

The Imperative and the Challenge of Diversity

Reconstructing Sociological Traditions in an Unequal World

Author : **Sujata PATEL**

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Since the seventies and particularly after the nineties, the dynamics of the world have changed. Global integration has promoted a free flow of ideas, information, knowledge, goods, services, finance, technology, and even diseases, drugs, and arms. At one level, the world has contracted. It has opened up possibilities of diverse kinds of trans-border flows and movements: those of capital, labour, and communication. Together with interdependence of finances, new global practices have widened the arenas of likely projects of cooperation and collaboration. And, paradoxically, it has also created intense conflicts and increased militarization.

At another level, the contexts of flows of capital and labour have changed; if these have encouraged voluntary migration, they have also encouraged human trafficking, displaced populations, and made refugees. Inequalities and hierarchies are now being differently organized even though we manifestedly live in one global, capitalist world with a dominant form and representation of modernity. Lack of access to livelihoods, infrastructure, and political citizenship now blends with new forms of exclusion - those of cultural and group identities as they are articulated in uneven ways in distinct spatial locations.

Space is being reconstituted and articulated unevenly as sociabilities crisscross within and between localities, regions, nation-states, and global territories in tune with the changing nature of work and enterprise, agency and identity. Each of these locations has thus become a significant site of scrutiny and analysis, as sociabilities are being constituted unevenly within many, multiple locations.

This process is and has challenged the constitution of agency of actors and groups of actors. Today, the globe is awash with differential forms of collective and/or violent interventions, concurrently asserting diverse representations of cultural identities together with livelihood deprivations as the defining characteristic of these collectivities. Fluidity of identities and its continuous expression in uneven and varied manifestations demand a fresh perspective to assess and examine the world; it needs to be perceived through many prisms.

Are sociology and sociologists across the world ready to take the challenge that contemporary times pose for us? What kind of resources do they have to tackle the demands presented by contemporary dynamics? In the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, the Europeans and later the Americans took up the challenge to assess societal changes facing their societies and evolved new perspectives. Does this legacy have traditions of criticality to give us a language and resources to cope with these challenges?

Sociologists declare that sociology is and remains the most reflexive of all social sciences. The first moment of reflection emerged when American sociology was institutionalizing the Parsonian approach in its university structures. But these and similar interventions merely interrogated the silences of gender, race, ethnicity and other identities within Europe and North America regions. There has been very little reflection regarding the implicit and explicit assumptions of power that have governed the formation of the discipline in Europe and its export to other regions of the globe. The genealogy of this reflection in the US can be traced to Alvin Gouldner's (1971) seminal work, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, and to the later criticisms that emerged with the growth of student and feminist movements in the late sixties. This had its impact on European and American social theories, which, together with the impact of new perspectives developed out of structuralism and post-structuralism, reconstituted Marxism, feminism, environmentalism, and identity theory and reframed social theory as many-faceted, plural, and eclectic. These trends coincided with Wallerstein's (1996) advocacy for the discipline to "open" itself to incorporate the challenges from interdisciplinary social sciences such as gender studies, environment studies, cultural studies, and race and ethnicity studies.

These trends find recognition in texts such as *Social Theory Today* (Giddens and Turner 1987), which argue that there is no agreement in the profession about the fundamentals of what constitutes social theory. European and American traditions of the discipline assert this theoretical and methodological plurality. Neil Smelser (1994) treats it as an asset when he says, "The benefit is living in a field that refuses to seal itself into a closed paradigm and threatens to exhaust itself, but, rather, retains the qualities of intellectual openness and imagination" (8).

In some fashion, this theme was reflected in Martin Albrow's (1987) statement in the inaugural issue of *International Sociology*, when he proposed that the journal initiate an "... explicit search for [new] models of inquiry and conceptual frames which can express the uniqueness of cultures" (9). In spite of this felt need, within Europe and the USA, discussion of sociological traditions has been generally restricted to a debate on social theories, the development of a culture of professionalization, and the affirmation of universality in its perspectives and practices. This universalisation locates the discussion of social theory in modernity and its growth in Europe and spread across North America and later the rest of the industrial developed world. For instance, Anthony Giddens (1996) asserts, "Sociology is a generalising discipline that concerns itself above all with modernity - with the character and dynamics of modern or industrialised societies" (3).

It is in this context that we need to assess the recent interventions by Jurgen Habermas (2001) and Ulrich Beck (2006) for a post-national and trans-national social theory to embrace the new cosmopolitanism being ushered in by contemporary globalization. But this position reasserts the grounding of social theory in European modernity, in this case "the second modernity." It makes Beck claim, "Reality is becoming cosmopolitan – this is a historical fact" (68).

At this juncture, it is imperative that we recall Charles Taylor's (1995) distinction of two kinds of modernity: cultural, wherein the theory assesses transformations in terms of the rise of new culture, and acultural, when theory examines transformations in terms of culturally neutral terms, such as Western rationality or industrialization, and now

globalization. Taylor argues that most social theory is *acultural* and that Western modernity is powered by its vision of positive good. This affirms Western modernity as a moral outlook and distorts the theory at two levels. The first is the miscalculation of changes related to the specific culture of the West and the second is the universalization of facets of Western civilization, such as science and religion, as perennial. Taylor asks us to remember that science has grown in the West “in close symbiosis with a certain culture, in the sense ... [of] a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good” (27).

Beck’s argument on cosmopolitanism, I would contend, needs to be rejected on similar grounds. He argues that there is interrelatedness and interdependence of people across the globe, but this is assessed in terms of certain specific features that are now universalized. These are the emergence of supranational organizations in the area of economy, politics of non-state actors, and civil society movements; normative precepts like human rights; types and profiles of global risks; forms of warfare; and global organized crime and terrorism. Their common denominator is cosmopolitanization, *i.e.*, the erosion of clear borders separating markets, states, civilizations, cultures, and the life-worlds of common people. But does it? Beck’s work remains located empirically within trends occurring in Europe and has no comparative global analysis to support its position. Of significance in this context is a lack of analysis regarding the relationship between power, culture, and knowledge.

More interesting is Beck’s argument about *methodological nationalism*, which he claims is based on the “national prison theory of human existence” (12). He argues: Until now, methodological nationalism has been dominant in sociology and other social sciences on the assumption that they are nationally structured. The result was a system of nation-states and corresponding national sociologies that define their specific societies in terms of concepts associated with the nation state. For the national outlook, the nation-state creates and controls the ‘container’ of society and thereby at the same time prescribes the limits of sociology. (2)

Beck’s assertion regarding nations and nationalism resonates with those of other commentators. In the early eighties, Anthony Smith (1983) argued that while sociologists have studied “society” as a bounded territorial unit - the nation-state - they have failed to acknowledge that the “study of society is always *ipso facto* the study of the nation” (26). In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens (1990) elaborates this point when he states:

Now, understood in this way, ‘societies’ are plainly *nation-states*. Yet, although a sociologist speaking of a particular society might casually employ instead the term ‘nation’, or ‘country’, the character of the nation-state is rarely directly theorized. In explicating the nature of the modern societies, we have to capture the specific characteristics of the nation-state - a type of social community which contrasts in a radical way with pre-modern states. (13)

All three suggest that the subject matter of sociology is generally a description of the categories of people, institutions, organizations, and cultures of one’s own nationality. In this context, how can these be made universal? Following this argument and in context with Taylor’s methodological points mentioned above, it becomes imperative to explore the relationship between explanatory schemas and styles of reasoning with specific cultural contexts and representations of nation and nationalism, rather than to

assert an *a priori* universality. Rather, as Chakrabarty (2000) has suggested, these sociologies should be categorized as *provincial*.

Additionally implicated in nation and nationalism is control over territory and the use of its economic, political, and cultural resources, processes and knowledges for the project of nation and nation-building not only within one's own nation-state but those of others, through colonial and neo-colonial control. To what extent has European and American theory assessed the impact of global distributions of power on the production and reproduction of conservative, radical, and reflexive sociological knowledge across the world?

From outside Europe and North America, we see the emergence of a diametrically opposite position that introduces a new voice to the entire debate. Labelled indigenous sociology and recently recast as a project of constructing endogenous (Adesina 2006) and autonomous (Alatas 2006) sociologies and as transmodernity (Dussel 2000), it elaborates a new epistemic position on the discipline, some of which is incorporated in Raewyn Connell's (2007) book *Southern Theory*. Endogenous sociologists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have argued for a need to excavate indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, and methodologies to conceptualise, understand, and examine "local" and national cultures and structures in the various countries of the South (Alatas 1974). The key issue here is colonialism and the imposition of Western science, theories, and methodologies in assessing non-Western societies. Scholars in the rest of the world have argued that the universalisation of European and American perspectives provided one grand vision and a "truth" assessing changes taking place in the world (Wallerstein 2006). Syed Hussain Alatas (1972) calls it the captive mind, "an uncritical imitation of scientific intellectual activity including problem setting, analysis, abstraction, generalisation, conceptualisation, description, explanation, and interpretation" (11-12). Indigenous positions have suggested that European and American perspectives were ethnocentric and obfuscated the analysis of specific contexts and processes, refracting, misrepresenting, and simultaneously defining one particular way of evaluating them (Alatas 1974; Mukerji and Sengupta 2004). This was not only true of conservative and positivist theories but also radical theories such as Marxism and those representing subaltern and excluded voices, such as environmentalism and feminism (Mohanty 1988; Mani 1990). As these have been exported to other countries, they too have become dominant universal models.

No wonder, it is argued, the idea that there is very little in these non-Western societies and regions in terms of new conceptual and explanatory theories, and the suggestion that until there is we cannot seriously consider these sociologies as relevant, reconstituted domination in new ways. The Indian sociologists Radha Kamal Mukerjee and D. P. Mukerji thus suggested that social sciences should be seen as a unified discipline that is culture-specific and that integrates values with analysis; they demanded that Indian values define the way sociological thinking in India be construed (Mukerjee 1955; Mukerji 1958). The same assessment structures Akiwovo's (1987; 1990) demand for indigenous sociologies, to which end he elaborated a conceptual scheme for assessing sociological studies based on ideas and notions of African poetry. This perspective also affirmed the need for the nation-state (now in a different sense) to remain a critical locale for the classification and assessment of a range of sociological practices, including social theories. Additionally, there was a call to go beyond the

nation-state in search of the supra-local, which could be the locale for new practices to be construed - especially in the case of large nation-states such as China and India. Indigenous sociologists have highlighted Western domination in an array of sociological practices, including those that dealt with teaching, such as importing syllabi, textbooks, and research (what to study, how to study, and what are considered best practices of research, including the evaluation of research projects and protocols of writing and presenting empirical and theoretical articles in journals) (Alatas 1974).

These issues, together with a discussion on who funds research and who defines its agenda, opened up for debate the way social theory and its practices are embedded in the uneven distribution of global power, an issue of significance in the context of contemporary globalization. The argument here is that the discipline needs to be defined by the entire set of practices that structure its organisation, rather than merely the theories. These practices are unevenly organised across the globe, and their examination would lead us to assess the colonial construction of modernity. This is the resource from which it is possible to draw out the many ways of thinking and analysing contemporary, uneven, global processes.

These dimensions are explored in a radical epistemic critique emerging from the neo-dependency school of Latin America. Theorists such as Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo have elaborated this position, arguing that universalization inherent in sociological theory is part of the geopolitics of knowledge. The key to this process is an assessment of modernity and its relationship to social theory. For instance, Dussel (2000) argues:

If one understands Europe's modernity - a long process of five centuries - as the unfolding of new possibilities derived from its centrality in world history and the corollary constitution of all other cultures as its periphery, it becomes clear that, even though all cultures are ethnocentric, modern European ethnocentrism is the only one that might pretend to claim universality for itself. Modernity's Eurocentrism lies in the confusion between abstract universality and the concrete world hegemony derived from Europe's position as the center. (471)

Dussel and Quijano see a need to examine sociological knowledge as a discourse of power, particularly in the context of contemporary developments. They propose that both classical and contemporary European theories, and now American social theory, need to be assessed as discourses of power. They contend that this theory is premised on assessing itself, the "I" (the West), rather than the "Other" (the rest of the world), which was and remains the object of its control, even after the formal demise of colonialism and imperialism. Universalism implies legitimating the knowledge of the "I" regarding "society" (Mignolo 2002).

European and American social theories, they argue, incorporate a set of axioms to frame knowledge of society and consist of several features, which come together in terms of binaries to become a matrix of power and a principle and a strategy of control and domination. These scholars contend that this discourse has universalized the precepts of European and American modernity (as part of the imperialist project), disallowing legitimacy for new ways of thinking, of assessing processes in the rest of the world and unearthing its tradition(s) of philosophies and epistemologies together with its specific practices. They argue for a need to study not only sociological theories but the entire range of practices of production and reproduction of sociological knowledge within

nation-states and regions. These have to be examined in terms of their organic links with the dominant discourse, with each of such reflections indicating diverse-universal ways of understanding these symbiotic linkages (Quijano 2000; Lander 2002; Mignolo 2002).

Obviously, sociological theories, (systems of interrelated concepts, categories, and modes of explanation that are designed to make sense of the world) are enmeshed in normative projects (systems of thoughts and beliefs concerned with a way of improving society). Sometimes these normative projects are explicitly stated, but often they're implicitly argued. These normative projects are projects of power associated with imperialism (Connell 2006; Patel 2006; Wallerstein 1996).

Critical and reflexive sociology has been the first to initiate a discussion on the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power, including its own. But, as indicated above, the relationship between knowledge and power needs to be examined not only in terms of theories but in terms of an entire range of practices. Today, globalization is also reorganizing knowledge and its institutions in new and seminal ways. Can we delineate the way this process is affecting the nature of sociological knowledge? How is power and domination in its complex, colonial, neocolonial, patriarchal, discursive, national, and material manifestations affecting epistemology, its claim to truth, and its strategies of representation? Whose ideas and perspectives is it reflecting when it enumerates the nature and content of consequences of globalization? What is the relationship between national, regional, and global knowledges?

Dussel (2000) and Quijano (2000) suggest a need to construct "a worldwide ethical liberation project" in which alterity can be fulfilled through a creation of new knowledge where modernity and its denied alterity, its victims, would mutually fulfill each other in an imaginative process. Transcending the *coloniality of power* and embracing *transmodernity* is a project of mutual fulfillment of solidarity of center/periphery, woman/man, mankind/earth, Western culture/peripheral postcolonial cultures, different races, different ethnicities, and different classes. Can we fulfill this project at ontological, methodological, and theoretical levels?

Below, I present some steps that allow such a project to be initiated. For long, the criticism against dominant knowledges has been dismissed in terms of relativism and/or ethnocentrism. Borrowing from Taylor, I argue that there is a need for accepting a cultural theory of modernity (rather than an acultural theory) and that this can be constructed from many sites and in many locations and through many positions. Our goal should be to debate the various ways in which power has shaped and continues to shape the practices of sociological knowledge across the world. Our objective is to create a discussion on how to assess all aspects of the discipline organized and institutionalized across the globe: ideas and theories, scholars and scholarship, practices and traditions, ruptures and continuities through a globalising perspective that examines the relationship between sociological knowledge and power.

Given that the relationship between knowledge and power may be structured in distinct ways across the world and within nation-states, there is a need to examine the resources of the discipline at three levels. First, disciplinary traditions need to be studied from multiple spatial locations: within localities, within nation-states, within regions and the globe. However, the nation-state is a key element in fashioning the traditions of the

discipline. The nation-state defines sociological traditions in many ways. It does so directly. Whether democratic, authoritarian, fascist, socialist, or theocratic, it plays a critical role in legitimising the need for the discipline and framing its function for society. Democracies have generally encouraged the teaching of sociology; this is not so for states that have propagated fascism, communism, theocracy, apartheid, and military dictatorships. These have, instead, barred it and/or controlled its teaching. In countries where the subject is not proscribed, the nation-state can intervene in myriad ways, including when private institutions play a direct role. It does this by determining the content of knowledge to be transmitted to learners and through a gamut of policies and regulations on higher education, which both encourage and constrain the development of the discipline. These policies determine the protocols and practices of teaching and learning processes, the establishment and practices of research within research institutes, the distribution of grants for research, the language of reflection, the organization of the profession, and the definitions of scholars and scholarship. These different disciplinary traditions are best understood if perceived as being organized within the nation-state after the Second World War, though there also exist traditions in terms of language communities. However, the former provides the most significant spatial and political locale to assess this history together with the evaluation of the many contradictions and contestations that have defined the organic linkages between these tradition(s). Sociological knowledge, this paper argues, is imbricated in the identity of the nation-state and within its politics.

It is also significant to argue, following Smith, Giddens, and Beck (mentioned above), that the resources of the discipline need to be seen from above and below the nation-state. For instance, space in the form of locality remains a key category for structuring the resources of the discipline. But, these necessarily remain uneven and *provincial*. Thus, within each nation-state, one can assess the many starting points, many achievements, many failures, and many continuities and discontinuities. These ups and downs dealing with the organization, consolidation, and institutionalization of sociological traditions involve confrontations between dominant universal traditions and newly emerging subaltern ones. In this sense there is and will be diversity of sociological traditions within nation-states.

These diversities exist not only within nation-states but also between them. Because the histories of sociological traditions in nation-states are differently constituted, the collective experience of growth and the spread of sociological traditions across the world is and remains diverse and unevenly organized. This unevenness is related to the relationship of each tradition with that of Europe and later of the USA and relates to the way these traditions came to be universalized across the world.

Universalization of the North Atlantic tradition(s) is associated with the global distribution of power (Wallerstein 2006). In this sense, this paper attempts to move beyond the binaries of universalism versus relativism/particularism to posit a third position which suggests that sociological traditions are both universal and diverse. It argues that the claims of each of the traditions of sociological knowledge are distinct and universal, but together these are not equivalent but remain plural, multiple, hybrid, or relative-positing claims based on criteria internal to each of these tradition(s) (Chakrabarty 2008).

Second, traditions need to be discussed in terms of their sociological moorings in distinct

philosophies, epistemologies, theoretical frames, cultures of science, and languages of reflection. These need to be explored to assess how, at various points of time in the history of the discipline, new perspectives on understanding social life have emerged by questioning dominant universalized and colonized sociological ideas. There is also a need to examine how the discipline has evolved to incorporate subaltern voices and use these voices in order to understand, assess, and comprehend evolving sociabilities.

They also highlight how external and dominant processes, together with colonialism and neo-colonialism, have reframed knowledge, and they assert a need to excavate new endogenous and/or autonomous ways of thinking and of practicing sociology.

Third, the intellectual moorings of sociological practices are extensive. There are diverse and comparative sites of knowledge production and its transmission. These range from campaigns, movements, and advocacies to classrooms and departments to syllabi formulations and protocols of evaluating journal articles and books. They involve activists, scholars, and communities in assessing, reflecting, and elucidating immediate events and issues that define the research process; in organizing and systematizing knowledge of the discipline; and in long-term, institutionalized processes for organizing the teaching process.

Together, these diversities cannot be placed in a single line and considered equal; neither are these superior or inferior. Collectively, they are and remain both diverse and universal sociological traditions, because they present distinct and different perspectives to assess their own histories of sociological theories and practices. Each of these traditions has also evolved its own assessment of its relationship with other traditions and with the accumulation of sociological knowledge and power. In this sense, different traditions' perspectives remain diverse and comparative. This is so for two reasons: First, they are diverse because each tradition makes its own assessment of how it is structured within the global distribution of ideas, scholars, and scholarship (whether these are adapted from imports or are stated to be indigenous/endogenous/local/national/ provincial); how these relate to its contexts, including the culture of teaching and research, institutions, the state, and the economy. While these claims are universal, the interpretations of how these are interconnected with the North Atlantic tradition(s) and with each other remain different for each nation-state. Or, to put it in other words, what is distinct is how each tradition has contested the claims of those from the North Atlantic and evolved its own internal assessment of this relationship. In this sense, collectively, sociological traditions can be stated to be diversely universal or incorporating "diversality" (Mignolo 2002: 89).

Second, following from the above, we can suggest that sociology was globalized from the moment of its birth with the assertion of the singularity of the process of modernity through the universalization of European and later the American *provincial* experience(s) (Chakrabarty 2000). A discourse of power structured universalization of knowledge regarding sociabilities. In this sense, while globalization has been debated to be a recent process, globalization of sociological knowledge has had a longer history. This globalization has sometimes erased earlier histories of modernities, reinterpreting these and displaced ways of thinking, being, and living. As a result, some tradition(s) have not evolved perspectives and theories to assess their relationships with dominant, universalized traditions, though the latter have been recognized. Others have adapted to external and dominant ideas. Yet, others have made a critique of the legacy of

dependence and domination to assess and to reflect on their own modernities. If globalization of sociological knowledge has “silenced” the formation of many voices in certain regions and nation-states, it has also challenged the West by asking new questions and provided novel answers from other arenas. These energies need to be coalesced in a strong intra- and internationalized network of communication that transcends the above mentioned multiple matrices of inequalities. Working from the margins of all borders can help to provide a new identity. The creative and imaginative use of these resources continues to remain the most significant challenge of the day.

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Notes
