

Theory from Elsewhere

Michael D. Gordin
Princeton University / ИГИТИ
mgordin@princeton.edu

Where does “Theory” come from? I do not mean the intellectual or psychological impulse to theorize, to approach historical, literary, anthropological or sociological questions from a more abstract angle. I mean, quite literally, where on the globe do we locate its origins? There is a straightforward and not very interesting answer to this question, and a deeper and potentially richer one. The simple answer is that we find significant theory all over the world — Ljubljana, Mexico City, Mumbai, Melbourne, Istanbul, Taipei, etc. But what if you follow the footnotes all the way down? When you track the citations for what has counted as “theory” in the academic world for the past few decades, you end up with a more restricted set of places: the German (Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche), the Austrian (Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein), the French (Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu), the Italian (Antonio Gramsci). Even in these cases — take Foucault, for example — you will eventually reduce back to Marx and Nietzsche. So this is my **first broad claim**: we have defined “theory” in a geographically restrictive manner.

From the perspective of today’s historians of science — perhaps I should stress *even* from the perspective of today’s historians of science, given that my discipline has been resolutely attached to a small Eurocentric slice of theorists (Bruno Latour, Ludwik Fleck, Thomas Kuhn, with roots in Heidegger and Wittgenstein) — this geographical limitation no longer seems adequate. Of course, it is perfectly possible to continue within the older tradition, but in terms of the theoretical center of gravity, it no longer seems fully satisfying.

My **second broad claim** is that the theoretical impulse that is most noticeable in history of science in the twenty-first century — excluding some important works like Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* (2007), the roots of which were planted back in the 1980s — has come from postcolonial studies. This is ironic, given both that postcolonial theory had its strongest impetus from the Subaltern Studies Collective of scholars of South Asia, which was most vigorous also in the 1980s, and that its theoretical guiding light is Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony,” which brings us back to the old geography. My contention about the intellectual significance of postcolonial theory for contemporary history of science might strike those who follow the mainstream

literature as absurd, since most current work still concentrates on North America and Western Europe, and rarely includes footnotes to Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, or Gyan Prakash. (Even though some of these, notably Prakash, published on science during the 1990s.) Yet there is a particular strand that unquestionably derives from postcolonial theory that seems to me ubiquitous in the more recent literature.

This is the desire (my **third broad claim**) to question “unmarked” categories. Since at least the 1960s, a dedicated group of historians had documented the histories of women in the (natural) sciences, a domain notoriously dominated by men. Although these scholars produced excellent work, it has had limited impact beyond specialists. Lately, the frame of the question has altered: historians began to take the maleness of science as a research question, to ask what it meant in terms of *masculinity* that the sciences had so few women. The point is to take the ostensibly “unmarked” category — white, male, heterosexual — and unpack the process by which it came to be so. The same move has been performed in many contexts: showing how science in the metropole was always shaped by the colonies; looking at the labor of non-scientists in the production of knowledge; and so on. In my own work, I constantly struggle to make Soviet and Russian events appear visible to non-Russophone historians, to demonstrate that many have treated “Western science” as unmarked (not to mention Chinese science!). Even when not specifically citing postcolonial scholars, this technique of interrogating the archive and the canon, of flipping the marked and unmarked categories, moved from 1980s subaltern studies to become a dominant theoretical stance in the history of science today.

But where does this theory live? As noted earlier, postcolonial scholars have drawn inspiration from (Western) European scholars. But something is changing here as well: a reorientation of what counts as Theory. As Jean and John Comaroff note in *Theory from the South: How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (2012), there is an implied and often explicit Eurocentrism in how Theory is constituted. When we look at empirical phenomena in the West today — authoritarianism, epidemic disease, sexuality — one can retrofit European theory to suit them, or one can look at parts of the world (in their case, Africa) where the phenomena have been present for decades if not centuries. We can generate frameworks that grow organically out of the phenomena itself, provincializing not just Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty famously put it, but “Theory” itself.