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Panel: The Postcolonial turn in the history of knowledge

My commentary is a response to Michael Gordin's agenda-setting contribution to the panel and an attempt to develop some of his "broad claims."

Building on Michael's discussion and my own experience, I suggest that the greatest contribution of the postcolonial turn has been an epistemological critique of the analytical languages of human and social sciences that we deem as neutral and objective. This allows us to expose the structures of epistemological domination and the embeddedness of our language in historically constructed mental geographies, gender and race regimes, and so on. I think this includes what Michael describes as questioning "unmarked" categories through explicating the process by which they "came to be unmarked." If this is so, perhaps we can apply the same approach to Chakrabarty's and others' critique of Europe and the West as the sole reference point for modern theories of social and historical evolution, or theory in general, and extend our questioning to include the deployment of the very opposition of West to non-West in postcolonial theory.

As we know, the argument that modern theoretical language is an instrument of negation or colonization of the "non-West" goes together with the pessimistic admission that subalterns "cannot speak," and that a non-Western modern theory is simply impossible due to the all-penetrating nature of Western theory, Western science, and the Western mode of capitalist economy that practically coincide with the phenomenon of modernity. Hence, exposing the power of the Western episteme to produce "unmarkedness" is not enough for an independent epistemological order to emerge. According to postcolonial theorists, one should look for alternative languages and theoretical frameworks in "spaces of authenticity" that have been spared from the otherwise total power of the Western episteme.

One can hear allusions to the discourse of authenticity in Michael's call for a "theory from elsewhere." The very language that the narrative assumes when the call is articulated in the concluding paragraph—that is, the language of "organic frameworks" growing naturally out of the phenomenon in need of theoretical conceptualization—differs from the earlier discourse of deconstruction, distancing, defamiliarization, and denaturalization. In my view, such a change of

tone is not accidental and it reveals the larger problem of the postcolonial turn: having equipped us with the essential tools of epistemological deconstruction, it has left us with the discourse of authenticity as the only alternative to the deconstructed Western norm. However, the paradox of the postcolonial predicament is that even the most thoughtful attempts to locate and explore such authentic spaces of knowledge production end up reinstalling a nationalist paradigm. This is, in general, one of the main problems of postcolonial theory both politically and in terms of generating constructive theories and narrative frameworks. It is either colonial muteness or national authenticity. Moreover, in contemporary discourse the claimed "authenticity" often appears as a tradition constructed with the help of Western epistemes of ethnography, anthropology, musicology, and so on.

We have examples of "organically grown" theories such as, for example, Russian Eurasianism, which explicitly defined itself in postcolonial terms as an organic response to Western epistemological domination. In the 1910s, it became one of the autochthonous languages that married the existing hybridity and diversity of Eurasia (and the Russian Empire as a polity) with a nationalizing view of Russianness as embedded into the hybrid Eurasian natural and cultural landscape. In the 1920s, Eurasianism generated scientific theories such as Petr Nikolaevich Savitskii's model of the structuralist geography of Eurasia, which, in turn, influenced the emergence of the structural linguistics of the Prague circle and phonological structuralism, which would soon move from the margins to the center of European "theorizing" (Glebov 2017). Is Russian Eurasianism an example of a theory from some authentic national "elsewhere" or an invitation to destabilize the very notion of Western modernity as it has been affirmed by the postcolonial turn?

Sanjay Subrahmanyam captures this dilemma in his description of modernity as "historically a global and conjunctural phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another. It is located in a series of historical processes that brought hitherto relatively isolated societies into contact, and we must seek its roots in a set of diverse phenomena" ("Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia" 1998: 99–100). The global context of modernity formation that he thus describes was enabled by empires, and their framing in binary postcolonial terms prevents us from seeing how empires functioned as spaces of globalization and globalized modernity. It is true that by employing the systematic politics of global comparison, imperial elites succeeded in

constituting the idea of "the West" as a category of global superiority and in appropriating "modernity" for "the West." The idea of progress as open-ended historical time, advanced scientific knowledge, big theories and technological innovations, as well as the more general intellectual predispositions underlying them, such as rationalism or economic pragmatism, were identified as exclusive innate qualities of the "West." Furthermore, "the world order dominated by Europe forced the rest of the world to engage with European cosmologies and ways of interpreting the past" (Conrad 2016: 25). In the second part of the nineteenth century, the very notion of "Western science" was invented, together with what Roy MacLeod has called the "creed of since," that is, the widespread acceptance of science and technology as the embodiments of the triumph of progress (Elshakry 2010; MacLeod 2000; Adas 1990). Many non-Western intellectuals readily acknowledged the centrality of Europe as a current leader of scientific, economic, and technological progress, but not as the locus of a superior civilization in principle. Their concept of civilization was often "understood as universal to be sure, but not bound a priori to Europe," that is, not legitimizing any unconditional and atemporal political or cultural hierarchies (Conrad 2016: 29; Hill 2008). According to Marwa Elshakry's *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, in the case of Arabic intellectuals, the discourse of European civilization included the idea of its demise, as had happened earlier to Arabic or Islamic civilizations. The translation, adaptation, and appropriation of Western knowledge was thus a conscious choice, a way to recover past glory and status under new global conditions. This active stance toward accepting the Western episteme, illustrated by historians and historians of science who revise the rigid postcolonial binaries, problematizes the self-proclaimed "Western" monopoly on modernity.

Therefore, in my concluding thesis I want to caution against following the postcolonial turn to the end, into the spaces of authenticity that "grow organically out of the phenomenon itself". Perhaps, it is more productive to use "Western" theories with an appreciation of their embeddedness in a global context of exchange, exploitation, mutual translations and mistranslations, and reflections and projections, and to credit postcolonial theory for connecting knowledge production to historically constituted human diversity (hierarchical, uneven, rationalized and/or underrationalized), that is, to empires. It is productive to read Foucault through Ann Laura Stoler's eyes—to ask whether Foucault was aware of the problem of coloniality and racism and if so, how did it code his theory? Or to read Fanon as an essential contributor to "Western" theory-making. And it is similarly productive to be critical when, for example, theories of "sustainable agriculture"

are framed in the global scientific and political discourse as indigenous theoretical frameworks borrowed from non-Western societies for the solution of global problems. I think that globalizing "Western modernity" can offer a better framework for reassembling the pieces of deconstructed epistemologies than authentic spaces "from elsewhere" can.