (Chingangaidze, 2022).

A second possibility consists in promoting ‘connected sociologies’ and connected histories (Bhambra, 2010, 2014); that is, in linking mainstream Western sociology with other forms of social thought arising from the experience of pre- and postcolonial societies (Patel, 2021). This proposal concerns the promotion of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls a ‘diatopical hermeneutics’ (Santos, 2002): that is, a space for dialogue between different philosophical and political traditions that enables us to broaden our understanding of social reality. The proposed example is a diatopical hermeneutics conducted among the *topos* of ‘human rights’ in Western culture, the *topos* of ‘dharma’ in Hindu culture, and the *topos* of ‘umma’ in Islamic culture to conceptualize a space of multicultural coexistence. As Go (2013: 40) observes,

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.

This perspective urges the development of a solidarity-based epistemology (Banerjee and Connell, 2018) oriented not simply to deconstructing Western social thought and to removing the scoria of colonial thought within the social sciences, but also to grasping the reciprocal constitutive interconnection between the creation of social thought and colonial history.

To conclude, in spite of a certain lack of analytical clarity, the interest in post-/decolonial approaches lies in their subversive potential to renew the theoretical apparatus of notions that originated in Western modernity. While the critique of Eurocentrism can be considered acquired, a stimulating and regenerating set of theoretical inspirations could come from the discussion and inclusion of non-Western analytical notions and from the contamination of analyses coming from different historical experiences of globalization. Post-/decolonial studies are not just a set of criticisms of the hegemonic role of Western modernity in the construction of knowledge; rather, they are important protagonists of the effervescence of current social theory, and they actively stay in its trouble, where also new forms of hegemony can emerge. Knowledge from non-Western countries is no longer subaltern or provincial, and it plays an important role in the discussion of the main global issues like gender inequalities, racism or climate change. The productive trouble of a social theory constructed on themes and issues, transversal to theoretical tradition, is also the effect of a global social theory that can no longer be conceived in binary terms and instead emerges from intercultural dialogues and multi-layered perspectives. The potential generated by such connections is part of the transformation and translation of the theoretical tools that we have inherited from the past.

Note

- 1 We use the term ‘post/decolonial studies’ to denote the ensemble of these studies, and occasionally the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ when referring to more specific cultural areas of investigation.

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