

Published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2021 (online)

Review of Julian Go's, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 264 pages.

Reviewed by Jessica K. Gill

Abstract: In Julian Go's pathbreaking text, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*, he seeks to bridge the seemingly unreconcilable gap between social theory and postcolonial thought. Go begins by arguing that that social theory emerged at the center of power within the heart of the imperial episteme, influenced by Eurocentric thinking; whereas, postcolonial theory developed from the margins of empire through the voices and perspectives of colonized populations espousing anti-imperial sentiments. How can these two divergent theoretical approaches work together to understand the social world? Drawing on powerful illustrative examples with strong theoretical grounding, Go elegantly brings these fields together—proposing a new wave of postcolonial thought.

Key words: *social theory, postcolonialism, metrocentrism, perspectival realism, Eurocentrism, subaltern standpoint*

In Julian Go's book, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*, he seeks to reconcile the tensions between social theory and postcolonial thought. Go notes that both theoretical perspectives evolved from very different histories and struggles; arguing that sociology, as a discipline, emerged from a position of power that has roots embedded within European imperialism and colonial legacies. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, developed in opposition to imperialism and emerged from the margins of empire to challenge the very epistemological foundations that underpin social theory. Go attempts to explore this opposition and creates a case for the decolonization of contemporary social theory by putting both theories in dialogue with one another. At the crux of his book, Go interrogates the imperial episteme—the way in which empire conceptualizes, sees, and thinks about the world. He examines social theory's role in adapting this epistemic approach and convincingly presents a postcolonial challenge to inform it.

Go urges the need for a postcolonial critique of sociology in order to “imagine different types of knowledge, new ways of seeing and perceiving, and alternative conceptual forms and tools for better understanding the world around us” (p.17). His book is an important contribution to contemporary social theory because it offers a new way of understanding “the social”, the network of relations between humans, materials, and ideas (p.132), that engages two seemingly divergent schools of thought: social theory and postcolonial thought. In doing so,

Published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2021 (online)

Go questions key assumptions central to both theoretical approaches and posits a bridge between the two.

Go has published extensively on the topics of postcolonial thought, the sociology of empires, and social theory. He is Professor of Sociology at Boston University, where he also serves as Faculty Affiliate in Asian Studies and the American Studies/New England Studies program. Go is editor of *Political Power and Social Theory*, a biannual scholarly journal and has authored several award-winning books including *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present* (2011) and *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico* (2008).

Go begins his book by tracing the foundations of postcolonial theory, describing two significant waves of its development. The first wave grew amid anti-imperial protests and antiracist resistance in the early to mid-twentieth century, illuminating the violence and exploitation embedded within the Anglo-European empire. This wave, as Go describes, embodied the efforts of intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amilcar Cabral, and W. E. B. Du Bois. It was further bolstered by the movement of subjugated people around the globe who sought liberation from colonial domination. The first wave set the impetus for the second, which emerged following the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. This wave, Go contends, served as the introduction of postcolonial thought into academe, specifically within the humanities. Scholars from the second wave, including Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty extended the postcolonial critique arguing that Western discourse and academic representations justified imperialism by narrowly constructing colonized territories, peoples, and their cultures as objects to be analyzed, appropriated, and governed. The second wave advocated for the cultivation of alternative knowledges which described the nuanced and intricate histories of the subaltern, rather than confining these accounts to the limits of Eurocentric essentialism.

Expanding on the works of first and second wave scholars, Go proposes a third-wave of postcolonial thought that moves beyond the confines of the humanities and into the realm of the social sciences. Go persuasively describes the need for this epistemic project by identifying gaps in contemporary social theory in the second chapter of his book. Go begins by grappling with two popular criticisms of the social sciences put forth by postcolonial thought: the complicity critique and the corruption critique. The former argues that sociology has been implicitly and explicitly influenced by imperialism, inhibiting a critical understanding of modern society. The latter asserts that sociology is intrinsically problematic due to its development under the Enlightenment, rendering its focus on scientific objectivity in contention with the postcolonial stance.

Go suggests that although these two criticisms offer a basis for reshaping social theory, they are much too sweeping in their analyses and fail to recognize postcolonialism's own reliance on sociological thinking. He, instead, underlines four specific areas within social theory that prove problematic from a postcolonial perspective. The first being persistent Orientalism which refers to the portrayal of non-Western societies as static, backward, and homogenous essences; while the West as dynamic, complex, and creative. Second, Go critiques the deliberate occlusion of empire from sociological accounts, arguing that this practice erroneously treats the rise of empire and the imperial episteme as an inevitable and natural outcome of modernity rather than as a constitutive force shaping modernity itself. According to Go, occlusion of empire results in two harmful effects: analytic bifurcation, the artificial binarization of social relations into "us" versus "them"; and the repression of colonial agency, the process of erasing the historical contributions of colonized people. Third, Go problematizes social theory's practice of universalizing Eurocentric ways of knowing, what he calls metrocentrism. Finally, he charges social theory with relying too heavily on substantialism, the view that all social phenomena have a unifying principle that underlies it—a practice which, effectively, removes nuance and complexity from sociological analysis.

After laying bare the postcolonial challenge and identifying the shortcomings within social theory, Go explores approaches to counter them. In chapter three, he presents the concept of postcolonial relationalism to overcome the problems with Orientalism, analytic bifurcation and substantialism. The relational approach recognizes the interconnectedness and fluidity of social interactions in shaping social phenomenon. It transcends the false dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized, acknowledging their mutually constitutive and overlapping histories and relationships. By applying Bourdieu's field theory to the Haitian and French revolutions, and Latour's actor-network theory to the connection between British industrialization and Indian textile production, Go provides powerful examples of how a relational approach can illuminate obscured postcolonial interactions.

In chapter four, Go tackles metrocentrism, or Eurocentric universalism, by introducing a subaltern standpoint theory. This approach is analogous to a feminist standpoint lens, however gives analytical primacy to geopolitical hierarchies and social positionality. Subaltern standpoint begins theorization from the peripheries of empire, rather than the center; it is grounded in the experiences and voices of marginalized populations. The subaltern standpoint offers sociologists multiple, yet partial, objective perspectives and understandings of the world as experienced from the margins. Each of these unique accounts serve as an incomplete map which is part of a larger whole—an analogy Go uses to describe the philosophical concept of perspectival realism. Taken together, both postcolonial relationalism and the subaltern standpoint unearth subjugated knowledges and reveal legacies of colonial domination that have previously been made invisible within positivist approaches to the social sciences.

As the vanguard for a third wave of postcolonial thought, Go provides a compelling case for its introduction into the social sciences. Go articulates his ideas in an academic style that is both clear and persuasive. The urgency in his writing, supplemented by illustrative examples, make his arguments that much more convincing. Go sheds a critical light on the works of foundational scholars such as Marx and Foucault, raising important questions about their embeddedness within the imperial episteme. He also cogently demonstrates the flaws within parochial claims of universality and objectivity within sociological theorization. The structure, flow and coherence of Go's book makes for an engaging and thought-provoking read.

There, nevertheless, remain limitations within Go's articulation that must be addressed. For example, Go's discussion of the subaltern standpoint theory as a solution to metrocentrism lacks engagement with the gendered-lens from which this approach was born. Though he does acknowledge the feminist underpinnings of this approach by drawing on the works of Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith; his analysis does not go much deeper than this (p.76,158). For Go, a subaltern standpoint theory would focus on global social hierarchies and geopolitics, rather than on gender (p.159). This narrow focus seems counterintuitive to Go's espousal of perspectival realism, given that the experiences of marginalized groups would vary drastically across gendered lines. Perhaps a more nuanced exploration of how a gendered lens could inform the subaltern standpoint is needed. This critique leads into the broader question of how Go's response to the postcolonial challenge may be applied in practice within the social sciences. Though Go provides examples of its application via Bourdieu and Latour, a more complex analysis would be valuable such as through the inclusion of illustrative vignettes which link both theories to sociological praxis.

In his book, Go presents a framework to reconcile the differences between postcolonial thought and social theory in a way that both fascinates and challenges the reader. This book is an essential text for those interested in exploring contemporary social theory from a critical angle. It is also an excellent resource for an audience seeking to learn more about the development of postcolonial thought and its genealogy. Ideally, readers should have some background in sociology to grasp the arguments put forth. Even so, Go provides enough detail to coherently follow along. This book concludes by proposing a third wave of postcolonial thought which critically informs and emancipates social science from its imperial roots. By making a call for interdisciplinary dialogue between social theory and postcolonial thought, Go's polemical treatise serves as an invitation that encourages sociologists to think reflexively and create space for subjugated voices to inform knowledges which have, until now, been rendered invisible.

Published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2021 (online)

References

Boston University Department of Sociology (n.d.) Faculty and staff: Julian Go. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/sociology/faculty-staff/faculty/julian-go/>

Go, Julian (2008). *American empire and the politics of meaning: Elite political cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during US colonialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Go, Julian (2011). *Patterns of empire: The British and American empires, 1688 to the present*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Said, Edward (1979). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Author Bio

Jessica K. Gill is a PhD student at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies. Her research interests focus on critical legal feminism, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminist critiques; specifically, she examines the application of these frames to the area of gender-based violence.

Email: Jessica.gill@uwaterloo.ca

Publication link:

Theory, Culture & Society: Global Public Life (published on April 22, 2021)

<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/review-julian-go-postcolonial-thought-and-social-theory>