

POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT

AND

SOCIAL THEORY

JULIAN GO



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For Oliver

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book attempts to reconcile social theory and postcolonial thought. The former originates within the metropolitan culture of modern European imperialism; the latter originates within the anticolonial movements that opposed imperialism. The former is institutionalized as social science; the latter has been largely a humanistic project. So what can one learn from the other? Because I am a card-carrying sociologist (albeit with strong historiographical and humanistic leanings), I am more concerned about one direction in this relation: how postcolonial thought might reorient social theory. But I am also concerned about how social science might inform postcolonial thought. Some of the ways I think it does are scattered throughout this book.

As with so many projects academics undertake, this book has its origins in those formative years we nostalgically call “grad school.” Back in the 1990s, when I was still taking courses at the University of Chicago as a PhD student in sociology, something called “postcolonial studies” was in the air. Students were talking about it. Seminars were filled. Dipesh Chakrabarty recently had been hired in South Asian Studies, and I had the distinct pleasure of getting to know him through his graduate seminar on Indian historiography. In that seminar, we students (an impressive group that included my friends Neil Brenner and Manu Goswami, among others) read about peasant resistance and subaltern studies. We read Gayatri Spivak’s path-breaking intervention into subaltern studies and Chakrabarty’s own response, which took the form of a new project he called “provincializing Europe.” We debated the promises and pitfalls of “representing” the subaltern. And we pondered whether the abstraction of labor as discussed by Marx necessarily left behind a concrete history that theory could never enclose (what Chakrabarty was calling “History 2”). We also debated whether that abstraction was a real abstraction, a conceptual abstraction, or both at once. Meanwhile, Homi Bhabha also had been hired by the English department. My friends in

that department were overjoyed, and the chatter at grad student parties in Hyde Park had become all about subalternity, Orientalism, colonial discourse, and colonial mimicry.

All of this piqued my interest in this exciting field of postcolonial studies and postcolonial theory. That body of writing and thought spoke to me. It offered a way of thinking about knowledge and the world more broadly; a way of thinking that resonated with me, but which I did not yet know how to articulate or express. And it offered a critique of Eurocentric modes of thought that my discipline of sociology embodied and expressed but had not yet named. I was dismayed at my discipline's ignorance of this exciting realm of thought. But my dismay soon turned into hope. I thought that, maybe, sociology could learn from postcolonial theory. Accordingly, I gave one of my advisors in sociology an article by Chakrabarty and asked him what he thought of it (and of postcolonial theory more generally). He responded dismissively but gently, "it's a little weird." Later, at a humanities academic conference, I mustered up enough courage to approach a scholar whose work in postcolonial studies I admired. I spoke to him of my interest in postcolonial theory and he replied, "right interest, wrong discipline."

I gave up. It appeared to be a fruitless fancy. Instead, I explored my other interests. These had to do with the U.S. empire and colonialism, and the result was a disciplinary-specific dissertation on U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico and the Philippines. That work, and much of my work thereafter, was about applying conventional social science to better understand colonialism. It was not about how an understanding of colonialism could help us better understand social science.

These formative experiences at Chicago had led me to believe that postcolonial thought and sociology are fundamentally opposed. Many experiences since then reinforced that belief. Most sociologists, when they know postcolonial theory at all, see their field and postcolonial studies as irreconcilable, or at least do not know how to articulate them. Other sociologists see postcolonial theory as little else than a trendy fad lacking substance. At best, in their view, postcolonial theory dangerously celebrates the cultural and particular at the expense of the material and universal. Or it runs perilously close to identity politics and normative humanism; hence away from "objective" social theory and "real" social "science." Alternatively, humanities scholars find social science to be the problem. They see its Eurocentrism, and its claims to pure "objectivity" and total knowledge, as yet another manifestation of the culture of empire that requires destruction. To them, sociology is part of the problem and so must be stopped short in its tracks.

But I have also seen an aperture. Scholars like Syed Fared Alatas, Gurminder Bhambra, R.W. Connell, Zine Magubane, and Sujata Patel form a vanguard movement in sociology that is more open to the sorts of ideas and critiques represented by postcolonial thought. This book is emboldened by their seminal labors. At the same time, graduate students whom I encounter express their dissatisfaction with conventional sociology in North America, embittered or at least disappointed by its putative Eurocentric parochialism, theoretical stagnation, and seeming irrelevance for our neo-imperial present. This book is alive to their pleas.

The possibilities of a postcolonial social science are slowly becoming clear. This book is my humble attempt to contribute to the making of that postcolonial social science, thereby fulfilling an initial fancy I once had, over two decades ago, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

And yet, the ultimate goal of this book is not to offer the concluding statement on how social science can be transformed by postcolonial thought. It is only to suggest that it should be.

Countless colleagues, friends, interlocutors, and critics have shaped this book. In various forums, from conference sessions and department halls to e-mails and coffeehouses, I have especially learned from, received encouragement from, or been generatively challenged by (in alphabetical order): Andrew Abbott, Julia Adams, Ron Aminzade, Tarak Barkawi, Claudio Benzecry, Cedric de Leon, Muge Gocek, Michael Goldman, Manu Goswami, Neil Gross, Jeff Guhin, Kevan Harris, José Itzigsohn, Monika Krause, Sanjay Krishnan, George Lawson, Zine Magubane, Renisa Mawani, Raka Ray, Isaac Reed, Meera Sabaratnam, Bill Sewell, George Steinmetz, Jonathan Wyrzten, and Andrew Zimmerman. Not all of them will be able to pinpoint exactly how they have helped me, but they have. Friends and colleagues in Sociology at Boston University, especially Nancy Ammerman, Emily Barman, Cati Connell, Susan Eckstein, Ashley Mears, and David Swartz, have helped make the BU Sociology Department an intellectually invigorating and open space in which to pursue weird ideas.

Parts of this project have benefitted from lectures at the sociology departments of Boston University, Northwestern University, the University of Virginia, Rutgers University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Tennessee, and the University of Lucerne-Switzerland; the International Relations Workshop at the London School of Economics (LSE); the Mellon Series on Postcolonial Studies at Brown University; the University of South Florida (USF) Provost's Postdoctoral Scholars Symposium; and the Comparative Historical Social Science Workshop at Northwestern University. I am indebted to the audiences for their helpful feedback and those wonderful folks who invited me to these forums,

including Martin Petzke at Lucerne, Phadra Daipha and József Böröcz at Rutgers, Krishan Kumar and Jeff Olick at Virginia, Paul Gellert and Harry Dahms at Tennessee, George Lawson and Kirsten Ainley at the LSE, the political science and sociology graduate students at Brown, Claudio Benzecry at Connecticut, Kiri Gurd at USF, and James Mahoney and Ann Orloff at Northwestern. The College of Arts & Sciences at Boston University provided crucial resources for this work. The International Relations Department at the London School of Economics provided a home away from Boston to do some of the writing.

I thank the invaluable insights of two anonymous readers for Oxford University Press, and the wonderful help, guidance, and support of my editor at OUP, James Cook. James has been an ardent proponent of this project throughout. I owe him one. I also thank the PhD students at Boston University and elsewhere who have repeatedly pushed me to go further in my explorations and who have encouraged or challenged me throughout (especially Ricarda Hammer and Michael Rodriguez at Brown, and Zophia Edwards, Trish Ward, Jake Watson, and Alexandre White at BU). Thanks, too, to my spouse, Emily Barman, for not only supporting my efforts throughout but also for telling me when my ideas are just bad. Finally, I must thank my son, Oliver. Because of the time it took to write this book I have not been able to spend as much time with him as he deserved; or as much as I would have liked. I can only dedicate this book to him as a small offering and hope that, by the time he is old enough to read social theory, this sort of book will no longer be necessary.

Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory

Introduction

Social Theory beyond Empire?

Social theory and postcolonial thought are two different modes of thought with respectively different histories and lineages. On the one hand, social theory is the abstract form of social science research. It schematizes the forms and dynamics of relations between people. It conceptualizes social relations, social hierarchy, and social change, and explains them. It also explains various other phenomena—from the biological to the political—by reference to “the social.” And like all modes of thought, it has a history and a social context of birth. That history, that social context, is *empire*: the global political formation that dominated the world’s landscape until the late twentieth century. Social theory was born in, of and, to some extent, *for* modern empire.¹

Postcolonial thought has a different history. Although this history also has to do with empire, it has been spirited by opposition to it. Postcolonial thought is primarily an anti-imperial discourse that critiques empire and its persistent legacies. If social theory was born from and for empire, postcolonial thought was born *against* it. Therefore, not only do social theory and postcolonial thought have different and divergent histories, they also embed opposed viewpoints and ways of thinking about the modern world in which we live.

These differences between social theory and postcolonial thought raise the question that animates this book. Can social theory and postcolonial thought be reconciled? The task is to consider the possibilities of articulating social theory and postcolonial thought, to see how they might fruitfully engage. One part of the task is to explore how postcolonial thought might benefit from a direct engagement with social theory. Can it learn

anything at all from it? The other part of the task is to see how social theory might be enlightened by postcolonial thought. How might social theory, and indeed the social sciences more broadly, be reconstructed and reworked in order to better suit the intellectual challenge that postcolonial thought poses to it? This question is especially vexing for, as we will see in chapters to come, the intellectual challenge to social theory posed by postcolonial thought is potentially insurrectionary. What anticolonial revolutions were to empires, postcolonial thought is to social science. Postcolonial thought is the intellectual equivalent of the anticolonial movements of the twentieth century that birthed it.

Hence the question: How might social theory survive the invasion?

EMPIRE AND THE SOCIAL

Let us first revisit the origins of social theory and its manifestation as disciplinary sociology. In what sense are those origins imperial? Chapter Two will explore this matter in more detail, but here note the timing and initial function of the concept of “the social.” Sociology as a disciplinary formation, housed in universities in the United States and Europe, first emerged in the late nineteenth century, but the social concept had emerged earlier. And its emergence was not purely an intellectual matter. Auguste Comte first used the term *sociology* in 1839, theorizing “the social” as a space distinct from the political, religious, and natural realms. But a key part of his larger project was to create an elite group of technical experts, armed with knowledge of the social realm, whose ideas could help manage and control society. Sociology was to be the “science” of the social, and it was to serve the powers that be.² Subsequently, the privileged classes increasingly deployed the social concept to make sense of and manage threats to social order from below their ranks (Calhoun 2007: 4–5). In the United States, we find something similar. One of the first books with the word “sociology” in the title was published in 1854. Written by George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* mobilized the social concept to vindicate the slave system in the American South and expand it to include poor whites (Fitzhugh 1854; Hund 2014: 36–40). Meanwhile, in Europe, intellectuals and political elites in the wake of the French revolution fretted about future revolts and disorder, and so deployed the social concept as part of their political projects. Social theories resonated in this context as “explanations of, and remedies for the increasingly violent demands of labour, natives and women” (Owens 2015: 18–19).

[2] Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, social theory took on an institutional form as disciplinary sociology, nestling within the emerging social sciences in the metropolises of the United States and Europe. It is here where sociology as we know it today was hatched, and it is here where the imperial origins of social theory become clearer. For it is precisely at this moment that Anglo-European imperialism began to reach its pinnacle. This was the moment of the “new imperialism” or “high imperialism” (as it would later be called)—the unleashing of violent power as nations like England, France, Germany, the United States, Belgium, Italy, and others mounted new territorial assaults upon Africa and Asia. By 1900, the new empires were ruling 90 percent of Africa, 56 percent of Asia, and 99 percent of the Pacific. By the First World War, imperial powers occupied 90 percent of the entire surface area of the globe (Andersson 2013; Young 2001: 2).

Sociology was institutionalized through and within this imperial moment (Connell 1997; Go 2013d; Mantena 2012). In 1893, the first Department of Sociology was established at the University of Chicago and the first doctorate in sociology in the United States was awarded at Cornell. But just as this was occurring, the French were colonizing the Ivory Coast, Laos, and Guinea; the British South Africa Company was invading Matabeleland in current-day Zimbabwe; and Queen Liliuokalani was surrendering her Hawaiian kingdom to the United States. A year later, the same year that Franklin Giddings was appointed chair and professor of sociology at Columbia (marking the first full professorship in sociology in the United States), England took Uganda as a protectorate, France seized Madagascar, and the Sino-Japanese War erupted. In 1895, as the *American Journal of Sociology* published its very first issue, Japan seized Taiwan, Britain turned Bechuanaland into a protectorate and raided the Transvaal Republic against the Boers, and the Cuban rebellion against Spain was unleashed. In 1901, the year that the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota was established, England was adding Tonga and Nigeria to its empire, and the U.S. government was violently suppressing an anticolonial insurgency in the Philippines, occupying Cuba, and solidifying its colonial regimes in Samoa and Puerto Rico (Go 2013d).

The early sociologists’ own words and concepts bespeak this imperial context of sociology’s institutionalization. Franklin Giddings, who later served as President of the American Sociological Society and was the first full professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, declared in 1911 that among the pressing questions of importance to sociologists were the questions of “territorial expansion and of rule over alien peoples” (Giddings 1911: 580–81). Meanwhile, many of these leading sociologists often affirmed imperialism, heralding it

as the necessary and desirable outcome of the “race struggle” and social evolution. Charles Cooley wrote in his journal in 1898 that the U.S. war with Spain, resulting in the acquisition of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam made him “proud of the race and the American stock” (Ross 1991: 242).

Even when they did not overtly praise imperialism, the data the early sociologists used to formulate their problems and construct their theories was dependent upon overseas imperialism. What was the topic of the very first dissertation in sociology in the United States? It was “The Making of Hawaii: A Study in Social Evolution,” awarded by Cornell to W. F. Blackman in 1893, the same year that the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown by the United States after years of American meddling in the islands (Morgan 1982: 51). And over in Europe, the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and many other founding “fathers,” along with W. I. Thomas in the United States, deployed data on colonized peoples that was being accrued for the purposes of colonial administration. In their research and theory, early sociologists thus reproduced the “imperial gaze” by which empires operated (Connell 1997). And, leaning upon evolutionary theory emerging initially from Darwin and then through Herbert Spencer, they theorized the world in racial terms; typically as a “race struggle” (Connell 1997; Go 2013e; Hund 2014; Morris 2015). Their theories and research rendered empire and racial domination intelligible, providing an intellectual framework and rationale for the new imperial world order in the making. “The inhabitants of southern, central, and western Europe, call them Aryan, Indo-Germanic, or anything you please,” wrote Lester Ward, first President of the American Sociological Society, in 1903, “has become the dominant race of the globe. As such it has undertaken the work of extending its dominion over other parts of the earth. It has already spread over the whole of South and North America, over Australia, and over Southern Africa. It has gained a firm foothold on Northern Africa, Southern and Eastern Asia, and most of the larger islands and archipelagos of the sea” (Ward 1903: 238–39).

As the social concept had been used in the earlier part of the nineteenth century to make sense of and quell social disorder and revolt, so too was the new discipline of sociology connected with imperial power. All the social sciences were, in fact.³ Sociology in this sense has imperial origins: not necessarily because it was in the direct service of empire (though in some cases it was), but because it was formed in the heartland of empire, crafted in its milieu, and was thus embedded in its culture. It was part and parcel of the imperial episteme. It was dependent upon and shared empire’s way of looking and thinking about the world, even when

it did not directly contribute to it.⁴ Sociologists have been among the first to assert that ideas are shaped by the social environments in which those ideas are generated (Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2011). If they believe their own theories, it should not be too difficult to acknowledge the context of empire within which their discipline was founded and their founding ideas forged.

One goal of this book is to explore how this imperial context more precisely shaped the content of sociology and social theory—and whether it still does today. Does social theory bear the imprint of its imperial origins? Has social theory extricated itself from this earlier imperial entanglement? How are sociological concerns, categories, frameworks, and research shaped by empire? Surely, the explicit racist claims of the early sociologists are not to be found in contemporary theory and research. And few sociologists would praise imperialism as a social good. But as we will see, the legacies of sociology's early imperial origins persist in subtle yet powerful ways—just as the legacies of empire in our world persist. There are important differences between social science today and social science in the era of high imperialism. But there are also continuities. In chapters to come, we will see how social science still works within an imperial episteme whose pervasive power we have underestimated.

ANTICOLONIALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT

Our exploration of empire's imprint upon social theory leads us to another body of thought: *postcolonial thought*, the origins of which lie not in empire but in anti-imperialism. We must remember the history. In the early twentieth century, the period of high imperialism gave way to a new period of anticolonial protest and resistance from subjugated peoples. Anti-imperial struggles had already surfaced in the late nineteenth century, and after the First World War they multiplied. In the 1920s, anticolonial populism erupted in colonies like India, and educated colonial elites joined the chorus. In 1927, for example, a group known as the "League Against Imperialism" met in Brussels. It brought together "two hundred delegates from thirty-seven states or colonized regions" representing one hundred and thirty-four organizations, who discussed issues ranging from "the tragedy of the Indian countryside to that of Jim Crow racism in the United States, from the growth of Italian fascism to the danger of Japanese intervention in Korea." Their name, the "League against Imperialism," was meant as a direct affront to the League of Nations' mandate system that

had reinstituted imperialism rather than throwing it aside after World War I (Prashad 2008: 19–20).

Anticolonial sentiment continued to spread through the 1930s. It surfaced in small pockets within the imperial metropolises, to be sure, but it also reached farther than before, as the Depression also laid the socioeconomic conditions for protests across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.⁵ World War II hastened the trend. It weakened colonial structures, armed colonized peoples, and raised questions about the strength of European empires and their future viability (Furedi 1994: 10–27). After the war, anticolonial nationalism proliferated even more. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah, and many other leaders of newly independent countries in Africa and Asia met with other dignitaries and writers such as Richard Wright. This helped further embolden anticolonial positions while offering a rallying point for the seemingly unstoppable spread of anticolonial nationalism around the world (Ballantyne and Burton 2014: 147–81; Parker 2006).

Throughout the period, many colonies were finally granted independence. Among those that were not, some erupted into bloody war, from Algeria to Vietnam. Later, the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana—otherwise known as the first Conference of the Organization of the Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—was a culmination of sorts. It brought together activists and leaders from all three continents of the Global South to push for the end of the last remnants of formal colonialism, and to bear witness to new forms of imperialism and exploitation emerging in the wake of empire’s seeming demise. Then, in the early 1970s, the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa marked a historic passage. The Portuguese empire had been among the last hold-outs on the continent, and its demise was the finale of decolonization. Those empires that had expanded in the beginning of the century were dismantled once and for all, and a multitude of independent nation-states appeared: new postcolonial states hoping to throw off the legacy of their colonial past and embark upon promising developmental paths. The colonial empires passed away. And for millions upon millions of postcolonial peoples, hope was in the air.

Social theory was born of empire within the metropolises of power, but *postcolonial thought* (or “postcolonial theory,” also known as “postcolonial studies”) emerged in this context of anti-imperialism. It emerged from the margins if not the underbelly of empire, flourishing amidst anti-imperial protest and resistance from subjugated peoples around the world. Today, when academics utter “postcolonial theory,” they most likely think of the

academic trend of postcolonial studies that flourished in Departments of English and Literature beginning in the 1980s. They think of scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha (just to name a few early proponents) who were leading advocates of postcolonial studies. Or they think of the historians associated with subaltern studies, such as Ranajit Guha or Dipesh Chakrabarty. Surely these figures represent postcolonial theory, but this was merely a second wave of postcolonial thought. The earlier first wave of postcolonial thought included writers and activists such as Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and C. L. R. James (1901–1989) among many others. These are the same thinkers in whom the second wave found inspiration. And they wrote amidst the throes of anticolonialism and decolonization in the mid-twentieth century.

To be sure, just as the founders of sociology in the United States were alive to the new imperialism around them, the founding postcolonial thinkers were spirited by the anticolonial struggles that enveloped them. Fanon, for instance, had been an active participant in anticolonial struggles. Hailing originally from Martinique and trained as a psychiatrist in France, Fanon joined the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in 1956 that raised arms against French colonialism. Expelled from Algeria, he moved to Tunis and became one of the editors of the FLN newspaper *El Moudjahid* and the FLN's ambassador to Ghana and Mali (to organize support for the anticolonial movement in the Maghreb). Even after his death in 1961, his guiding spirit remained. The Tricontinental conference in 1966 culminated in a journal, *Tricontinental*, the first issue of which included essays by Stokely Carmichael and Kim II Sung along with a posthumous piece by Fanon (Barcia 2009). Another first-wave postcolonial thinker, Amílcar Cabral, also had been a leading anticolonial activist. In the 1960s, he was a prominent member of the independence movements in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde before being assassinated in 1973. His major contributions to postcolonial thought came from speeches given at arenas such as the 1966 Tricontinental Conference (Young 2001: 285).

Not all of the first-wave thinkers actually took up arms as did Cabral. Du Bois was a public intellectual and scholar-activist, occupying university positions while traveling to activist meetings and writing journalistic pieces. Besides helping to establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the United States, he participated in the major anticolonial conferences of his day, such as the First Pan-African Conference in London (1900), the First Universal Races Congress (1911), and the First Pan-African Congress (1918) (where he was followed closely by U.S. agents hoping to try him for treason) and the

subsequent Second Pan-African Congress in 1921. In 1945, he attended the conference in San Francisco that established the United Nations. There, he and the rest of the NAACP delegation drafted a proposal for the United Nations to call an end to colonialism everywhere. Aimé Césaire, for his part, was a writer, politician, and poet. Before penning his influential work *Discourse on Colonialism* (first published in 1950), he had traveled from his home of Martinique to Paris to study at the *École normale supérieure* where he created the literary review *L'Étudiant Noir* ("The Black Student") with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas. He returned to Martinique to write poetry and teach (teaching Frantz Fanon, for instance). He later became mayor of Fort-de-France and then deputy to the French National Assembly for Martinique.

W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral: They were all part of the global landscape of anticolonialism onto which their names are indelibly imprinted. And animating all of them was a critique of empire and its multifarious operations. They highlighted the violence wrought by the Anglo-European empires. They emphasized colonial exploitation and the racist and racialized foundations of imperialism. They highlighted the costly psychological impact of colonialism upon colonized and colonizer. They illuminated how colonial exploitation facilitated the wealth of Anglo-European societies. And their critiques targeted more than just political domination or economic exploitation. The postcolonial thought they spawned was a critical engagement with empire's very *culture*—its modes of seeing, being, and knowing. As we will see in Chapter One, this is a crucial dimension of postcolonial thought: an opposition to the episteme of empire. Postcolonial thought recognizes that empire is everywhere, a silent shaper of our ways of seeing and knowing the world.

Besides critique, these thinkers were also spirited by a will to imagine worlds beyond empire. Du Bois, Fanon, and Cabral pushed for the national independence of colonized peoples and formal political equality, but they also strove for much more. They envisioned, for instance, a future of global racial equality and redistributive socioeconomic systems; a world beyond the enslavement and exploitation wrought by the colonial empires. Césaire, Senghor, and others envisioned new postimperial forms and modes of self-actualization, in which racial and cultural differences would flourish rather than be denigrated, erased, and replaced by Europe's so-called civilization. And rather than praising the particular against the universal, they sought ways of transcending the very opposition between them (Grosfoguel 2012; Wilder 2015).

Postcolonial thought, then, was born not only of anticolonial movements seeking national independence and political equality but also of

attempts to chart entirely new ways of being and human belonging. This is why their writings—and the scholarly enterprise they helped to spawn—is rightfully referred to as *post-colonial* thought. The word “postcolonial” does not connote that the legacies of colonialism are actually over. It does not designate a historical reality *after* colonialism. In the early 1970s, some scholars had, indeed, used the term “postcolonial” to refer to the historical phase or period after decolonization (Alavi 1972). “To describe a literary work or a writer as ‘postcolonial,’” notes Neil Lazarus (2011: 11), “was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics.”⁶ The meaning of “postcolonial” in phrases such as *postcolonial* thought, *postcolonial* theory, or *postcolonial* studies is different. It refers to a loose body of writing and thought that seeks to transcend the legacies of modern colonialism and overcome its epistemic confines. It refers to a relational position *against* and *beyond* colonialism, including colonialism’s very culture. As Gandhi (1998: 4) notes, postcolonial studies is “devoted to the academic task of revising, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past,” but it only does so in order to overcome the legacies of that past. Postcolonial thought critiques the culture of empire in order to cultivate new knowledges, ways of representing the world, and histories that circumvent or transcend rather than authorize or sustain imperialistic ways of knowing.

Postcolonial thought thus sketches a world beyond the epistemic limits of the present. It is only *post* in this sense of seeking transcendence; something beyond or *after* colonial epistemes. The signifier “post” in the term “postcolonial thought” refers to an intellectual stance that recognizes colonialism’s legacies, critiques them, and tries to reach beyond them. It is also *post*, therefore, in the sense that it seeks to overcome the imperial suppression of the thought, experiences, and agency of the colonized and ex-colonized peoples. “If colonial history . . . was the history of the imperial appropriation of the world,” writes Robert Young (2001: 4), a prominent interpreter of postcolonial theory, “the history of the twentieth century has witnessed the peoples of the world taking power and control back for themselves. Postcolonial theory is itself a product of that dialectical process.”⁷

We have before us, then, two bodies of thought: social theory and postcolonial thought. They were born within respectively different contexts and served functions that stand in tension with, if not in opposition to, each other. Social theory embeds the culture of imperialism; postcolonial thought manifests critiques of empire. One comes from the center of modern empire; the other from its margins. One was part of the imperial episteme, the other critiqued imperial formations and envisioned postimperial futures. Are these two modes of thought reconcilable?

The main goal of this book is to ponder the precise parallels and points of convergence between social theory and postcolonial thought as well as their many differences; to see what productive tensions they yield and how, if at all, they might be reconciled. The ultimate task is to consider how the former—social theory—might benefit from the latter, to see how postcolonial thought might help us overcome the limiting legacies of social theory's founding context of empire. How might we cultivate a social science that goes beyond its existing analytic confines? If social theory can be challenged for its persistent imperial gaze and its embedded-ness in the episteme of empire, how can we reconstruct it, making it more attuned to the global challenges of our ostensibly postcolonial present? This book explores modes of possible remediation by putting social science into critical conversation with postcolonial thought. Put simply, this book explores the possibility of a postcolonial social theory—in short, a postcolonial sociology.

THE DIFFERENCES OF DISCIPLINES

As of yet, a postcolonial sociology is unrealized.⁸ Just as social theory and postcolonial thought represent two different histories and global processes—empire on the one hand and anticolonial resistance on the other—so, too, have they diverged in disciplinary resonance and orientation. Social theory is mainly a project of disciplinary social science. Alternatively, postcolonial thought has been sequestered to the academic humanities.

Consider how postcolonial thought has been received in the North American academy.⁹ In 1978, the book *Orientalism*, by the Middle East specialist and literary scholar Edward Said, became widely acclaimed in literary circles. The work embodied the spirit of anti-imperial critique articulated earlier by the likes of Césaire and Fanon. It excavated the ways in which an imperial episteme, embedded in the academy and the arts under the name “Orientalism,” enabled and facilitated imperialism. *Orientalism* also raised the possibility of going beyond that episteme, of crafting a post-Orientalist way of thinking (Said 1979). Said's later work, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), continued to explore and critique imperial cultures; and along the way, other scholars joined in. Gayatri Spivak (who had been known for helping to bring the thought of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to the American academy) produced a spate of articles and books about imperialism, colonialism, and culture. Homi Bhabha, the literary theorist who had started his academic career

in England but then moved to the United States, added to this fledgling body of work in literary studies, exploring themes such as colonial hybridity and resistance. In history, the subaltern studies school strove to recover the agency of colonized peoples and then, with the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty in particular, pondered ways of incorporating postcolonial thought into historical narratives.

This amounted to the second wave of postcolonial thought, picking up the mantle of critiquing empire, imperial cultures and knowledge from thinkers like Du Bois, Fanon, Césaire, and Cabral. And it was born in and largely for humanities departments. It offered a critique of certain trends within the humanities, forming an “oppositional stance against the traditional humanities” that challenged intellectual conventions in literary studies. It took the spirit and content of anticolonial critique to the academy, picking apart the humanities and showing how it embodied the imperial episteme (Gandhi 1998: 42). And even though it began as heterodoxy within the North American humanities faculties, by the 1990s “postcolonial studies” had become an identifiable and widely popular trend within those same faculties (Brennan 2014: 89). In 1995, Russell Jacoby wrote that the term “postcolonial” had become “the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind” (Jacoby 1995). By the end of the decade, Gandhi (1998: viii) noticed that postcolonial thought had “taken its place with theories such as poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and feminism as a major critical discourse in the humanities.” Indeed, since then, postcolonial thought has spread to various parts of the humanities, converging with and animating trends like “decolonial” thinking in philosophy and facilitating critiques of Eurocentric history (Dussel 2008; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo 2009; Santos 2014). Its presence can be found in fields all over the humanities, from cultural studies to linguistics and rhetoric, and even science studies, legal studies, history, and education (Andreotti 2011; Darian-Smith and Fitzpatrick 1999; Harding 1992; Harding 1998; Loomba et al. 2006).

But what about social science and sociology in particular? On the one hand, it is the case that postcolonial thought has recently exerted some influence on sociology in Europe and elsewhere in the world (Bhambra 2007a, 2010; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boatcă, and Costa 2010; Kempel and Mawani 2009).¹⁰ And surely, certain postcolonial *themes* can be said to have emerged in disciplinary sociology. As we will see, for instance, world-systems theory within sociology can be said to be sociology’s best answer to postcolonial thought. Critical race theory in sociology, too, shares ground with postcolonial thought (Weiner 2012; Winant 2004). Furthermore, we must not forget that one of the thinkers of the first wave of postcolonial

thought, W. E. B. Du Bois, was a sociologist by name, methods, and institutional affiliation.

Still, these exceptions are just that: exceptions. For the most part, sociology and especially sociology in North America has yet to directly engage the sort of postcolonial thought that has had such a profound influence in the humanities. The *New York Times* was not incorrect when observing, in 2000: “Surprisingly, the primary home for postcolonial studies [has not been] political science, but literature” (Hedges 2000). Postcolonial thinkers are not cited as highly in mainstream social science journals as they are in humanities journals—when they are cited at all. There are few if any panels at major sociology conferences on postcolonial theory; few if any courses in postcolonial studies and no job lines (Go 2013b). There is a sense in which even popular culture has paid attention to postcolonial thought more than conventional social science: The *New York Times* has referred to Homi Bhabha more times than the *American Sociological Review* (Go 2013b: 26–27). And although some admit that Du Bois belongs in the sociological canon, few, if any, sociologists put Fanon, Césaire, Cabral, or C. L. R. James into the canon; nor do social theory textbooks. The sociologist Steven Seidman noted in the 1990s that “[Edward] Said has had, sad to say, little influence in sociology” (1996: 315). This is true today, and it is more general than just the occlusion of Edward Said.

The case of W. E. B. Du Bois both complicates and yet affirms our story. As we will see in later chapters, Du Bois was among the vanguard of the first wave of postcolonial thinkers. His work shared and in some cases prefigured the themes of the other postcolonial writers, emphasizing empire and colonialism as foundational for modernity and theorizing imperial racism and knowledge. And like the other first-wavers, he was an active anticolonialist, as noted above. Yet Du Bois was also a card-carrying sociologist. He was a professor of sociology, history, and economics at Atlanta University. And the American Sociological Association has named a scholarly award after him. Should he be taken as evidence that sociology has been open to postcolonial thought?

The problem is that Du Bois is the exception that proves the rule. His standing within mainstream sociology attests to his exceptionality. Du Bois may be known by sociologists, but his historic role in sociology and his thinking has been largely marginalized. He had been a member of the prominent sociology department at the University of Pennsylvania, but for most of the twentieth century he was not mentioned in its histories (Katznelson 1999: 465). The American Sociological Association finally came to recognize him as a founder of American sociology, but this recognition has come only recently, after nearly a century of neglect. To this