Minh Nguyen
Tobias Werron
Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka

Session 9 | 18 Jan 2024 | Decolonising the Social Sciences, Decolonising Universities: What it Might Mean and how it Could Work

A conversation between Tobias Werron and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, moderated by Minh Nguyen (Bielefeld University)

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This session brings a social anthropologist, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and a sociological theorist, Tobias Werron, into dialogue on the question of what decolonisation means for them in teaching and practicing social theories and in the production of knowledge within anthropology and the university.

According to Tobias Werron, the Western tradition of sociological theories resolves around two main abstract questions. First, how is social order possible? And, second, what are the main characteristics and historical forces shaping modern society? Given these abstract and seemingly universal questions, he wishes to reflect on the critique of the tradition as being “colonial” through what Julian Go terms “imperial episteme” and what Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to as “false universalism.” A common theme of such critique is to describe the sociological tradition as “eurocentric”, given that sociology was first institutionalised in European and North American universities at the time of “high imperialism” between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. In his contribution to the conversation, Werron plans to highlight two major issues. First, recent findings in the history of the social sciences which show how perspectives of major sociological theories (as well as sociology’s ways of remembering or forgetting its own history) reflect sociology’s entanglement with

colonial and imperial history. Second, he will discuss what could be done to account for these insights in our own practice and teaching of social theory, arguing that this implies two major tasks: (1) expanding the Western canon and discovering new – particularly non-Western or non-Northern – authors and theories (see suggested reading by Go, 2023; see also Alatas/Sinha 2017); (2) readjusting the focus on topics – such as imperialism, colonialism, racism, violence, nationalism – which have played only minor roles in Western/Northern theories' conceptualisations of social order and modernity.

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka wishes to discuss similar issues from the perspective of knowledge production as a global hierarchy dominated by the Western canon that shapes our universities and the differentiated sense of academic belonging within them. Pointing out the alienation of those operating from within what she calls "academic provinces" and from undervalued positions within the hierarchy, she emphasises the need to decentre academia, to recognise the co-construction of knowledge between academics and 'informants', and to take notice of how academic hierarchies are reinforced in the materiality of the university and its social rules. According to her, processes of de-colonising need to be traced in three different dimensions: a) the socio-political constellations of knowledge production; b) pluralising knowledge; and c) the modalities of transmitting and exchanging knowledge.

The conversation is moderated by Minh Nguyen, another social anthropologist in Bielefeld.

Prof. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka *conducts anthropological research in the Himalayan region and in other parts of South Asia. Another 'region' of her inquiries are the social spaces of universities in different parts of Asia and Europe. Her most recent projects centre upon 'Knowledge Production and Circulation' in the framework of the 'Shaping*

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Asia'-program and on 'Navigating University Spaces' (both projects founded by the DFG).

***Prof. Tobias Werron's** research focuses on globalization, nationalism, competition and practices of theorizing in the social sciences. Trained in the Western canon of sociological theory, he has become increasingly interested in recent years as to how this canon has been questioned, particularly from postcolonial perspectives, and how it might be expanded and redefined. In other words, he is interested in this debate not just for its own sake but also to reconsider and change his own understanding of social theory.*

***Prof. Minh Nguyen's** research examines the different facets of the relationship between labor, care, and mobility in Vietnam, China and Southeast Asia. She is the Principal Investigator of the ERC Starting-Grant project WelfareStruggles and author of Vietnam's Socialist Servants (Routledge, 2014) and Waste and Wealth (OUP, 2018). Increasingly, she is interested in the implications of financialization for working lives in the region.*

Further reading

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