

# Sociology after the postcolonial: Response to Julian Go's 'thinking against empire'

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## Abstract

Julian Go's 'Thinking Against Empire' identifies the corpus of 'anticolonial thought' as being instructive for a wider rethinking of how sociology might rally its key conceptualisations of social relations. He insightfully identifies the marginalisation of such thinking from Sociology as an institutionalised discipline. In our response we take up some of the warnings Go provides in the closing sections of his essay—which concern the expanse of intellectual engagement being currently bracketed under or connected to the 'anti-colonial', not least vis-à-vis the 'decolonising/decolonial' turn—to further unpack how the 'anti-colonial' might be adapted for thinking through contemporary socio-political dynamics. Offering, first, a precis of some particularities of British Sociology vis-a-vis the contributions of anticolonial social theory, this article then expands upon the dilemmas arising when anticolonial theory contemporaneous to the pre-decolonisation era is transposed to contingencies of the present 21<sup>st</sup> century. Namely, whilst the anticolonial archive has proved invaluable to upending the omissions but also complicities of European social theory canons, allowing for a much more expansive sense of how the modern world and its violences were conjured and how we might accordingly escape its miseries, it is also clear that much of the postcolonial world has undergone sufficient shifts to warrant an adapted sense of how we consider the anti-colonial for our

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current politics. We suggest that the important deviations which anti-colonial theorisations might heed include the dangers of conflating the anticolonial with an affirmation of Global South, non-white nativist identity; the need to recognise some key conjunctural premises by which the anticolonial is no longer geographically indexed to a straightforward Global North–Global South distinction; and the need to acknowledge that, at its most radical, anticolonial thought is itself still invested in traversing both the dreams but also corruptions of those dreams as intrinsic to modernity.

**KEYWORDS**

anticolonial, decolonisation, nationalism, postcolonialism, sociology

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Julian Go's (2023) 'Thinking Against Empire' identifies the corpus of 'anticolonial thought' as being instructive for a wider rethinking of how sociology might rally its key conceptualisations of social relations and selfhood. The range of thinkers, spanning the early to mid-20th century, that Go assembles here is enviably broad and complex—including, amongst others, W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Laura Cornelius Kellogg, Apolinario Mabini, and Nguyễn An Ninh. This body of 'anticolonial social thought' was forged by those whose first-hand sense of being colonised and 'negatively racialised' (Lentin, 2020) yielded a direct interrogation of the colonial making of the modern world, its hierarchies, its expropriations, and its corrosive identifications which its subjects were meant to fashion. Go places his emphasis here on the terms by which such thinkers, though rarely admitted into the disciplinary annals of sociology (excepting, of late, for Du Bois), apprehended the world from the perspective of the colonised, allowing accordingly for an overdue inversion of the otherwise imperialist location characteristic of those like Spencer, Durkheim and Weber and their resultant conceptualisations of modern society and its relations. Go makes accordingly a typically sophisticated contribution to what is now a growing position within the academy, and particularly amongst those already working from an anti-racist perspective—who have long understood that the past insights and analytic frames we reach for cannot simply be the historical preserve of an institutionalised discipline that zealously guarded its access as exclusive to the metropole.

But as Go also insightfully indicates, it would be easy to confuse and to be confused by what exactly we seek to redeem under the expansive breadth of 'anticolonial thought', not least amidst the contemporary decolonial turn where the terms by which 'decolonisation' is invoked can be sufficiently expansive so as to encompass and condense a multitude of often conflicting theoretical and political positions. Similarly, it can frequently seem hard to discern whether it is a particular analytic appreciation for the political, economic, and sociocultural conditions of the post-colonial era that is taking precedence within these debates or whether it a more general attempt to affirm assorted Global South identities and/or alternative, putatively non-European 'ways of knowing', as a *sui generis* end in itself.

It is these entanglements as recurrently flagged by Go, and particularly in his stirring conclusion, that this piece will engage. Offering first a precis of some particularities of British Sociology vis-a-vis the important turn to formalising the contributions of anticolonial social theory, this article then expands upon the dilemmas that arise when anticolonial theory contemporaneous to the pre-decolonisation era is transposed to contingencies of the present 21<sup>st</sup> century. Namely, whilst the anticolonial archive has proved invaluable to upending the omissions but also complications of European social theory canons, allowing for a much more expansive sense of how the modern world and its

violences were conjured and how we might accordingly escape its miseries, it is also clear that much of the postcolonial world has undergone sufficient shifts to warrant an adapted sense of how we consider the anti-colonial for our current politics. Put differently, and again building on Go's (pp. 25–8) closing qualifications, any sense of the colonial as a critical object in social theory must remain vigilant about analytically petrifying relationships (geographic, economic and cultural) as characteristic of say the mid-twentieth century; wherein, a watchfulness is required so that anticolonial analytic and political commitments do not succumb to an ahistoricism that might seem at first glance analytically expedient but may in actuality be politically misconstrued and misdirected. Rather, we suggest that, as with any temporally and spatially rooted social theory, the generative promise of anticolonial thought lies in its elasticity, an elasticity that is responsive to noteworthy shifts in prevailing geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural circumstances whenever trying to reaffirm its key political and theoretical premises.

We draw herein upon three different renditions of how the anticolonial remains vital to thinking through the political horrors currently amassing, but how such political horrors must also be considered through the terms by which it deviates from a more classical sense of a colonial era hierarchy and division. The three reckonings we profile here comprise, firstly, the need to consider the dangers of conflating the anticolonial with an affirmation of Global South, non-white nativist identity; secondly, the need to recognise some key conjunctural premises by which the anticolonial is no longer geographically indexed to a straightforward Global North-Global South distinction; and, finally, the need to acknowledge that the best of anticolonial thought is itself still invested in traversing both the dreams but also corruptions of those dreams as intrinsic to the era inaugurated by what, as a shorthand, is still best typified as modernity.

## 2 | WHICH CANON?

First, however, a few personally inflected notes on our own academic background will help situate our entry into Go's conversation but also help situate some important differences regarding US and British sociology, differences that have implications for how we might conceive of canon formation in the first place. Postcolonial theory, in all its contrasting guises, remains a key anchor of our political and analytical training, and indeed, we both find ourselves convening modules on postcolonial theory as well as drawing from its assorted debates in our written work—be it about contemporary nationalism, ideology and Marxism, feminist debates on agency and governance, or the statecraft of contemporary surveillance and bordering. In this sense, though we are both housed in sociology departments, it is important to note that the sociology we have encountered is a rather different proposition to the one that Go depicts in his piece.

Sociology in Britain has increasingly become a hodgepodge host for a variety of otherwise orphaned dispositions, ranging from a heavy humanities temperament to explicit 'scholar-activism' to more technically oriented, government-facing social policy research. And however one reckons with this often-chaotic spray, what is increasingly clear is that very few of its current practitioners would ever make recourse to a formal canon. Indeed, if there is something approximating a shared reference trinity common to most sociology departments in the UK, it is less so Durkheim, Weber or even Parsons, and much more Foucault, Bourdieu and Butler. Indeed, as someone who also convenes an introductory social theory module for first years, it is evident that after their preliminary encounter with Durkheim, Weber and others, students and seasoned sociology academics alike are never again likely to come across, let alone feel weighed down by, the suffocating canonical inheritance of such scholars. Marx remains of course an enduring thread tying the 19<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary research priorities, but again, this is less to do with a sociological disciplinary policing and much more an indication of the formative post-war significance of leftist class-based debates in British Sociology, and politics more broadly.

In fact, the better of British sociology, even if the discipline's formal luminaries remain reluctant to acknowledge it, is almost wholly indebted to the insurgent energies of a Cultural Studies blitz that informed sociology's renewal in the 1980s and 1990s. This was a total remaking that saw the works of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy

become an equally defining set of lodestars shaping sociological practice and intuitions. This legacy is still prominent, and partly explains the current prominence of race and gender as key themes for many (alongside, thankfully, a continued if often embattled attentiveness to class, labour and political economy). In other words, the fact that many of us can comfortably inhabit an anti-racism position from within British sociology is owing to the often-beleaguered efforts of a previous generally non-white generation, who, in much more inhospitable circumstances, scoped and affirmed a proud tradition of unapologetically politicised anti-racist cultural studies-cum-sociology and one which also ably drew upon, and often helped mainstream, a vast repertoire of postcolonial thinking and references. A scoping that helped sociology, and the sociology of race and our multiple colonial legacies, break free from the initial 1980s Weber-versus-Marx (Loomba, 2005, pp. 107–8) frames which circumscribed the terms by which racism (marked unhelpfully as the 'race relations' field) was to be formally parsed in British sociology.

Of course, this is not to deny that sociology in Britain too is riven by a series of compromised imperatives that uphold a certain conservatism. It suffers from a surfeit of cautious professionalism and unimaginative, depoliticising specialisation, it is subject to assorted neoliberal subjectifying mechanisms as regards productivity and expedient visibility over patience and political sincerity, and it is increasingly answerable to the consumerist dictates of providing a palatable, neatly packaged degree experience to debt-ridden, fee-paying students. And perhaps most saliently to the remit of Go's provocation, in Britain too key scholars such as Gurminder Bhambra (2007, 2014), Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021 and John Holmwood but also, amongst others, Ali Meghji (2021) have been vocal in holding sociology to anti-imperialist account. Not least, when considering the place of Britain and therein its intelligentsia in consolidating the high-noon of colonial modernity but also by dint of Britain's' complacent provincialism-cum-presumptuous universality that obtains from still assuming that Britain, the island nation in spending isolation, can be sociologically apprehended on its own terms.

Indeed, it might be mooted that it is the provincialism of British sociology that is in fact its primary wound, its principal failing. A provincialism that arises via the delusional overhang of imperialist self-importance that continues to think itself the centre of the world (a claim i.e., now also hubristic and anachronistic); arises via its 'methodological nationalism' (Go, 2023, p. 24) where Britain can publish for itself, about itself; and, though an often-overlooked issue, the analytical myopias that also obtain when the external world that one encounters is always English-speaking. In other words, it might be less the original sins, omissions, or complicities of its (now absent) canon that answers for the limits of contemporary sociology. Instead, it is its institutionalised provincialism that remains so corrosive—a provincialism that is as much to do with the wider realm of ideas and cultural orientations of the country it inhabits alongside the insularities that flow from the English language's *lingua franca* status.

### 3 | ANTI-COLONIAL THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

The arguments that Bhambra and others have accordingly steered, unpacking the lineage of British colonialism and its imbrication with its social science archive, is vital in terms of sharpening our analytic lens. But they are also timely as regards the contemporary political predicament this country faces. As Bhambra (2014) argues, any sociological question of economy, cultural identities or social divisions must always be seen as nested within global webs of interdependency and domination as well as being palimpsests of previous colonial-era interdependencies and dominations. Or, in other words, any sociology that wishes to answer for the themes of inequality, curtailed agencies, and structural exclusion that the discipline otherwise purports to be serious about, must accordingly unlearn its complacent self-referential methodological nationalism that sees Britain as a self-contained unit. A self-containment where the sociology of Britain's interior space is all too often parsed with remarkable ignorance of its situatedness within the global elsewhere but also, therein, ignorance of the global past that has figured the present of the country.

Equally, lest one think that the cultivation of an anticolonial sensibility for sociology is simply an exercise in selfless virtue, where white British people are invited to consider their role and complicity in the imperialist impoverishment and racialised humiliation of others, an important perspective has been revived in British writing on Empire

(not least, Priyamvada Gopal, 2019, 2021) that also draws out the liberations and horizons that open up for Britons too once better freed of the colonial baggage that still colours their present. For instance, as regards the very structuring of British governance and as Kojo Koram (2022) has argued in his widely feted *Uncommon Wealth*, the imperialist design of the British state, as a colonial wealth-collecting machine, has long-frustrated the drafting of a more democratically structured state<sup>1</sup> and has also interacted in significant ways with local class-based exploitations. Koram demonstrates how colonial-era mechanisms that allowed for wealth to be repatriated to London's financial centre without it being subject to wider governance are still enduring features of how adapted colonial-era devices impoverish many working-class Britons too. The notorious 'non-dom' status that the United Kingdom offers global elites is exemplary of this, alongside the multiple tax offshoring jurisdictions that Britain upholds in Caribbean overseas territories. Though there is more to say here, such examples attest to how a better understanding is needed of how colonialism's tools, as a harvesting of global wealth extracted during and through Empire, has 'boomeranged' (Césaire, 1955) to Britain itself, allowing for the disenfranchisement of its locals too. Similarly, a more resolute grappling with colonialist governance would also help attune Britons to the forms of political repression that are becoming more acute in Britain too. As Sita Balani (2022) recently argued, the anti-sedition laws that British administrators fashioned in the colonies, to blunt and criminalise anti-colonial movements, has now also been invoked in Britain itself, allowing for a potential censoring and tightening of what is permitted critique of the British nation. This being, amongst other things, the threats to criminalise undue 'hatred of Britain'.

Equally, and perhaps most significantly in terms of Britain's political culture, the long hold of a masochistic post-colonial melancholia for a bygone Britain of supposed homogeneity and innocence permanently arrests the English political imagination and its ability to discover a sense of purpose for the future. It is frequently noted that a distinctly postcolonial nostalgia, agnotology, and/or 'amnesia' (Koram & Nişancıoğlu, 2017) colours the contemporary British political imagination—a backward-looking gaze that has left the country in a uniquely moribund and increasingly self-destructive impasse (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019; O'Toole, 2018). On the back of Paul Gilroy's (2004) defining 'postcolonial melancholia' coinage, it is increasingly understood that a morbid longing for a faintly understood late-colonial past has paralysed any sense of Britain being able to habituate its sociocultural present or command its political future. This being a future that is better reconciled to a humbled sense of Britain's place in the world. This being a future that is less hampered by its paralysing attachment to a lapsed Churchillian mythology. But this also being a future that better reckons with the global accountabilities and imperatives that would not only allow Britain to shoulder a more ethical, redistributive place in the world but also allow for post-imperial global collaboration that yields a more pragmatic governance responsive to the distinctly *global* era of climate collapse, pandemics, and capital's fleet-footed transnational mobility.

The profiling of such horizons as relevant to a route out of Britain's particular political predicaments is not to deny the elementary fact that anticolonial thought is, at its heart, most concerned with Empire's most abjected victims, most of whom are concentrated in often deprived and punishing Global South settings that the overdeveloped west remains answerable for. But it is still to note that much of the anticolonial archive remains a repertoire that consistently nourished a collective spirit and harbours lessons that might liberate us *all*, including its erstwhile beneficiaries. In this context, it is vital that British sociology too, as Go argues, might play a role in taking up the anticolonial lens, not only as a basis to apprehend the present world through the perspective of those who experience it most harshly, but also in line with the generative possibilities that await those who also call Britain, and similarly wrought places, home.

#### 4 | THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE ANTICOLONIAL IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

However, when considering the global of the present, it is equally important that the necessary repurposing of anticolonial motifs must carefully avoid ahistorical models that fossilise certain geographic divisions and racial distinctions that we ordinarily understand to typify colonial modernity. A basic canard of thinking through colonial modernity is

to assume a permanent state of European dominance and supremacy against which others are pressed into dependency, subjugation and normative deference; and, sometimes, to invoke it in monolithic terms so that even where broad regional distinctions in colonial governmentality are acknowledged, internal temporal and spatial differences are still flattened.

Certainly, prominent elements of this Western hegemony still prevail, and European populations continue to enjoy many of the benefits of an overdeveloped affluence, a position perhaps made most recently visible in Western states' vaccine nationalism and their monopolising of health resources that unfolded in the wake of a pandemic emergency. However, many from within the postcolonial and world-systems schools have also noted that there is presently a certain 'convergence' (Chuāng Collective, 2019; Horner & Hulme, 2018, 2019; Moore, 2015) or dispersal of such privileges and attendant institutional and militarist power across multiple global nodes, revealing capitalism 'as a genuinely global form' (Salvage Collective, 2021). In this realignment, which has coincided with a relative if still minor decline in the might of US imperial power alongside a growing European provincialism, not least in Brexit Britain, new sites of capital concentration and substantial consumer middle-classes have emerged outside of the conventional west. Whilst in the west itself there has been a general squeezing of some of the entitlements that the middle classes previously enjoyed and some of the securities that the working-classes, as a Keynesian-era wage aristocracy, briefly assumed to be a birth right. Similarly, structures of dept-dependency, a central tent of theorisations of neo-colonialism, no longer privilege only west-backed supranational finance institutions, given the rise of other key channels of debt and credit being issued by, say, Chinese institutions (Financial Times, 2022),<sup>2</sup> but are also starting to afflict western nation-states themselves (the Euro-zone 'debt crisis' being a momentous portend of this).

In other words, the political geography of what we might mean when invoking the colonial has been partially reconfigured beneath a surge of toxic nationalisms and realignments of globalized capital. The question of dominance, or global capitalism's clustering of cores, semi-peripheries, and peripheries (Moore, 2015), no longer maps onto a neatly arraigned geography bequeathed by European colonialism. The task of anticolonial thought as adapted for the contemporary is to herein avoid a laundering of guilt and innocence, beneficiary and victim, ruler and ruled, onto scales set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Instead, as Goldie Osuri (2017, p. 2428) issues in an important reading of Indian chauvinism and militarism vis-à-vis Kashmir,

Contemporary colonialisms and imperialisms may be best diagnosed through the lens of identifying forms of sovereignty [as practiced across different geographic nodes] rather than relying on the geopolitical framework of West/non-West recognisable in the conceptual vocabulary of postcolonial theory.

Or as the influential Jairus Banaji (2021) argues in the context of Marxist analysis, to continue to speak of western multinationals as the principle critical object of an anticolonial socialism is to not only assume multinationals have a western and not a *global* capital premise, but equally, it is to elide the powerful vehicles of capital that sit *within* Global South regions, for example, the Gulf, India and China. Considering India, for instance, Banaji reminds us that the formidable sectors of Indian capitalism enjoy capture of the state, are largely protected from international markets, whilst also sourcing a considerable legitimacy through local nationalist branding (see also, Kaur, 2020).

The aforementioned Osuri (2017, p. 2432) expands by calling for a 'theorisation of the postcolonial nation-state as engaging in its [own] expansionary colonial project'. Such a remark becomes doubly salient when noting that not only might the anticolonial need to be envisaged *within* nation-states, but some of those nation-states increasingly act as superpowers in their own right and are nascently clustering into a 'multi-polar' set of regionally based capitalist-imperialisms (e.g., China, India, the Gulf, Turkey, Russia, Brazil, alongside the already-established reach of the US and the EU). Of course, it is perhaps still only capital as concentrated in the United States that enjoys a truly global footing (only partially rivalled by China) as well as disproportionate power over those supranational instruments that enforce a global regime of capital accumulation, where the reach of other emergent economic powers

remains concentrated to more regional spheres of influence. But still, it is widely acknowledged that there is today a global realignment where *multiple* centres of capitalist expansion and middle-class formation have been consolidated (and particularly across various regions of Asia). Herein, when purposing for the contemporary the powerful political radicalisms and ethical sensibilities that Go identifies in anticolonial thought—for example, a relationality of mutual recognition (p.8), a harmonisation of the self as existing within and not above nature (pp. 10–12), and solidarities as sourced in collective empowerment (pp. 19–21)—it is to realise that imperialist means of governance, economic dominance and state violence now belong to a multitude of actors. Of course, there are ongoing debates about whether much of this ought to be called colonialism/imperialism per se, as there are scales within already established understandings of capitalist expansion and nation-state supremacism that might already attend to many of these violences, inequalities and unfreedoms.

But regardless, we note that the best of anticolonial thought is committed to a redemptive modernity that can live out its promise of radical freedom and absolute equality. This is, namely, the ‘double consciousness’—which Go (pp. 18–19) draws out via Du Bois as being available to those who are doubly located both within and outside of modernity’s appeal—that is better attuned to the desperate promise of modernity just as it also sees, without equivocation, the very denial and hypocrisy of that initial promise. Herein, in the contemporary we spy the emergence of new webs of frustrated modernities against which the anticolonial archive is to be rallied, as opposed to only assuming that the initial rendition of the colonial is where we must concentrate our energies, even if that initial ‘West and the Rest’ (Hall, 1992) rendition is also still very much with us and our current deprivations.

More generally, there is an increasingly loud sense that Europe is experiencing secular decline, where its pre-eminence in the chain of value and its monopoly on global institutional and militarist power is gradually dissipating, even if their elites and select western middle-classes can still fortify themselves against those effects, inured by micro-fortified and hyper-surveilled pools of health and security. Indeed, as Achille Mbembe (2019, p. 1) asserts in the opening gambit to his celebrated *Critique of Black Reason*, the central fact of the coming world-historical ordering of power is in fact the lapsing of Europe’s ready-made centrality.

Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the world. This the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era. And we are only just now beginning the work of measuring its implications and weighing its consequences. Whether such a revelation is an occasion for joy or cause for surprise or worry, one thing remains certain: the demotion of Europe opens up possibilities—and presents dangers—for critical thought.

And as Mbembe (2021) goes on to elaborate in his ‘Notes on Late Eurocentricism’, one important and cotemporaneous way of purposing the anticolonial temperament for an analysis of today’s European metropole is less the question of accrued colonial privileges but rather, what morbidities and threats arise from within the western political psyche when it measures up to the reality of decline. Here, the assorted anti-racism of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Du Bois and Fanon, as marshalled by Go, takes on a slightly different valence. To consider, for instance, Du Bois’ (1935) enduring ‘wages of whiteness’ coinage, we see now that those wages, which were already considered by him as holding primarily symbolic/‘psychological’ value, no longer retains much of its material premise. Or to quote from the pithy aside by Paul Gilroy, ‘whiteness just ain’t worth what it used to be’ (Wade, 2020).

But as Mbembe (2021) remarks, the decline of Europe is as much a sublime threat as it is an opportunity. It is well-understood that fascisms of a ‘disaster nationalist’ (Seymour, 2020a, 2020b) variety often find their fullest destructive flourish amidst the nationalist psychoanalytic drives of denialist revanchism, thrive on the energies of a masochistic resentment, and culminate in the often futile but authoritarian desire for walls, fences and Frontex as the basis by which to retrench for the normatively white national citizen the remains of treasure amidst the ruins. Or, as Mbembe (2021) summarises, Europe is not willingly provincialized. We also know that flaying empires, when confronted with their curtain-call or lacking the means to live out its imperialist supremacy, are often more prone to last-hurrah militaristic adventurism, stoking an appetite for hubristic wars that replay old imperialist morality tales of

Western civilizationist virtue contra foreign devilry (i.e., the cheap moral theatre of the West and Russia, or the West and China, that has been recently recycled amongst a centrist establishment). Such war-making dysfunction attests to the Gramscian 'morbidity' (Hall & Massey, 2010) that gather during the ungoverned 'interregnum', and anybody hardened to the recent wars unleashed by US-led imperialisms alongside the recidivist racial nationalist turn across western Europe will remain viscerally wary of the supreme scale of nativist violence and shock-and-awe military violence as authored by a Europe in denial of decline.

So, Europe will not be easily provincialized. But the tussle in its embers resembles something more akin to an 'inchoate' prospect for fascism (Seymour, 2020a, 2020b) that is grooved primarily by a revanchist nostalgia: a pathological inability to reconcile oneself to a humbled standing in the world or a desperate attempt to sublimate the symbolic shocks of experiencing downward class mobility. This being a regression which contradicts an inherited sense of Eurocentric entitlement—where working and middle classes alike experience a dissipation of previous comforts and certainties. This is, put differently, a scope for violence and cruelty that is borne more of a certain perception of weakness and vulnerability, not domination and privilege.

Herein, again echoing Mbembe's above synopsis, there are also new promises and possibilities that the anticolonial form from within Europe would do well to stay alert to. Namely, amidst this sense of decline and dissipated privileges, a new scope for multi-racial and pro-migrant working-class political solidarities also arises. In other words, the widespread sense of dissipated privilege experienced today across many western working-classes may also be the conjunctural opening by which local registers of shared, non-nationalist common identification may obtain (Rogaly, 2020). In such contexts, the plight of the postcolonial migrant and the racialised is no longer an invitation to scorn, fear, or indifference. Instead, the plight of such 'outsider' figures might also now leave residues of self-recognition and familiarity in the very person who is otherwise able to identify with the ostensible security of a national, colonialism-derived whiteness.

## 5 | ANTI-COLONIALISMS AND THE SPECTRE OF THE NATION

A second vigilance that Go hints at in his conclusion are the traps of thinking that the assertion of nativist identity by those in the former colonised world is, in itself, an 'anticolonial' act. The minting of an anti-colonial thought, in all its diversity, is herein marooned, as Go dub its, on an altar of 'geopistemic essentialism' (p.26)—where any assertion of Global South identity risks being read as contributing to 'alternative knowledge'. A useful connection can be drawn here to Olúfẹmi Táiwò (2022), who has decried increasingly prominent talk of lost 'epistemes' as being romanticist and asociological. For Táiwò, it remains sufficiently unclear what that previous and presumably coherent knowledge may have been and whether it ought to be recovered, insofar as it often assumes a wholesale denial of the basic historical materialist fact we have all entered into a modernity that cannot be undone. (Of course, it should be noted that some of these increasingly prominent concerns with the precolonial is not actually about the recovery of lost knowledge but is committed to a rather Foucauldian tracing of the processes through which one episteme is displaced in favour of another.) Indeed, as Spivak (1987) made evident in an influential staging of a comparable argument, the precolonial cannot be known without it being necessarily filtered by the socio-political imperatives of the contemporary.

But even it was known, it would be to know other structures of domination, status hierarchy and expropriative divisions that are not only not worth redeeming but indeed, have in fact enjoyed many reactionary afterlives as they were folded into the often 'indirect rule' (Mamdani, 1999) of colonial administrations as well as being half-yoked to structures of global capital accumulation. This being the 'coarticulation' reading of Stuart Hall (1980) of capitalism and the precapitalist, the global capitalism's subsumption of multiple 'forms of exploitation' argument of Jairus Banaji (2010), or the 'non-universalization of capitalism' thesis steered by the sub-altern school (Guha, 1998). Or as Spivak (1987) expanded, the subaltern voice is always trapped within the interlocking dialectical trap of overdetermined discursive repertoires. On the one hand, a colonial Eurocentric repertoire of western civilizationism and Orientalist taxonomies, and on the other hand, the local nationalist and their emphatic and generally conservative claim on local authenticity. Spivak argues here that the voice (which we may call knowledge) that might instead emerge



through the subaltern is not about recovery but always about the future, a critical vision and political spontaneity that comes out of being estranged from all competing hegemonies, be they European imperialism or local, patriarchal nationalism. Though it would be a distraction to expand upon these influential arguments, these various readings do begin to hint at the importance of not turning to a mantra of the anticolonial merely as the basis to exult claims to native authenticity or alternative precolonial knowledge, as such authenticities are themselves often implicated in a multitude of distortions, exclusions and conservatisms and to automatically imbue it with a virtue of anti-colonial affords it a legitimacy and standing that it does not deserve (Loomba, 2005).

But perhaps more significantly, and far more ominously, it is now abundantly apparent against the record of post-colonial history that the local assertion of a native majoritarian identity around which to formalise state sovereignty has scarcely birthed more progressive or inclusive imaginations of community and solidarity. Instead, in asserting a nationalist identity around which to coalesce an anti-colonial liberation, it is now nearly an orthodoxy of postcolonial theory to note that the inclusionary premise of decolonial liberation has become the exclusionary premise of post-colonial nationalism. Or, as Mamdani (2003) puts it, paraphrasing Fanon, the racism of the colonial was enshrined, through different subsequent inflections of native majorities and inauthentic outsiders, the nationalisms of the post-colonial. Fanon (1961) remains the most prescient prophet of this ill-fated dialectical trap—where he cautions that the forging of a localised nationalism, as the liberationist act, risks becoming ensnared in the ethnocentric exigencies of thereupon realising and maintaining that very nationalism through new iterations of those who belong and who is the interloper, who is the patriot and who is the traitor, who is the innocent victim and who is overdetermined source of our native ills.

Needless to say, postcolonial nationalisms, when actually successful as opposed to pleading from a minoritarian location, have borne witness to a painful catalogue of violent majoritarianisms, assimilationist injunctions, frontierist expansion, and anti-migrant scapegoating and expulsions. Alongside, a multitude of civil wars where state-making nationalisms provoke equally impassioned minoritarian secessionisms amongst those impugned as being guests or existing at the munificence of the native custodian of sovereignty.

Of course, it is already well-noted that nationalism is the terms by which modernity rehearses its fundamental sense of political community, and that its monopolistic claim on the channelling of political legitimacy rendered it largely inevitable that the colonized too would have to mobilise and codify a nationalism in whose name sovereignty and liberation might be actualised. We accordingly already see here the stain of colonial modernity as it lives out in the postcolonial futures of the colonised (Sharma, 2020). Not to mention the basic fact that the very categories of national community, nativeness and official minorities were often minted and codified by colonial taxonomies themselves and where the borders that demarcate the states to which nations belong were often drawn by aloof, middle-ranking colonial administrators (Chatterjee, 1993).

And perhaps more significantly, not only is such nationalism now so embedded in so many former colonies, but it is increasingly the principle and generally violent political force in coalescing forms of political hegemony that also aides the standing of new capitalisms—be it state capitalism or late neoliberal—that can conclusively bury leftist dissent and the threat of nascent labour movements. Left politics across the former colonial world is often maligned here as being anti-patriotic, under the spell of foreign, or worse yet, western, influence, or is simply made to seem less politically visceral and energising when compared to the rawer, more affectively intense phenomenology of being roused by nationalist injunctions against demonised Others in the country's midst or gathering at its borders.

Of course, Europe too remains distinguished in its ability to realise a rabid nationalist fervour that dehumanises those often racialised figures of non-belonging as well as displacing the appeal of leftist claims on alternative conceptions of collective solidarity. One key difference however for the purposes of thinking through the place of anticolonial thought is that whilst European nationalisms implicitly reach for a nostalgia grooved symbolically in the former glories of empire, as a prematurely lost heyday, postcolonial nationalisms can often dress themselves up in the garb of *anti-imperialism*. That is to say, anti-imperialist simulacra are an increasingly common motif of opportunist nationalist demagogues, endowing their reactionary projects a legitimacy through contrived but still arresting claims to the radicalism of the initial decolonial movements.

The irony of such co-opted claims should not go unacknowledged. Those original movements were, in many important ways, less nationalist and more avowedly shaped by the heady 'world-making' (Getachew, 2019) and communist energies of the short 20th century. Indeed, many of those same national liberation leaders who were staunchly socialist in their commitments would often counsel against the appeal of the compromised necessity of nationalism. And yet today, as Priyamvada Gopal (2021, pp. 890–895) summarises with forceful clarity, we see assorted appeals to the anticolonial not in the name of freedom, but for the purposes of reactionary hegemonic supremacy.

The salience of the 'anticolonial' for validating contemporary postcolonial nationalisms is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the burgeoning Hindu nativist scholarship that sanctifies with a scientific veneer the revisionist coordinates of ruling Hindutva. A spate of recent books according Hindutva politics a decolonial imprimatur have drawn heavily on the propositions of decolonial theory—and its particular emphasis on 'coloniality' as an omnipresent force that continues to penetrate epistemological mindsets and frame ontological norms—to argue for the assertion of an 'indigenous indic consciousness'. Arguing that Indian postcolonial state formation, and particularly its constitution, judicial and parliamentary system, remain products of a toxic Western Enlightenment tradition, it is J. Sai Deepak's (2021) multi-volume<sup>3</sup> account that proves most beguilingly indicative here.

Deepak relies heavily on the decolonial theory of Walter D. Mignolo<sup>4</sup> and other Latin American scholars to explicate his thesis of an enduring 'colonial mentality' that is rife across India's political spectrum. Dismissing ideas of 'equality', 'toleration', 'humanism' and 'liberty' as being deeply western centric, for Deepak, a turn to Indic consciousness and 'true' decolonisation can only be achieved when the norms, values and standards of society are devised from what he terms Indic 'onto-epistemology and theology'. Such a bid calling for the return to 'authenticity' entails the construction of the Indian state as a monotheistic Hindu one, a revisionist political project that is itself, as Anustup Basu (2020) has shown, deeply Orientalist and Eurocentric in its roots, not merely asserting a debatable sense of unified Hinduism across peoples spanning vast regional territories otherwise known for polytheistic, localised and fluid practices but, crucially, fixing such narratives to an imagined sense of nationhood and state.

In this instance, rather than illuminating progressive possibilities for reckoning with the state of the social, such efforts to assert an 'Indic consciousness' turn out to be deeply anti-sociological. In the effort to outline an alternative pre-colonial history by drawing on select theological and theoretical texts, even incorporating when it suits British colonial anthropological accounts of ancient Hindu civilizations, the sought for restoration of 'indic consciousness' is at best a philosophical conjecture that maps pre-modern cultural practices and beliefs onto the political theology of Hindutva political monotheism. Even as India, or Bharat, is recognised as 'a federal civilization with multiple sub-identities that are free to retain their identities'—emphasis is given here to evidence of a continuous use of specific terminology in land records and/or worship rituals—reverence for the land and nature are solicited as evidence of a holistic consciousness binding 'civilization' together. And thus, claims to an imagined affinity between disparate peoples, tribes and communities across the continent are made. The resulting assertion of a communitarian chauvinism elevating Brahminical practices and histories effaces complex histories of social relations, of political-economic structures and of past and present power dynamics that would all point to something much less coherent, much more diverse, and certainly contested. Most starkly, it projects a universalist narrative deeply at odds with any reckoning with caste in India (Telumbde, 2018). As Kancha Ilaiah (2016) famously states in his critique of Hindutva philosophy, 'why I am not a hindu', 'I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know they were Hindus' (p.1)—noting that as a child born to a sudra caste of shepherds, he felt much greater affinity and proximity with local Christian and Muslim children and some other scheduled castes than with any Brahmins and kshatriyas.

Deepak's turn to decolonial theory then, whether opportunistic or not, results in multiple dismissals. A dismissal of the sheer weight of caste complexities; a dismissal of the historical realities of cultural syncretism and borrowing, of cosmopolitan fusions and human migration; a dismissal of the both international but also intranational centre-periphery socioeconomic dynamics formative of Marxist iterations of postcolonial theory; and a dismissal of national liberation leaders' and movements' contingent attempts to take, adapt, and claim for their own ends otherwise ostensibly liberal principles of equality, democracy and human rights. It is instead the assertion of indigeneity

and 'indigenous culture', in order to 'reclaim Indic civilizational consciousness', that takes effect, and with inevitably drastic political consequences. Not least, such a philosophical scaffolding shapes to validate the ruling Indian government's contemporary attempts to repeal the constitution. An iconic marker of postcolonial independence, the constitution remains a key if limited (Roy, 2016) channel through which to legally secure certain core civil protections and rights for many marginalised groups, including the assorted scheduled caste groups, women and minorities who are otherwise subject to considerable institutional and social discrimination. In contrast, judicial activism seeking to assert an 'Indic civilizational consciousness' and a Hindu nativist mentality that have surfaced within recent legal judgements justifies the maintenance of an oppressive caste system, helps uphold misogynistic practices relegating and excluding women from civic, political, and religious life, and, perhaps most notoriously, legitimates a violent revision of citizenship practices and law that facilitates mass exclusion of Indian Muslims.

This is not to say that such brazenly reactionary arguments as the ones espoused by Deepak cannot make a claim to the de/anti-colonial. Such claims posit an unapologetically nationalist validity; a desire to cohere a cultural and political homogeneity as sourced in an imagery of authentic historical continuity that they believe to be in absolute opposition to the deleterious influence of 'western thought'. (The magnetic and now topical sweep of Aleksandr Dugin's philosophical presentation of a Russia-led Eurasian civilizational order is an instructive if often overlooked example here). Such politics can indeed be presented, in part, as de/anti-colonial should its proponents wish to, and it is likely a misplaced errand to audit what is decolonial and what is not. But those who traffic in its appeal should also more honestly concede that such claims have nothing to do with the Left, nothing to do with working-class empowerment, nothing to do with the horizon of a de-alienated liberty or even more humanist conceptions of community and solidarity. But rather, it has everything to do with shepherding authoritarian-nationalist governance and its alliance with capital into the brave new world where the west is no longer the sole hypocritical arbiter of our future trajectories.

## 6 | WHO IS THE ANTICOLONIAL SCHOLAR?

This general nod to how different postcolonial histories have been lived and will be lived allows for a more situated re-engagement of Go's more particular stress on how sociology, or a general sense of social theory, as housed in western settings, needs to reckon with the contributions of anticolonial thinkers. Namely, if the very nature of the postcolonial present has yielded so many alternating configurations of power, nativism, and future trajectory, we also note that the original thinkers too of the anticolonial must be engaged not because they promise a particular political consensus or shared destiny, but because they understood the place of the colonial in birthing and contouring the globally immanent political questions we still answer.

Go (2023, p.6) is accordingly apt to stress that anticolonial thought comes in many shades. As he puts it, 'anticolonial thought does not mark a space of pristine prelapsarian purity' (p.25). His reflection here on the often-conservative wisdom of Ibn Khaldun (p.27), though an anachronistic reference if considered against the specifics of a social theory that reckons with European colonialism itself, is salutary. Via the example of Khaldun, Go observes that a simplistic reflex to see all Global South thought as progressive is to indulge in a patronising politics of deference. It is indeed only a repackaged racism that allows such a diversity of thought and purposes to be bundled into one purportedly virtuous canon committed to the same task or future.

Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's (2020) much-discussed recent essay on 'epistemic deference' is particularly apposite here. Táíwò argues that there is increasingly an exultation of identity that is less about analytic position or political schema and more about lionising 'standpoint'. Where standpoint (as theory) is dislodged of its original Marxist-cum-feminist moorings and becomes (as practice) something more akin to a transparent and virtuous intellectual and political lens that is seemingly by default available to those who are oppressed. (After all, if as sociologists we understand all subjective perspective to be mediated, socialised and contradictory, it is not at all self-evident that 'lived experience' or neatly tabulated grids of oppression would tally with transparent registers of resistant insight and political

radicalism). In other words, what Táiwò helpfully cautions against is the emergent tendency where mere geography (Global South), identity (non-white), or political ambition (anticolonial rhetoric) is ipso facto afforded a social and political validity seen as coterminous with perspectives that point towards progressive liberation and radical equality.

Analogously, one is struck how many generally western, 'liberal-radical fantasists' (as Spivak et al. (2022, p. 136) puts it) of decolonial scholarship seem unable to distinguish the nationalist from the anti-nationalist, the Marxist from the liberal, the developmental modernist from the romantic traditionalist, the secularist from the post-secularist, the social democrat from the neo-authoritarian, the representation champion from the abolitionist radical. All that is to be stressed here is that anticolonial thought, past and present, will be as promiscuous and without obvious ideological consensus as so-called western social theory itself. Or, in more glib terms, to differentiate Schmitt from Arendt, Durkheim from Fromm, Gramsci from Durkheim is to also differentiate Memmi from Fanon, Liang Qichao from Mao, Gandhi from Nehru, Cabral from Atatürk, C.L.R James from Garvey.

We accordingly ask if the old twentieth-century parlances and the dialectical paradoxes they helped draw out as common to all meaningful social thought are still what is at stake, even if its 21st century coordinates and geographies are in the process of being remade. Put colloquially: nationalism or global humanism, communitarianism or cosmopolitanism, productivism or de-alienation, individualism or individuality, authoritarianism or democracy, statism or liberty, tech accelerationism or public sociality, reification or consciousness, extractivism or the planet, etc. Or, perhaps, simply, socialism or barbarism. These are immanent distinctions built into the horrors but also promise of modernity, promises that are largely unique to modernity just as the scale of its horrors are too; and indeed, any political and ideational programme will arrive at complex permutations of how these assorted contrasts are to be brought into a common resolution.

In turn, to append the anticolonial to any such reckoning with these assorted alternatives/questions is not itself a political commitment but only a descriptive premise, but a descriptive premise that is vital in championing a more historically literate conception of the modern world's arrival but also a more expansive sense of how our everyday social and political concerns are constituted by a global field of relationships and implications. Herein, to turn to the anticolonial is to make sure that we see the global as constituted by previous histories of exploitation as well as knowing how those histories are still with us. It is also to know that the contemporary is constituted by interdependent webs of global relations—which manifest as bonds and divisions alike—and that any sociological canon would be greatly enriched by the anticolonial but also Marxist scholars who first made this elementary reality most explicit. But it is also to know that the anticolonial, as a place from which to think, commands no steady course intrinsic to it, and that anticolonial theory too is itself as contentiously invested in the key questions of an immanent modernity and its contrasting configurations. Indeed, as far as we are concerned, those formative of anticolonial thinking—be they Du Bois, Fanon or Marx—were central to making these different theses on the modernity that needs redeeming more visible, more tangible, more non-negotiable. As such, and in keeping with the sentiments of Go's deft argument, this is the simple wager, when we turn to anticolonial thought *qua* anticolonial thought, that we would do well to remember.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Some of this was indirectly primed in the famous 'Nairn-Anderson' thesis, which was developed across a range of writings by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson in the 1960s and onward, many of which were published in the *New Left Review*. For a defining if partially dissenting take, see Ellen Meiksins-Wood (2015, pp. 1–20).
- <sup>2</sup> Of course, there is a shamelessly hypocritical scaremongering amongst much Establishment commentary in the west that impugns China-backed lending whilst still ennobling western governmental and/or supranational issued credit, trafficking hereby in a wholly absurd and ultimately racialised and/or civilizationist moral economy about the ethics of debt. Such

moral selectiveness also hides the enduring fact that the bulk of developing countries' debt, laden with swinging interest rates, is still owed to the west.

<sup>3</sup> This being the first book of a forthcoming trilogy, no less.

<sup>4</sup> Mignolo does indeed provide an emphatic endorsement for the book.

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