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In Defense of the Southern Standpoint. A Friendly Response to Comments

(doi: 10.2383/85283)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2016

Ente di afferenza:

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In Defense of the Southern Standpoint

A Friendly Response to Comments

by Julian Go

doi: 10.2383/85283

I am immensely grateful for, and honored by, the comments on my essay from Beigel [2016], Crothers [2016] and Keim [2016]. Their insights have pushed me to think harder about its claims. They also give me the opportunity to elaborate and extend them. While it is impossible here to address all of their points, I can address most of them.

Let me begin with a story that conveys the motivation behind my essay. Years ago, I came across Raewyn Connell's remarkable book, *Southern Theory* [2007]. It was a revelation: here was a trenchant attack upon Eurocentrism (as I named it at the time). I knew of the critique of Eurocentrism from postcolonial writers like Fanon, and I knew of the world-systems critique of Eurocentrism. But here was a sustained and elaborate examination of contemporary social theory. Here, too, was a solution: "Southern" theory.

I was riveted. I also was excited to read about the debates in the 1990s over "indigenous sociology." Apparently, the critique of "Northern" theory and the indigenous/Southern solution is nothing new. But then I was curious. Why hadn't the indigenous/Southern solution made more headway in the North American academy? My curiosity led me to ask a prominent American social theorist about Connell's book (I will not name him; suffice to say that he was a renowned and powerful sociological voice in the United States). His reply was something to the effect of: "It's a nice little book, but it's a lot of multicultural identity political posturing without much substance, isn't it?"

Through more reading and more discussions, I soon learned this was a common view among mainstream American sociologists. While many were sympathetic to the critique of Eurocentrism, they did not see the indigenous/Southern solution to be a viable alternative. They saw it as too essentialist. How do we determine what is “Southern” or “indigenous” without resorting to some sort of core identity of race, ethnicity, or geography? They saw it as subjectivist and epistemically relativist: an approach that roots knowledge claims in racial, cultural or geographical identity rather than in objectivity. And they saw it as parochial or particularistic, as reflecting only limited concerns of certain people in the Global South and lacking any large-scale systematic analysis. In their view, the existing canon, however Eurocentric, was preferable. For all their faults, at least Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, Giddens, Coleman, etc. strove to be scientific (and hence non-essentialist), objective (hence permitting truthful social knowledge), and universal (and hence not parochial).

So I came to the conclusion that one of the many reasons for why the indigenous/Southern theory movement had had only limited impact in North America was the predominance of this critique—viz., that indigenous/Southern theory is essentialist, parochial, and epistemically relativist. My own view was that this critique was misplaced. I, for one, did not see these problems as inherent to indigenous/Southern theory. Yet, a fully-fledged systematic defense of the movement and a clear ontological and epistemological scaffold for it was lacking. So I searched. I read and re-read the debates from the 1990s, but there I only found the same criticisms of Southern theory without defense. I turned to more recent work, like Sousa Santos’ *Epistemologies of the South* [2014] and Bhabra’s *Rethinking Modernity* [2007] but again I failed to find a clearly stated ontology and epistemology that would directly confront these critiques.¹ Finding little there, I turned to the anticolonial thought of Fanon and Césaire. I also enlisted standpoint theory and feminist thought. And I dug into post-positivist philosophies of knowledge and science.

One result is the present essay. What I wanted to do was mount a sustained defense of the indigenous/Southern theory movement that makes explicit what I take to be its implicit ontology and epistemology (even if proponents of that movement had not yet articulated in this way). This, then, was not meant to be an analysis of the institutional and practical problems attendant with the indigenous/Southern theory movement. We all know these problems, and many thinkers more attuned to the issues than I have offered important insights on them. Indeed, the important work

¹ In fact, in some of this work [e.g. Bhabra 2007, 29], I just found the same critiques of Southern theory that I had encountered among many conventional North American sociologists.

of the commentators in this forum has helped to illuminate them. Fernanda Beigel's edited collection, *The Politics of Academic Autonomy in Latin America* [2013], is replete with insights on the complexities of knowledge production in the some parts of the Global South. So, too, is the wonderful volume edited by Keim, Çelik, Ersche, and Wöhrer [2014]. But my essay was not meant to discuss these sorts of questions. Nor was my essay meant to formulate a new strategic orientation of knowledge directed towards "social and political considerations", as Keim put it in her commentary [2016]. Keim's commentary, and her work, points to exactly that type of strategy already (a strategy which I applaud and endorse wholeheartedly). What I wanted to was different: to consider the *intellectual* barriers involved in the movement. More specifically, I wanted to contribute to the movement, in however minor a way, by formulating a frontal rebuke to the charges of essentialism, particularism and subjectivism that have given many otherwise sympathetic social scientists pause. The question is whether I have succeeded in that precise endeavor.

For some readers, I have not succeeded. According to Beigel [2016], there is nothing new to my intervention. The "original contribution" of my essay is unclear. Beigel claims that existing work in the Latin American tradition, including work by Varsavsky [1975], Herrera [1974] and Vessuri *et al.* [1984], among others, already says all that needs to be said. Beigel therefore implies that a new intellectual intervention such as mine is not necessary. Perhaps translating existing Latin American interventions into English is all that is required. This is an intriguing critique of my essay. And I would agree. If the work cited by Beigel does indeed already articulate a perspectival realist theory that overcomes essentialism, particularism and epistemic subjectivism and highlights the partiality of social knowledge, I would surely welcome it. That work should be translated and promoted. We should use it as a bulwark against critical challenges from skeptical sociologists. It should also serve as a rallying point for advancing the movement. Sign me up.

That said, my admittedly cursory understanding of this literature tells me that it does not mount an explicit defense against charges of essentialism, particularism and subjectivism. Herrera's [1971] work, for example, shows how political elites control or otherwise direct the production of knowledge for their own ends. The implication is that autonomous knowledge needs to be cultivated. And while Herrera's analysis is important, it does not offer an explicit ontology and epistemology defending indigenous/Southern theory against the long-standing criticism that it is essentialist, particularistic, and relativist. I fail to see how it solves the problem that I raise in my essay.

Do the other authors cited by Beigel offer as much hope for us as Beigel suggests? I do not yet know, because I have not read them all. But thanks to Beigel's useful commentary, I will surely investigate.

That an explicit and sustained defense of the indigenous/Southern theory movement is necessary (and that my intervention is not superfluous) is emboldened by some of the other comments in this forum. For instance, some of them raise the exact same critiques of indigenous/Southern sociology that I take up in my essay. Crothers questions the term “indigenous” because it covers up vast differences among different countries and peoples [2016]. Keim makes a similar point about the term “Subaltern”: “it is not singular but multiple” [2016, p.4]. These points are similar to those made by mainstream sociologists who dismiss indigenous/Southern theory as essentialist and reductionist. And I agree with them, which is why I prefer the term “Southern” to “indigenous”, equate it functionally with “subaltern”, and define both *relationally*. As a relational position, “subaltern” does not refer to any singular identity. It refers to a place in hierarchy: a subject *position*. The places can be multiple, because the hierarchies can be multiple too. But because the category “subaltern” does not refer to an essence, it can accommodate this multiplicity. Analytically, which identity we wish to focus upon depends upon the relations at stake. Return to Frantz Fanon. On the one hand, in relation to French colonial rulers, Fanon occupied the position of a subaltern subject, and his experiences as that subject provided a base upon which he formulated his theories of colonial racialization. But in relation to, say, a peasant Kabyle woman, Fanon would not be a subaltern subject. On the other hand, both Fanon and the Kabyle woman would be considered subaltern in relation to the French imperial state. And they would likewise both be considered subaltern in the sense that their standpoints have been repressed by a/the? Northern epistemic regime – a regime that heralded only the French colonialists’ standpoint as relevant. The multiplicity of identities only becomes an analytic problem if we stubbornly cling to a “substantialist” rather than a relational approach.²

The same relationality pertains to the category “Northern.” Keim rightfully points to the critique that has been registered against Connell’s *Southern Theory*: the term “Northern theory” covers up a vast array of differences within the “North.” But I have always read Connell’s point to be that the category “Northern” is relational too, just as is the category subaltern. This means while it can and should accommodate multiplicity on one level, it also needs to be considered as a singular subject position on another level and at the very same time. The latter is especially important for acknowledging *global geopolitical and economic hierarchies*. If we acknowledge these hierarchies, then some notion of a position at the top of the hierarchy must also be admitted, and calling that position “Northern” would not be problematic. Northern

² On substantialism vs. relationalism, see Emirbayer [1997]. On the category “subaltern” as relational, see Coronil [1997] and Spivak [1988].

denotes a coordinate relative to Southern. Consider, for instance, the France that ruled Algeria when Fanon was writing. Yes, there were poor uneducated whites in France in that period who were different from the educated bureaucrats of the French imperial state. But the French imperial state still ruled Algeria and all those within it. The French imperial state occupied the dominant or “Northern” position. And this is important because it shaped knowledge. The knowledge the French imperial state generated and used was driven by the particular standpoint of power attending its Northern position. Biologistic theories about racial inferiority – or even social theories about what caused native unrest and hence about maintaining social order – followed from this standpoint [e.g. Owens 2015]. And all the while, the standpoint of colonized subjects like Fanon was occluded. The hierarchy – and hence the hierarchy of knowledge – remained, despite the multiple other identities running across and through it.

The point is that we have no choice but to speak of something like a “Northern theory” (or “Northern” standpoint) unless we refuse to admit of power relations, the hierarchies they form, and the social embeddedness of knowledge. While I would concur that there are different identities and experiences that criss-cross the top position of the global hierarchy, the fact that they share a position at the top at all warrants, in my view, the use of a category like “Northern.”³

Besides essentialism, another criticism of indigenous/Southern theory is that the “local knowledge” it offers is not usable for social theory. This is Crothers’ point that Southern theories are not really “theories.” African poetry, for example, does not offer a true “analytical model.” On this point I agree, and so in my essay I stress that a standpoint approach based upon perspectival realism would not countenance African poetry as a *replacement* for analytical models, rather it would insist it might be an crucial *starting point*. Fanon’s “local” knowledge of racism in colonial settings does not constitute his theory of colonialism’s racializing operations and structure, it is the beginning point for it. Prebisch’s “local” knowledge (the equivalent here of “African poetry”) is data on Latin American economic conditions that had been previously unavailable. But Prebisch did not use that data to replace his theory of dependency; he used it as an initial position that enabled him to see dependency in the first place. Or turn to the example of mapping offered by perspectival realism: the experience of walking through a street in the city of Manila is not the analytical

³ At the very least, I would rely upon Spivak’s [1988] notion of “strategic essentialism”: we must, for the purposes of critiquing power, refer to power relations that produce hierarchies – hence hierarchical positions that share certain similarities within them.

model itself. The experience does not replace the map. But it is the first necessary step towards drawing the map.

The related critique of indigenous/Southern theory is that local knowledge is narrow and parochial. This is the critique reproduced in Crothers' worry that local knowledges "preclude consideration of the wider environments in which these people are located." [2016, p.4] But as I tried to stress in my essay, I do not agree. Local knowledge may be specific, but key is not to take local knowledge as the end point but rather as the starting point for scaling upwards to analyze the "wider environment." This is exactly what Fanon and Prebisch do, as I tried to show. And as the tenets of perspectival realism claim, *all* social theories start from local knowledge. Northern theory, for instance, purports to be more universalistic and generally applicable, but it still emerges from a standpoint; hence from a locality. How can it not? Take Marx's theory of Capital: what enabled that theory was Marx adopting the standpoint of the worker. As he says, by stepping into the "hidden abode" of the factory, he was able to analyze how surplus value is generated through labor exploitation [Marx 1977, 279]. But this did not preclude an analysis of the wider capitalist system: it was an entry to it.

This worry about the presumed parochialism of Southern theory is evident too in Crothers' insistence that "structure and agency [...] apply across all human situations" [2016, p.3]. By this I take Crothers to be claiming that Northern theory *is universal*, and so is superior to Southern theory. This is also a claim that I challenge in my essay, where I draw upon perspectival realism to show that those categorical schemes and theories like "structure-agency" which we take to be universal must be understood instead as *partial* even if they do "apply" to many situations. In fact, I agree with the claim that "structure and agency" can be applied everywhere. What I disagree with is the attendant notion that it is the *only* theoretical system that is useful everywhere or that it is somehow superior to others. This is the whole point of my deployment of perspectival realism. Multiple objectivities are always possible, such that structure and agency may indeed apply to many contexts. That is, using those theoretical categories may tell us some things about social practices in certain places. The structure-agency scheme is like a map. But as with any map, it comes from a certain place (in this case, the North), and its view is always partial and incomplete. It does not tell us everything we might want to know. Therefore, we need to recover other standpoints that enable us to produce other maps to let us see other things. The problem is that those other maps are often occluded, repressed, or cast aside by dominant sociology on the grounds that they are inferior because they are particularistic and subjectivist.

This is why I fundamentally disagree that perspectival realism is "Weberian" as Crothers seems to think. Weber's refusal to acknowledge the social embeddedness of

knowledge (including his own), his false claims to universality, and his often Orientalist categories do not accord with the tenets of perspectival realism. This, too, is why I actually agree with Crothers' notion that we should not "privilege" the viewpoints of "the most deprived," because perspectival realism *rejects* the notion that certain standpoints hold "epistemic privilege" [2016, p.6]. My point is not that the subaltern standpoint should be privileged over other standpoints: it is that it has been too long repressed by the standpoint of the dominant, and so it needs to be recovered.

This is not a call to privilege some voices over others, it is a call for epistemic justice enlisted for the purposes of new social knowledge. This is where I break with Crothers, for Crothers would instead have us continue with the "analytic tools that we've got" rather than excavate new standpoints [2016, p.4]. But imagine how impoverished our social knowledge would be if Fanon had reduced racialization to a matter of "structure and agency" rather than theorizing it from the standpoint of the colonized subject? Or what if W.E.B. DuBois had only theorized American race relations as a matter of "structure and agency" rather than from the standpoint of those condemned to suffer from a double-consciousness?⁴ If those theorists had stuck to the tools that were imposed upon them, they would not have generated new theories from the Southern standpoint, and we would not today have the benefit of their important and critical social insights.

Let me try to clarify these points by taking up Crothers' call to move beyond the examples of Fanon and Prebisch and examine standpoint innovations in the North. Specifically, let me return to the example of Marx and his critique of Adam Smith. Marx, recall, chides Smith for his faulty theory of value. While Smith reduced value to market price, and explained market price by reference to supply and "effective demand," Marx contended that the real action lies in labor, and hence in the production process. We must enter the "hidden abode of production" where "we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced" and where "the secret of profit making must be laid bare" [Marx 1977, 279-280]. Marx thus shows us that surplus value comes from surplus labor through the extension of the working-day and through gains in efficiency – all of which occur in the factory; that is, in the sphere of production [*Ibidem*].

The theory is well known but two things to note here. First, note that how Marx innovated by adopting a new standpoint. The reason why Smith could not "force the secret of profit-making" is because he looked at capitalism only from the standpoint of the market, that is, from the perspective of the "noisy sphere of exchange, where

⁴ For an excellent examination of the innovation in this concept from Du bois, see Itzigsohn and Brown [2015].

everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men” [*Ibidem*, 279]. Marx’s discovery lies in adopting an entirely different standpoint: looking “beneath” the market or realm of exchange and into the “hidden abode” of the factory. The standpoint therefore led to a different theory. Smith’s theory of value, coming from the standpoint of exchange, led him to see value in terms of price, and to find the determination of price in the fluctuation of supply relative to effective demand. But Marx’s theory from the standpoint of the production process allowed him to see that “Value” is determined by the socially-necessary labor time it takes to make a commodity and to then trace the origins of profit to surplus labor [*Ibidem*: 281-284]. While Smith’s theory embeds the view of capitalism from the standpoint of the market, hence the merchant, Marx’s theory embeds the view of capitalism from the standpoint of production, hence of the laborer.

Note, secondly, that Smith’s theory of supply and demand as determining exchange values can be equivocated with “structure-agency” as Crothers’ characterizes it: that is, it is in a certain sense “universal.” It is “universal” in the sense that, in fact, Smith’s theory, despite Marx’s criticism, did apply to a certain extent. Marx himself did not challenge the theory that supply and demand determines price [Marx 1969, 11]. And Marx’s own theory about the dynamics of capitalism relies upon and indeed *assumes* that Smith’s theory that the market price of a product is determined by the ratio of supply and effective demand is correct, at least when the ratio is in disequilibrium [Harvey 2010, 24; 166; 183]. So, like “structure-agency”, Smith’s theory applies to all capitalist situations and in that sense is universal. But it is also partial and incomplete, just like the “structure-agency” problematic. For while supply and demand, Marx insists, “will explain to you why the market price of a commodity rises above or sinks below its value”, it “can never account for the value itself” [Marx 1969, 11]. That is why Marx entered the “hidden abode” of factory production – a new standpoint – to theorize capitalism, and thereby offer his innovation. But what if Marx had not adopted a new standpoint that had been repressed by bourgeois political economy and instead did what Crothers suggests we do now, that is “work with the analytic tools we’ve got” [2016, p.4]? We would have remained beholden to the standpoint of the market and hence would have never been afforded the insights of Marx’s theory.

Hopefully this example from Marx clarifies my argument about perspectival realism and standpoints.⁵ Hopefully, too, it can help address Keim’s crucial ques-

⁵ It also, hopefully, shows why Crothers’ opposition between my perspectival realism and what he alludes to as “multi-perspective realism” is a false one (perspectival realism *already* embeds within it a call for multi-perspective realism – that’s what it *is*).

tion: “what is the relationship between different standpoints and different theories?” [2016, p.6]. Keim claims that different standpoints do not necessarily lead to different theories (and that the same standpoint could produce different theories). Keim may be right. I think this requires further investigation. But based upon the examples I summon, I would contend that different standpoints *do* lead to different theories. Because Smith only saw capitalism from the standpoint of market relations, all he saw were merchants engaging with consumers. Therefore, he only saw demand, supply, and fluctuations of price. Smith’s theory (which was essentially about how market dynamics explains price) followed directly. But by adopting the standpoint of the wage relation in factories, Marx was able to see how the production process, and hence exploitation, undergirds the production of value and hence lies at the heart of capitalism.

The implication is that adopting other standpoints than either those of Smith or Marx would yield yet different theories, and I claim this is the case. Note, for instance, that Marx’s standpoint, while offering certain advantages over Smith’s market standpoint, has its own peculiarities. His is the standpoint of production from *male* workers in an industrial factory. Marx’s standpoint thus overlooks another perspective by which we could theorize value, price, and capitalism: the Victorian household. This is the intervention of feminists critically extending Marxist theory and who have shown that Marx’s theory obfuscates the value of women’s domestic labor and its role in reproducing male labor power, The result is nothing less than an entirely new way of looking at and theorizing capitalist social relations: a Marxist-feminist approach [Brown 2013; Vogel 2000]. And we could go further. For instance, we could turn away from Smith, Marx and feminist analyses of the Victorian household altogether and consider what happens when we adopt standpoints from the Global South. Here arises the postcolonial perspective on capitalism; that is, another “map” of capitalism – one which captures the subterranean regions of global capitalism in a way that neither Smith, nor Marx nor feminist-Marxists had captured. For postcolonial theorists like Aimee Césaire, Frantz Fanon, or C.L.R. James (to name a few), all of the foregoing theories of capitalism are particular because they embed the standpoint of white Europe.

[The] “masses” whom Marx presumed would be “seized” by theory were European male wage labors and artisans in the metropolises of Western Europe, Britain and the United States [Robinson 2000, iii].

Postcolonial thinkers, however, shifted perspective and showed how capitalism looked from the standpoint of the peasant, the slave and the colonized – those groups that Marxist theory had tossed into

the imagined abyss signified by precapitalist, noncapitalist, and primitive accumulation [*Ibidem*].

The result was a whole series of theoretical interventions now associated with postcolonial theory, critical race studies, and Black Marxism. In short, while Keim is right to suggest that the relationship between standpoint and theorization is something that we need to reflect upon further, I would nonetheless start from the working hypothesis that there is a closer relationship between standpoint and theory than we might otherwise imagine.

Finally, I agree with the suggestions here and elsewhere that we must think harder about strategies to undo the hegemony of academics in the Global North. We need to translate works from non-English contexts and create forums for sociologists from around the world to gather on more equal footing. We need to equally distribute resources for sociological production. We need to find ways to enable voices from the Global South to be heard. But note the implications of my non-essentialist standpoint approach rooted in perspectival realism: any such strategies would not be fruitful unless the *intellectual substance* of the sociological work is also altered. Do we translate a theorist from the South because we are presuming that that the knowledge produced by that theorist has value, *just because the theorist is from the South*? I would say “no,” and this is consistent with my anti-essentialist position. There are probably many sociologists from the Global South whose sociologies do not emerge from the Southern standpoint and instead reproduce the standpoint of the Northern theory.⁶ Unless we want to be geographical determinists or essentialists, we cannot presume that just because one writes in or is from the Global South that the knowledge embeds a Southern standpoint. So while I agree we need to do the work of translation and of giving venues for all sociologists to have a voice, we also must do the work of ensuring that different *standpoints* get represented as well. While the latter might follow from the former, it is problematic to assume that it necessarily does so.

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⁶ I discuss this in relation to Bourdieu, Fanon, and Mannoni in my book [Go 2016].

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In Defense of the Southern Standpoint

A Friendly Response to Comments

Abstract: This essay responds to the commentaries on Go's "Globalizing Sociology, Turning South. Perspectival Realism and the Southern Standpoint" by Fernanda Beigel, Charles Crothers, and Weibke Keim. It responds to criticisms of essentialism, particularism and epistemic relativism in Southern theory.

Keywords: Social Theory; Indigenous Sociology; Southern Theory; Standpoint Theory; Perspectival Realism.

Julian Go is Professor of Sociology at Boston University. His recent books include *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* [Oxford, 2016], *Fielding Transnationalism*, co-edited with Monika Krause [Wiley & Sons, 2016], and *Postcolonial Sociologies: A Reader*, (ed.) [Emerald, 2016]. His earlier books have won awards from the International Studies Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Political Science Association.