

Book review: Dilip Menon (ed.): Changing Theory - Concepts from the Global South

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Book Reviews

DILIP MENON (ED.), *Changing Theory. Concepts from the Global South*. London: Routledge, 2022. 366 pages, 14 illustrations, £35.99. ISBN 978-1-0322-2647-7 (pb)

Edited by Dilip Menon, the volume *Changing Theory. Concepts from the Global South* is a profoundly innovative and path-breaking contribution. As scholars increasingly recognise that social science is overwhelmingly restricted by the colonial legacies and protocols of academic knowledge production, the need for epistemic pathways out of this situation calls for contributions of this kind. The book provides theoretical alternatives to Western ideas by apprehending and re-centring the Global South as the complex site of global intellection it has always been.

As Menon puts it, key ideas about the political, the social, the human and the non-human are still, and regrettably, “thought with the trajectories of a European history and its self-regarding nativist epistemology that was rendered universal largely through the violence and conquest of empire” (p. 5). While the exercise of using Western theories to make sense of different areas and issues pertaining to the Global South has long been accepted as a proper scientific endeavour, the reverse dynamic has almost no place in academia.

The volume therefore exposes the epistemic dimension of what Maria Lugones¹ has termed “the colonial wound”, which refers to colonialism’s systematic sidelining, if not eradication, of non-Western languages as sources of theorisation in the so-called “modern” social sciences.² Dilip Menon refers to this phenomenon as “teleological amnesia”, inasmuch as scholarly attempts to make sense of the “modern” world fail to consider the processes of abstraction from the South even as they claim universal validity in the process. The discussion is long, but Menon’s introduction to the volume provides both deep and succinct guidance to tackling such issues. The question is: If the teleological foundations of “modern” science are still hostage to this coloniality of thinking, then how could one possibly make an effort to seriously advance an emancipatory agenda for social theory as a whole?

In order to counter the historically grown (and enforced) epistemic hierarchies, the volume brings together a highly stimulating group of intellectuals from

1 Maria Lugones: The Coloniality of Gender. In: Wendy Harcourt (ed.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development. Critical Engagements in Feminist Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 13–33.

2 Walter D. Mignolo: Introduction. Coloniality of Power and De-colonial thinking. *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3), 2007, pp. 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498>

multiple disciplines, institutions and locations. They contribute a set of twenty essayistic interventions that masterfully disentangle the theoretical elements embodied in the everyday use of particular words in languages such as Mandarin, Arabic, Yoruba, Zulu and Hindi, among others. These languages lie unquestionably far beyond the dominant vocabularies of theory production in the humanities. They thus display the oceans and rivers of philosophical thought that travel past (or rarely meet) the mainstream of academic discourse in peer-reviewed journals that focus on political science, international relations, sociology and environmental science, for instance. At the same time, the volume exemplifies and honours the virtues of translating these conceptual discussions for receptive audiences with reading competence in the English language. In my view, this contributes to the building of a dialogic instead of an antagonistic space between scholarship in the North and the South.³

For example, thinking the political subject through the tenets of *guanxi/ ubuntu*, as Jay Schutte's chapter does, allows for relational and intersubjective instead of individualistic or dividing conceptualisations of self and other. The first term comes from Mandarin and the second from Nguni Bantu, as the reader is instructed. Both terms understand the individual subject by virtue of its relatedness with others. *Guanxi* emphasises the process through which social relations are curated to blossom over time while *ubuntu* highlights the "networked" nature of the human subject, its experiences and ways of shaping both the individual and the social. In conjunction, these two words enable (and explain) negotiations of identity, collectivity and difference that take place between Chinese and African students, as their respective worlds become increasingly entangled not only politically and economically but also transculturally.

The chapter by Noha Frikry challenges modern theorisations of human–nonhuman relations through the Arab word *tarbiyya*. This word refers to the relations of care and affect that go into the human consumption of reared animals in family systems of farming. This notion unsettles modernist rationales that place the human species in an authoritative position to subdue animals for the sake of producing food in businesses at large scale. *Tarbiyya*, by contrast, understands the relationship between humans and animals as an inherently conflicted one. It implicitly opposes the histories of violence inherent in food systems of mass production, while contrasting these with the relationships of care (and suffering) that go along with the consumption of animals in subsistence farm systems. To eat through the notion of *tarbiyya* presupposes, then, an entirely different ethics and thus responsibility and practice rather than eating through the carefree or careless mechanisms of large-scale industrial food.

3 Siddharth Tripathi: International Relations and the "Global South": From Epistemic Hierarchies to Dialogic Encounters. *Third World Quarterly* 42(9), 2021, pp. 2039–2054. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1924666>

A further illuminating chapter, written by Arjun Appadurai, engages with the word *andāj*, which is used in Marathi, Urdu and Hindustani, as the author elaborates. Through the engagement with *andāj*, this chapter exposes the rather static character of Western modernity's fixation with the notion of accurate measurement. The word *andāj* instead highlights the social value of constantly negotiating what counts as the "just" measure, in what realm, and under what circumstances. While accuracy should not be rejected a priori, the idea of *andāj* embraces approximation instead of compulsive precision as a more fitting approach to the constantly shifting dynamics of social reality. These thoughts may invite social scientists to reflect upon the limits of methodology and abstraction as avenues for innovation instead of unnecessarily condemning the unavoidable practice of inexactness – especially when it comes to theory.

These are just a few examples from the much more complex fabric of essays that the volume entails. I have highlighted these from the perspective of a scholar from the Global South who has grown academically between North and South, and is constantly in search of sensitive ways to decolonise his own thinking about transcultural encounters, nature-society relations and knowledge production more generally.

Regarding the last point, the volume quite radically challenges analytical trajectories that engage with the Global South as an object of study while ignoring the cognitive/emotional processes and historicities that bring that very South into existence (through language and other means). At the same time, the book invites scholars of the social sciences, and especially those who are interested in theorising "the global", to understand and treat the Global North and the Global South as intellectual equals and not in terms of an inverted hierarchy, which would miss the whole point of global intellection from a decolonial stance. The volume therefore entails an ethics of academic knowledge production that could be brought more explicitly to light in future endeavours.

In addition, *Changing Theory* does not merely call attention to language as a much-overlooked universe of global intellection and hence driver of global transformation. This outstanding collection of essays also conveys an emancipatory and decolonising notion of temporality. As different chapters implicitly or explicitly show, the process of engagement with non-Western ideas *is not and should not be* understood as one of "going back" to a pristine landscape of Indigenous thought. Rather, the book highlights the inherent power of Southern words as linguistic devices for the decolonisation of the mind and hence transformation of social practice into a different, more equal, peaceful and sustainable future. While Dilip Menon himself characterises the Global South as "a space that bears the wound of former colonization, and therefore the loss of ways of thinking, imagining, and living" (p. 2), his work simultaneously

shows the actual vitality, plurality and emancipatory momentum that emanates from the very words that make up this space. Let there be more work, research and academic commitment in this direction.

Fabricio Rodríguez

AYSIMA MIRSULTAN / ERIC SCHLUESSEL / ESET SULAIMAN: *Community Still Matters. Uyghur Culture and Society in Central Asian Context*. (Studies in Asian Topics 77). Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022. 356 pages, £70.00. ISBN 978-87-7694-315-8

The volume *Community Still Matters. Uyghur Culture and Society in Central Asian Context*, edited by Aysima Mirsultan, Eric Schluessel and Eset Sulaiman, is presented as a tribute to the exceptional work of the self-described “Turkologist” Ildikó Béller-Hann. In her work, Béller-Hann has helped to shape the field of Uyghur Studies, influencing the research of almost any scholar who engages with the Uyghurs, both in Central Asia and in the diaspora.

Her aim to give voice to the Uyghurs throughout her career and scholarship inspired most of the authors who contributed to this book – the title of which also recalls one of the most influential works by Ildikó Béller-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur* (China Studies 17, Brill 2008). Béller-Hann’s book discussed ongoing research among Uyghurs and highlighted the importance of what the editors of *Community Still Matters* call “circles of kindness”, which “rely on members who proceed from a positive social orientation towards mutual support in pursuit of a common scholarly goal” (p. xi).

The current volume is composed of twenty short chapters that analyse a broad range of issues among Uyghurs, from diverse perspectives: historical (the chapters authored by Hermann Kreutzmann, Eset Sulaiman, Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, Rune Steenberg, Jeanine Dağyeli, Patrick Hällzon, László Károly and Ingvar Svanberg); biographical (David Brophy, Fredrik Fällman, Abdushukur Muhammet and Ablet Kamalov); literary (Eric Schluessel, Jun Sugawara, Claus V. Pedersen and Joshua L. Freeman); women’s studies (Zulhayat Öktür, Aysima Mirsultan, Joanne Smith Finley, Rachel Harris and Zulfiyam Karimova); political (Martin Lavička); and anthropological (Ingeborg Baldauf). The limited length of chapters seems a wise choice in many ways: on the one hand, it enables a greater range of topics to be covered within the volume, providing a highly varied scenario of fields of study related to the Uyghurs; moreover, it also gives voice to a larger number of scholars engaged with Uyghur studies, bringing those “circles of kindness” to the fore. Some readers may be