

Expatriating the Universal: A Decolonial Imagination beyond Authentic “Asia”

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Abstract

In the field of urban studies, there has been a call to develop “new geographies of theory” to accommodate “Asian” experiences of urbanisation in theory-building practices, which are said to have been based largely on “Western” experiences of urban space. In thinking about possibilities of a theory from “Asia”, this article, instead of arguing from within the field of urban studies per se, problematises the conventions of knowledge production today, including the division between the disciplines and area-centric research in the institutional formation of knowledge production, the separation of universal from particular forms of knowledge, and the isomorphism of “the West” with the universal and of “Asia” with the particular. In doing so, the author argues for the need to move beyond the notion of authentic “Asia” as an alternative locus of enunciation vis-à-vis “the West” and to expatriate the universal from the territorially bounded place. A theory from “Asia” should embody the liminality of “Asia” and “the West” and express the universal not as the transcendence of the particular, but as the manifestation of the multitude of alterity.

Keywords: Asia, the West, theory, knowledge production, urbanisation, modernity

Off the map

This article has emerged out of a series of theoretical questions that has begun to manifest itself through my recent engagement with works produced in a field of knowledge that has become increasingly popular – urban studies of fast-growing cities in “Asia”. Is urban theory inherently and dogmatically Western-centric, only reflecting urban experiences in a limited number of cities located in the trans-Atlantic region? If so, what does it mean to utilise such theory as an a priori positioning of our understanding of the unfolding of urban space in “Asia”? How can we adequately address the unique experiences and locality of urbanisation in and of “Asia” in our theorisation of urban space? What does a theory from “Asia” entail? And, more generally, why does theory matter?

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Though admittedly my reading of those works produced in the field of urban studies is limited, and therefore, only scratches the surface of the very complex scholarly field, it has become obvious to me that the central theoretical concern of the studies of urbanisation in “Asia” parallels the similar concern that has long been prevalent in the scholarly fields I am much more familiar with, that is to say, in the fields of postcolonial and decolonial reflections on coloniality of knowledge generally, and critical area studies more specifically. The central concern I am referring to here is a deceptively simple one – how to integrate spatio-temporally specific experiences of “Asia”, the geographical and anthropological Other of what is axiomatically defined as “the West”, into theory-building practices that are often said to take place within “the West”. This call for crafting “new geographies of theory” is not necessarily unique to urban studies per se, but reflects the much broader problematics about the institutional and epistemological structure of knowledge production, which manifests itself as the division of labour within the contemporary academy between the disciplines and area studies,¹ and as various oppositionalities – albeit appearing somewhat problematic to our intellectual sensitivity today – within historical knowledge between universal theories and knowledge of arcane features of the local, the theoretical and the empirical, “the West” and the rest, *humanitas* and *anthropos*, all of which derive from the overall valorisation of the Hegelian ontology that persistently reproduces the chasm between the universal and the particular.

As I understand it, there are two strategies for responding to this call for crafting new geographies of theory. One is to provide a comprehensive survey of urban studies organised in places that remain rather unfamiliar to most of those who occupy and operate from within the hegemonic centres of modern knowledge production on urban space. Japanese scholarship on urban space, for instance, is an interesting case here. Though urban studies, in particular urban sociology, in Japan has been significantly influenced by American urban sociology, and thus many canons of Japanese urban sociology reiterate theoretical debates in the American academy,² there have also been some interesting conceptual inflections that reflect particular historicity and unique qualities of urbanisation in Japan. Eitarō Suzuki, who was central in developing a systematic methodology for both urban and rural studies, had proposed the concept of *Kessetsu-kan* (“nodule” institutions) as the realm of human relationality specific to urban areas in Japan (Suzuki 1957). Tadashi Fukutake of-

1 Insofar as my reflection here is on the narrowly defined concepts of “universal” and “particular” that refer to the validity of knowledge claims based on the epistemological model of social sciences, by “disciplines”, I mean to suggest specifically the disciplines of the social sciences. The humanities, in contradistinction, occupy a curious place. In so much as the notion of *humaniora* refers rather to the “feeling” of the universal, to the multitude of human experiences as manifestations of human universals, the humanities are built upon the attention to the particular, and are thus separated from the disciplines of the social sciences.

2 See, for example, Fukutarō Okui’s *Gendai daitoshi ron (Theory of Modern Mega-city)* published in 1940 and Eiichi Isomura’s 1953 work entitled *Toshi shakai gaku kenkyū (Studies of Urban Sociology)*.

ferred a critical analysis of urban space and regionalism in Japan by means of mediating urbanism and urbanisation through a Marxist sociological understanding of agrarian societies (Kitakawa et al. 1962). Masamichi Shinmei provided us with a coherent theoretical perspective to disentangle the complex layers of structures characteristic of industrialised urban areas in Japan (Shinmei et al. 1959). And yet, such a strategy of introducing some theoretical and conceptual developments found elsewhere into our discussion, though undoubtedly important, has its limitations. Even without noting that my observation of these scholarly developments in Japan – and other cases from other geographical areas, for that matter – only touches upon the surface of a very complex and diverse scholarly field, this strategy of offering multiple narratives of urban space and pluralising the realm of theory does not necessarily address the fundamental conceptual matrix of the universal and the particular that separates the realm of theory-building from the realm of area-centric research.

Therefore, I instead pursue here the second possible strategy, a mode of reflection that addresses the prevailing problem of the universal / the particular, which tends to represent “Asia” and “Asian” cities as interesting, anomalous, different, unique and esoteric empirical cases, and thus hinders scholars on and from “Asia” from participating in theory-building practices. If problematisation already embeds within itself a possible schema of thought, to problematise the universal / the particular is to reveal: 1) how theory claims a mode of abstraction and generalisation applicable to the multitude of human experiences irrespective of locality and historicity, a mode of transcendence that goes beyond the immediacy of such experiences, and thus positions itself in the realm of the universal; and 2) how “the West” has established itself as the locus of enunciation for such a universal, while simultaneously “Asia” and other geographical Others of “the West” are represented as the locus of the particular, of the mere immediacy of human experiences. In revealing this, I wish to provide a way to dislocate our historical knowledge from the prevailing Hegelian folds, that is, to expatriate the universal from a territorially bounded location, from “the West” that has been established as a central locus of theory, and to provide an understanding of the universal, not in the Hegelian sense of transcendence of the particular, but in its aporetic nature, as something that we all *partake* of its (re)articulation.³

3 Perhaps some words of caution must be mentioned here. As much as I and this article have been influenced by the postcolonial and decolonial traditions of dislodging certain universal imperatives from their privileged place, I am aware of their inherent limitations. Beyond their claims for the colonality of knowledge and being, these intellectual traditions exhibit, albeit paradoxically, a tone of resignation, that one will only be able to combat the problematic of knowledge by becoming integrated into it. Being critical is one thing, but going beyond that which one is critical of is another matter. To this end, those critical and indeed influential engagements may appear in a way as the discourse of the moment of defeat, a moment that has not yet been overcome. This certainly opens a space for oversaturation of the polemics, whereby rather excessive intellectual victim consciousness is fostered through indulgence in the reproduction of hierarchised oppositionality between “the West” and the rest. Surely, such polemical claims would serve an

As a form of preparation, let me enter some qualifications here to set the stage for my discussion. The point of departure is rather a simple one. The idea that all beings are situated in space has been prevalent in intellectual debates for more than a century. From the mid-19th-century Chartists, Marxists and Fabians who challenged the stewards of the expert-led bureaucracy of urbanisation projects, to the late-19th-century historians and archaeologists whose works expanded our understanding of “community” as the locus of spatial practices of the collectives, and to the early-20th-century social historians, art historians and literary scholars who ethnographically documented various “worldviews” that manifested the ways in which the collectives brokered their relationship to and in space, a number of scholars have produced various academic – also at times, political and ideological – discourses on space. More recently, the works of French theoreticians, including Foucault (1977, 2008), Lefebvre (1991, 1996a), De Certeau (1984) and Virilio (1997), emphasised specifically the notion of power implicit in our understandings and experiences of space, providing us with conceptual vocabularies, such as “abstract space” and “symbolic place”, to expand the horizon of our scholarly perspective.

This so-called “spatial turn” and its spatial impulse took a deeper hold especially in the human geography tradition, and those vocabularies were elaborated further – in conjunction with Durkheim’s (2001) and Simmel’s (1971) works on the social – into theories of power/space. Notable conceptualisations include Sack’s “human territoriality” (1986), Massay’s “power geometry” (2005, 2007), Harvey’s “space-time compression” (1989), Soja’s “thirdspace” (1989, 1996) and Castells’s “variable geometry” (1987, 1989). These theoretical developments have indeed rewritten the old concerns for space, with a renewed attention to capitalism, globalisation, surveillance and power that extends much beyond the realm of social history. These new theoretical categories have moved us well beyond the hitherto conventional notion of space as a fixed, stable, a priori enclosure, as a locus in which history, culture, progress and social relations occur and can therefore be analysed. Instead, these scholars emphasise, *contra* statist, that space and spatiality are, in fact, social, cultural and even quasi-material productions, produced through the complex

emotional end, effectively reducing any forms of Western-centrism to the manifestation of the xenophobic and dogmatic Western imperialism of the imagination. However, the point I want to emphasise is that my attempt to reconsider the prevailing division between “the West” and the rest, and understanding the universal in its aporetic nature as something we all partake of, is to articulate a possible way of moving beyond the very opposition that polemics often exploit. All the more so to negate polemics. It is important to recall at this juncture that postcolonial and decolonial undertakings are not narrow polemics that only reflect upon the ideological practices of “the West” in the rest of the world. One must thus recognise that their undertakings have made the locus of knowledge of the Other rather precarious, even if such undertakings are organised within the same epistemological terrain that they are critical of. Thus understood, to follow the postcolonial and decolonial intellectual sensitivity to the power/knowledge nexus, especially decades after its inception, is not only to make a radical rupture with various oppositionalities embedded within modern knowledge regimes through an alternative understanding of the universal, but also and importantly, to create an instance of epistemological inflection by that very rupture from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions. See Said 1983a, Gasche 1987, Derrida 1992, and Hall 1992 (pp. 275–331).

layers of human interactions and modalities of human existence. It is to this end that many of them also argue for the importance of understanding not merely space per se, but space-time, in order to account for the processual, ever-changing, non-representational nature of space. And, in so doing, these scholars, along with many others in the social sciences and humanities, have turned specifically to urban space as the microcosm of contemporary everyday life and of complex processes of being and becoming, and simultaneously as the macrocosm of global flows and increasing interconnectedness.

In this context, “Asian cities are increasingly imagined as global frontiers of urban studies in the twenty-first century” (Bunnell 2017: 9). Indeed, scholars have recognised, to an increasing extent, the importance of rapidly growing cities in “Asia” as an alternative source of aspiration for development, modernisation and urbanisation that exhibit divergent trajectories of human experiences of and human relations in urban space. And yet, this growing attention to the cities in “Asia” has simultaneously revealed some impediments of the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks available in the field of urban studies – impediments that are said to have derived from the fact that the hegemonic knowledge regimes of urban studies have revolved around a handful of Euro-American urban spaces. Ever since the Chicago School of urban sociology brought our attention to the city of Chicago as the epitome of “urbanism as a way of life” (Wirth 1938), and thus, as the object of knowledge for investigating “the process of civilisation as it were, under a microscope” (Park 1929: 890), the canons of urban theory have largely developed as narratives of urban space, of urban change and of space-time (re)configuration, having emerged from a narrow set of paradigmatic cities located in the Euro-American advanced capitalist economies that occupy the position at the apex of global capitalist competition and at the centre of the global network (Friedmann 1986: 71–72).

To be sure, this is not to say that scholars have been completely blind to urban development elsewhere. For instance, Rozman argued for the importance of developing a comparative orientation to shift our “attention away from the single city and toward the urban cluster”, because “although concentration on single cities may, on occasion, offer intriguing glimpses of persistent patterns, it fails to provide a representative sample of settlements for systematic approach” (Rozman 1978: 65). His works were particularly significant in expanding the horizon of urban studies in both a geographical and historical sense, as he integrated cases of urban development in pre-modern societies of Russia, China and Japan and developed a systematic perspective for addressing complex networks within and among these societies (Rozman 1971, 1973). Sharing a similar concern for offering multiple narratives of urban space was Skinner. Focusing specifically on the city and urban development in late imperial China, his works brought the study of historical Chinese cities, hitherto

analysed under the obscurity of conventional Sinology, into the orbit of broader, comparative urban studies (Skinner 1977). The inclusion of one of the most prominent “Asian” cities in her analysis was also one, among many, contribution of Sassen’s seminal work on global cities, which successfully introduced Tokyo, along with New York and London, as one of the emblematic sites for the increasingly complex entanglements of world economy and urban experiences (Sassen 1991). Through a thorough comparative analysis, Sassen developed a coherent framework for understanding urban life vis-à-vis the spatial dispersion of economic activities and the reorganisation of the financial industry in the context of globalisation.

Their individual contributions to area-centric knowledge of pre-modern Russia, China, Japan, imperial China and contemporary Japan notwithstanding, it is important to recognise here that these opuses together have directly challenged the long-held assumption of urban studies: that “to speak of towns [...] is to speak of the bourgeoisies” (Balazs 1964: 66), and therefore, of the self-regulated, autonomous, market-based urban social structures in Euro-American cities. Hence, they opened up a new scholarly space, not merely for developing a new intellectual movement epitomised by the so-called California (or Los Angeles) School that diverged in its focus and conceptual orientation from the hitherto dominant Chicago School, but more importantly, for problematising dominant theories and practices of theory-building.

Yet a sense of dissonance in Euro-America research, between theory-building practices and urban experiences of geographical “Others”, does not seem to have been adequately reconciled. To say so is not necessarily to deny the importance of those scholarly works that call for expanding the horizon of our perspective beyond Euro-American cities by pluralising the narrative of urban space and urbanisation. The dissonance remains persistent precisely because those works fall into the common rubric of the first strategy I mentioned earlier. That is to say, while offering detailed analyses of urban space in “Asia” as either an alternative or a comparative model for theorisation, those works do not necessarily reflect upon the complex conceptual and philosophical matrix that determines and justifies the separation prevalent within the contemporary knowledge regimes, between theory and area-centric knowledge, between “the West” and the rest, and between the universal and the particular. Thus, as Goldman (2010) observes, theory remains somewhat imperceptive of “significant social dynamics occurring within and among lower-tiered ‘other’ cities, [...] working below the radar of the global-cities analytics” (Goldman 2010: 556). In a similar vein, Roy argues, geographical “Others” – not limited to Asian cities, but also cities in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Eastern / Southern Europe – can appear only as “‘mega-cities’, cities of underdevelopment, on the margins of the map of global capitalism” (Roy 2014: 13). She even goes so far as to claim that “although considerable empirical research

and robust analysis was being conducted in the context of such cities, this work had not necessarily entered into the annals of what constitutes Theory, of the authoritative canon of the discipline of urban studies” (ibid.). Comaroff and Comaroff have made a similar observation when discussing cities in Africa, discontentedly noting that “the non-West” comes to be represented “primarily as a place of parochial wisdom [...] of unprocessed data [...] as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories” (Comaroff / Comaroff 2012: 114).

To this end, the kind of sentiment that Robinson expressed more than a decade ago seems to have remained still relevant: among urban studies scholars, urbanisation and experiences thereof, when occurring in or relating to those geographical “others”, are “off the map” of the urban theoretical register (Robinson 2002: 531). This being the case, the field of knowledge production on urban space has been one, among many sites, that still manifests a coloniality of knowledge, and hence, is – or more precisely put, still remains – at a decolonial juncture. Thus the question of new geographies of theory will benefit from an engagement not with another case of geographical Others, but with the conceptual and philosophical matrix that regulates knowledge production of such geographical Others, so as to recalibrate theory itself.

Oppositionalities and isomorphism

On theory, James Clifford once wrote:

“Theory” is a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance. To theorize, one leaves home. But like any act of travel, theory begins and ends somewhere. In the case of the Greek theorist the beginning and ending were one, the home polis. This is not so simply true of traveling theories in the late twentieth century. [...] In the late twentieth century the community, the polis, of the Greek traveller-theorist loses its centrality as a “home” base. It is more and more difficult to ignore what has always to some extent been true – that every center or home is someone else’s periphery or diaspora. (Clifford 1989: 1–2)

To theorise, as I understand this analogy of “home”, is to move beyond our embedded experiences, that is to say, the locality (spatial specificity) and historicity (temporal specificity) of our being, with a conviction in the generalisability of the local and the historical. What differentiates the contemporary practices of theorisation from, say, that of the ancient Greek, is that the product of leaving our “home”, the product of dislocating the embeddedness of our being – a theory – no longer ends only back at our “home”, but instead is also utilised to understand someone else’s “home”, to have recourse to someone else’s embedded experiences. A theory does not merely travel and return,

but it also migrates, or sometimes intervenes. Invariably, this intellectual osmosis that reveals the power/knowledge nexus, and by extension, the inadequacy of theoretical imperatives has become the locus of contestation (Said 1978; Chakrabarty 2000).

Theory is no longer naturally “at home” in the West – a powerful place of Knowledge, History, or Science, a place to collect, shift, translate, and generalize. Or more cautiously, this privileged place is now increasingly contested, cut across, by other locations, claims, trajectories of knowledge articulating racial, gender, and cultural differences. (Clifford 1989: 2)

And yet, despite this intellectual sensitivity – now widely shared – towards provincialism, or else, located-ness, of theory, the institutional formation of knowledge of “Asia”, of “the Other”, that is to say, the position of area-centric research vis-à-vis the disciplines and their practices of theory-building, remains as that which to some extent hinders such sensitivity.

This separation of area-centric research and the disciplines is all too familiar. At the onset of the institutional formation of post-war area research, Wagley observed that “at any rate, if there be a provincialism within these disciplines, it will be quickly revealed when the expert applies his formulations to alien cultures,” and thus, “area studies brings comparative and concrete data to bear on generalization and theory” (Wagley 1948: 6–7, 9). It is precisely to this end that the division of labour between the disciplines and area-centric research was deemed necessary to “the development of a universal and general science of society and of human behavior” (ibid.: 5). This observation seems to have remained pertinent for some decades. As Taylor suggested, although the separation of theory from area-centric knowledge and the division of labour between the disciplines and area research are rather artificial and even “unfortunate because there is no basic antagonism between the two,” nevertheless, “the full development of theory depends on the accumulation of comparable data from all available sources” (Taylor 1964: 9). From the perspective of the disciplines on the other end of the institutional spectrum, Morgenthau (1959) argued in a similar vein:

Contemporary area studies assume that the key to the understanding of a foreign area lies in the investigation of the specific phenomena that make up that area. [...] Yet might it not be said that, in order to understand China or France or any other area, it is first necessary to understand mankind, of which all areas are but particular manifestations? [...] If you know something about man as such, you know something about all men. You know at least the contours of human nature, which, when superimposed upon a concrete situation, may get blurred here and there and which always lack specific content and color. It is for area studies to provide an empirical check upon their correctness and that specific content and color. (Morgenthau 1959: 134)

Since then, there seems to be a slight inflection in scholarly debates, emphasising more the potentiality of area-centric knowledge as able to directly contribute to – rather than to “check upon [the] correctness” of and to add “specific content and color” to – the disciplinary practices of theory-building. Bates maintained that “the combination of local knowledge and general modes of reasoning, of area studies and formal theory, represents a highly promising margin of our field. The blend will help to account for the power of forces that we know shape human behaviour, in ways that we have hitherto been able to describe but not to explain” (Bates 1997: 169). Szanton envisaged, by the same token, the role of area studies as follows:

When successful, Area Studies research and teaching demonstrates the limitations of fashioning analyses based largely on the particular and contingent histories, structures, power formations, and selective, and often idealized narratives of “the West”. [...] Area Studies can provide the materials and ideas to help reconstruct the disciplines so that they become more inclusive and more effective tools for social and cultural analysis.” (Szanton 2004: 2)

The significance of this increasing attention to the potentiality of area-centric knowledge notwithstanding, the presumed separation between the disciplines and area research, and by extension, the disciplinary theories and area-based empirical knowledge, remains central, not merely for legitimating the division of labour within the academy, but also as the very condition of possibility for such criticisms.⁴ To put it another way, both Bates’s and Szanton’s claims are possible only by presuming the a priori separation of the disciplines and area research. Thus, my assertion here is that this separation is rooted in something far beyond the institutional make-up of the contemporary scholarship on “the Other”, but in the realm of the conceptual formation that determines what constitutes an “area” as the object of knowledge, as “the Other”, as “the non-West” and its relations to “the West”.

As we all know, the peculiarity of “the non-West” is that it is not quite a cartographical distinction. It is a collection of “areas” – Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Eastern / Southern Europe – to which the principle of inclusion into “the Western world” cannot be applicable. It is those places that cannot be identified with a sense of familiarity and the consanguinity of trans-Atlantic fraternity. The logic for such inclusion and exclusion is ostensibly simple. On the one hand, “the West” is said to share a social, cultural, historical and intellectual affinity, meaning that it is not foreign, and hence its

⁴ Area specialists have long been described as holding “dual” citizenship. They must equip themselves with disciplinary methods through graduate training, while simultaneously possessing competence, both scholarly and linguistic, in a particular area of their choice. And yet, the importance of these two requirements respectively does not seem to be considered with equal measure, and “in general the area training” remains “supplementary” (Bennett 1951: 4). Graduate training is said to be based on the idea that “all advanced work must be associated with a degree in a traditional discipline”, which is generally translated to mean “that disciplinary work is intellectually superior to area-oriented work” and that if overly tainted with an area specialisation, such works may be regarded as lacking disciplinary rigour (Pye 1975: 9).

knowledge is always of *itself*. In contradistinction, an “area” refers almost unequivocally to a distinctive anthropological culture, hence is a priori different from and out of bounds of the “Western” knowledge of itself, and is thus objectified as the locus of anthropological knowledge.

Though this is a rather familiar narrative of the conceptual formation of “the non-West” vis-à-vis “the West”, it is important to recognise here that this conceptual demarcation has raised an inevitable methodological question about what constitutes appropriate ways to understand the multitude of differences, of the distinctive, bounded, anthropological cultures of all that is subsumed under the single label of area research. And, it is precisely this methodological question that predetermines the mode of inscribing area-centric research into its specific institutional existence. The fact that area research requires a universally applicable theoretical framework for having recourse to the realities of the Other is what preordains area research’s relation to the established theories of the disciplines and its contributions to the production and reiteration of universal forms of knowledge.

This conceptual matrix of “the West” as the subject of knowledge of itself and “the non-West” as the object of “Western” knowledge, and the separation of as well as the specific relationship between the theory-building disciplines and area-centric research, ultimately bring us back to the question pertaining to the distinction between universal and particular forms of knowledge. Universal forms of knowledge, here, are understood as those which go beyond the immediacy of human experiences by way of abstraction and theorisation that are – supposedly – applicable to the whole, while particular forms of knowledge are those which remain in the realm of immediacy. And indeed, from the Cartesian dichotomy of “I” and the world, to Kantian transcendental philosophy and finally to the Weberian discourse of disenchantment, Western philosophy seems to have been preoccupied with the determination of who craves knowledge in the form of the universal, and who is indeed capable of such a pursuit. For these philosophers of the Enlightenment, it is “man as such” who equips himself with a kind of self-consciousness as a necessary quality to pursue the universal. Such a postulation raises a number of questions.⁵ The point, however, is that this notion of self-consciousness is precisely that upon which the disciplinary claims for universal knowledge are predicated. Insofar as the disciplines have been developed as knowledge of *humanitas*, as knowledge of the self, in contradistinction to knowledge of *anthropos*, of anthropological Others, the disciplines have always been understood as the manifestation of

5 For instance, who is this “man as such” that has been promoted to the ranks of, say, Plato’s demiurge, Aristotle’s unmoved mover or Christianity’s Creator? And what exactly is this “self-consciousness” that regulates the cognition of “man as such” and allows him to position himself on the vantage point for transcendence? My tentative suggestion is to look into the discourse of disenchantment and how the position of “man as such”, as the knowing subject of modern knowledge, is articulated through the discursive manoeuvre of disenchantment. Here, Germain’s critical engagement with disenchantment as a philosophical discourse is extremely insightful (see Germain 1993).

self-consciousness, of the ability to reflect upon the self and to move beyond the immediacy of subjective experiences. Further still, this also means that the historical and cultural make-up of “the West”, the subject matter of disciplinary reflections on the self, is always promoted to the ranks of the universal.

Now that the disciplines have established themselves as the citadels of universal forms of knowledge, or else, to quote Cheach, “as the guardians of standards for determining the universal validity of social phenomena (i.e. social scientific laws)”, and such standards are developed by the experiences confined within “the West”, “there is an unspoken but for that very reason all the more tenacious isomorphism between the universal structures of reason and the social structures of the West” (Cheach 2008: 63). This isomorphism of “the West” and the universal, in turn, implies isomorphism of “the non-West” and the particular.

The point I want to stress here is that Eurocentrism – or else, Western-centrism – of the disciplines is not necessarily because of the inherent parochialism found in their practice of promoting the trans-Atlantic experiences to the ranks of the universal. The disciplines are *necessarily* Eurocentric because their claims for universal knowledge are predicated on the notion of self-consciousness of “the West”. Not only does such recognition move us beyond the well-versed critique of Eurocentrism articulated against disciplinary parochialism, it also directs us towards another realm of possibility to reflect upon the oppositions (the theoretical vs. the empirical, “the West” vs. “the non-West”, the universal vs. the particular) and isomorphism (“the West” as the universal, “the non-West” as the particular).

What I am effectively suggesting here is an alternative modality of critical intervention. Regardless of how theoretically sophisticated and interdisciplinary area research has become, the field of area-centric knowledge is still concerned with the bounded object, which is juxtaposed, explicitly or otherwise, or deliberately or otherwise, against “the West”, against the universal structure of its self-consciousness, either as an alternative or as a comparative model. But if we are serious about developing appropriate ways of addressing experiences in and of “Asia” – and for that matter, of “the non-West” – not merely as a data set for testing or tinkering with universal theories, but as something that has direct contributions to theory-building, then what is necessary is a radical shift in our epistemological and ontological presumptions. It is our responsibility to deconstruct such isomorphism by dislocating, or else expatriating, the universal from the bounded space of “the West”, from “Western” self-consciousness. Simultaneously, it is also imperative to dismantle “Asia” as a bounded anthropological culture, as the object of anthropological knowledge upon which the universal is projected, and ultimately to transform “Asia” into one that *partakes* of the universal.

The problem of authentic “Asia”

Now, the question is what exactly does it mean to *partake* of the universal. Immediately conjured up in our minds are the postcolonial and decolonial traditions and the way in which their undertakings have paved the way for revealing the arbitrary nature of the oppositions and isomorphism in question. “In their challenge to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe” and thus “in unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production” (Bhambra 2014a: 115), these intellectual traditions have effectively revealed the coloniality of knowledge and being as one that constitutes the psychological condition of possibility for self-representations of “Asia” – or else “the non-West” – and its relationality to “the West” (Clifford / Marcus 1986, Spivak 1988, Jameson 1993, Gandhi 1998).⁶

The implication is twofold. First, to recognise the coloniality of knowledge and being is to defy the idea that knowledge is the product of “discovering” the truths of human existence from the vantage point of the disenchanted, that is, by meditation through the universal structure of self-consciousness (of “the West”). It is therefore to suggest that knowledge is essentially the product of rendering the world with meanings for the self. Second, these intellectual traditions have also articulated a space for understanding the liminality of “Asian” – of “the non-Western” – subjectivities that can be described only as hybridity rather than authenticity (Bhabha 1994, Escobar 2007, Mignolo 2011). Such an understanding of the nature of knowledge and the hybrid quality of “Asian” subjectivities has taken up the position of an intellectual-cum-practical guiding principle for some critical enterprises in the fields of area-centric knowledge production (Barlow 1997, Lee / Cho 2012). Further still, this intellectual sensitivity towards knowledge and being has also reverberated in the disciplines, and some interesting debates are taking place under the aegis of, for instance, “postcolonial international relations”, “Asian international relations”, “decolonial sociology” and “connected sociology”.⁷

The point I want to emphasise in this instance is that, although these critical enterprises have made a giant step in the direction of articulating a possibility of *partaking* in the universal, some of the discussions about “Asia” derived from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions conflate the condition of “Asia” as the marginalised, with an absolute ontology of authentic “Asian”

6 Said has described such an intellectual sensitivity as a “critical consciousness” distinct from theory: “I am arguing, that we distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating and situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as a part of that time, working in and for it, responding to it” (Said 1983b: 174).

7 See Puchala 1997, Inoguchi 2007, Acharya / Buzan 2010, Chun 2010, Seth 2011, Seth 2012, Bhambra 2014b, Savransky 2017, Weiner 2018.

subjectivity. Put otherwise, while postcolonial and decolonial sensitivity allow us to re-signify the multitude of subjectivities of “Asia” as the necessary psychological practices for decolonising knowledge – being hitherto dictated by the conceptual matrix that I have discussed above and that such sensitivity indeed intends to deconstruct – it also creates a locus of signification, and as such a locus of polemics, that purify “Asian” ways of being in the world as alternatives to “the Western” ways of doing so. By wielding “Asia” as the locus of enunciation, as an alternative to “the West”, they paradoxically concretise, even if in a heuristic sense, the conceptual matrix of oppositionality, and therefore remain within the binary enunciation.

In these instances of dislocating “the West” from its hitherto privileged place, it is undoubtedly tempting to conceptualise “Asia” as an alternative to “the West”. Attempts to develop “Asian” theories seem, therefore, misleadingly momentous, when juxtaposed in relation to the entrenched expectations of a world drawn and manifested by theories derived primarily from “Western” experiences. Take for instance the claims for “Asian” urbanism, which have been articulated and gained popularity vis-à-vis the emergence of the so-called Asian tiger economies including Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Against the backdrop of the exceeding degree of condensation and the velocity of developmental experiences of these economies, “Asian” cities are said to exemplify a model of urbanisation that is dissimilar to the familiar narrative of urban space and its development in “the West”.

The first point of differentiation is the speed of urbanisation, which is said to be predetermined by the velocity of economic development. Dunford and Yeung (2011) offer a comparative analysis of the speed of economic development in various locations, suggesting that it took only about 25 years for those Asian economies to achieve a fivefold increase of GDP per capita, the level of development that required on average between 160 and 180 years in the advanced economies in “the West”, such as Germany and the U.K. This rapid economic growth is said to determine the context of urbanisation in “Asia”, which is characterised by the spread of institutional networks of governmental agencies and the private sector for the development of infrastructure and for increased material affluence (Bach 2011, Watson 2014); the circulation of capital and expertise within the Asian region, which creates the backdrop for exporting urbanisation models of, say, Singapore, or South Korea, to other places in the region as well as in the global south more generally (Percival / Waley 2012, Pow 2014, Nam 2017); and the consequent spatialisation of urban areas as new sites for urban imagination based on the aspiration for economic growth and material affluence. Insofar as “Asian” urbanisation is defined essentially as a statist project based on the abundance of surplus capital generated by rapid economic growth (Power 2012), “Asian” urbanism is also described as a means to an end for the political and ideological aspira-

tions of governments with authoritarian and non-democratic tendencies (Shatkin 2011, Shin 2019).

Further, it is argued that the consequence of this kind of state-led “developmental urbanism”, or what Watson (2014: 216) calls “speculative urbanism”, is “aestheticized land use intensification” (Scott 2011: 309) epitomised by high-density commercial and residential mega-projects and “vertical accumulation” (Shin 2011: 50) of skyscrapers and infrastructures that characteristically transform cityscapes in “Asia” (Hou 2012). A disenchanting ramification of such “developmental urbanism” is what is dubbed as “phantom urbanisation” (Sorace / Hurst 2016: 305), which is epitomised by those newly constructed “ghost cities” in China that remain largely under-populated, or in some cases even un-populated (Woodworth 2012). This kind of “developmental urbanism” is also criticised for its blatant political and ideological aspirations that justify the process of dispossession of basic human rights (Glassman 2006, Levien 2011) and the process of mass displacement of the population (Lees et al. 2016).

These observations indeed provide us with “a multiplicity of narratives” based on “a spatial (rather than a temporal) recognition of difference” (Massey 1999: 128) by calling attention to unique trajectories and characteristics of the process of urbanisation of “Asian” cities. And yet, the epithet “Asian” creates, as it seems to me, an enclosed and bounded locus of enunciation, whereby, while various experiences of urbanisation within “Asia” constitute the vast terrain of heterogeneous stories of urban space, “Asia” is simultaneously presented in its relation to the outside as a qualitative marker for differentiation. This contradiction is evident in the claims of those scholars specialised in “Asian” urbanism. As much as they argue for the necessity to see urbanisation in “Asia” in its plurality by using terms such as “Asian urbanisms” and “urban Asias” (Hogan et al. 2012, Bunnell / Goh 2017, Shin 2019), they claim for “Asian” urbanism something that “can be seen as both *actually existing* and imagined” (Shin 2019: 2), signifying “Asia” as an ontologically grounded authentic location.

Outside the narrow confinement of the claims for an “Asian” urbanism, we find a similar discursive manoeuvre, which has derived from the critique of the utility of disciplinary theories that are said to have systematically neglected complex entanglements and the heterogeneity of human experiences. One illustrative instance is those claims for “Asian” modernity, or for this matter, any understanding of modernity presented with a geo-cultural epithet, such as “Chinese”, “Japanese” or “Indian”. The idea that modernity in “Asia” is distinctively different has gained an analytical purchase especially vis-à-vis the growing sense of disenchantment towards modernisation theory and the in-

creasing scholarly attention towards the manifold trajectory and experience of modernisation and development in Asia.

In the 1950s and 1960s, modernisation theory, a strand of developmental thinking founded upon Rostow's seminal work (1962) on the stages of economic development, had gained both analytical and politico-ideological purchase. On the one hand, it offered a coherent, social scientific framework for understanding the degree of development, in particular, of those deemed as the underdeveloped, and for locating them in the linear historical narrative of human progress. Simultaneously, it also represented a strategic model of political and ideological modernisation projects applicable to the plethora of the underdeveloped, against the backdrop of transnational entanglements of the ideological conflict of the Cold War, decolonisation and the politico-social transformation of "developing" or "underdeveloped" countries. Such a developmental thinking embeds within itself an unstated yet for that very reason all the more problematic schema of spatial enclosure of the underdeveloped as well as a teleological temporal progression towards the modern, which creates and naturalises anthropological differences between the underdeveloped and the developed.⁸

Attempts to understand and locate "Asia" through such a schema have, of course, attracted a number of critics. For instance, Eisenstadt has devised the concept of "multiple modernities", insofar as "the actual developments in modernising societies have refuted the homogenising patterns of social development that are simultaneously modern and different from Western modernity" (Eisenstadt 2000: 1). In the context of "Asia", this idea of modernity as multiple and heterogeneous is often predicated on three qualitative markers of differentiation, namely, cultural values, intellectual tradition and nostalgia. Tu (2014) argues that culture and cultural values exert significant influences on the process of modernisation and thus that the "modernising process [in Asia] can assume cultural forms substantially different from those of Western Europe and North America" (Tu 2014: 105). Culturally distinctive "Asian" values, such as "self-cultivation, regulation of the family, social civility, moral education, well-being for the people, governance of the state, and universal peace" (Tu 1996: 1), are said to set a condition and direction of "Asian" modernity.⁹ Mishra (2013) identifies three strands of "Asian" intellectual response to "Western" modernity in the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afgani, Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore, and connects these intellectual strands to the different paths to modernity taken by "Asian" countries. Fung (2010) discusses

8 The popularity of modernisation theory was not merely a consequence of the dominant Western politico-ideological aspirations in the 1950s and 1960s. Some scholars and politicians alike in "the non-West" had actively internalised such a developmental thinking both as an analytical framework and as a means to an end for politico-ideological aspirations. See for example Conrad's interesting observation (2012) on the issue of modernisation and modernisation theory in the context of Japan.

9 See also De Bary 1998, Langguth 2003, Elgin 2010.

the interaction between different intellectual strands in China, including radicalism, conservatism, liberalism and social democracy, and argues that such interaction has been central to the development of “Chinese” modernity. Iwabuchi explores Japan’s nostalgia for “Asia”, arguing that today’s “consumption of popular culture has become a site [for] the continuities, rearticulations, and ruptures of historically constituted ‘Asia’” (Iwabuchi 2002: 548), and therefore for the imagery of a distinctive “Asian” modernity.

Notwithstanding the differences in the point of entry of these analyses, such a recognition of the radical otherness of “Asia” is said to be a prerequisite not only for dislocating “Asia” from the Enlightenment’s teleological temporality of progression, but also for revealing conflictual and contradictory orientations within “the West” and developing a “subtle appreciation of the modern West as a complex mixture of great possibilities rather than a monolithic entity impregnated within a unilinear trajectory” (Tu 2014: 111).

Here, as I suggest, the problem of “Asian” modernity parallels that of “Asian” urbanism. These attempts, perhaps ethically prompted, to create a site for enunciation of experiences *sui generis* to “Asia”, and thus of pluralising the hitherto singular narrative of modernity, paradoxically reproduce the very division they purport to deconstruct. The incongruity is that knowledge with the epithet “Asian”, while being produced as a mode of – and perhaps in a hope for – repossession (de-essentialisation, de-generalisation and de-objectification of “Asia” as such), becomes a mode of dispossession (essentialisation, generalisation and objectification of “Asia” as such, and by extension that of “the West” as such). Thus, one cannot help but contemplate whether any knowledge grounded in a specific place and culture has trouble escaping a mirror image of that to which it is trying to provide a viable alternative.

It is precisely at this juncture of questioning that I shall return to my earlier claim for distinguishing, on the one hand, the necessary psychological practices for decolonising knowledge by acknowledging the multitude of experiences firmly grounded within spatio-temporally specific locations, and on the other hand, the rather futile claims for authentic “Asia”, for an absolute ontology of “Asian” subjectivity. This is because, while those observations of “Asian” urbanism and “Asian” modernity are undoubtedly well intended and feed back to the ethical responsibility of contemporary scholarly practices to articulate loci for psychological practices of decolonising knowledge, those modalities of signification that to varying degrees purify “Asian” ways of being in the world as an alternative to something else, often to “Western” ways of doing so, do not reflect the hybrid and even liminal nature of subjectivity, and thus require further critical scrutiny. And such recognition of the hybridity and liminality of “Asia” is, as I argue, precisely the point of departure to articulate a way of *partaking* in the universal.

Expatriating the universal

Though it is such an obvious point, it is worth revisiting here the way in which Hegel's teleology of world history as "the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (Hegel 1980: 54) anchors the universal to a spatially bounded location as the locus of conscious being – spirit or *Geist* – that understands itself as a universal being that possesses self-knowledge, and how "Asia" as the site of enunciation of authentic being still inhabits the folds of such Hegelian claims.

In concerning the contingencies of history, and in attempting to "make sense" of such a contingent nature of human existence, Hegel claims that world history is the unfolding of world spirit (*Weltgeist*) – the consciousness that transcends the particular – of a given time in a form of finitude. It is precisely because of this finitude in its manifestation that *Weltgeist* is expressed through, or else anchored into, a certain national spirit (*Volksgeist*). And the nation, or *Volksgeist* of a particular nation that embodies *Weltgeist*, will possess universal normative force and lead all the rest for human historical progress.¹⁰ What is important to reiterate here is threefold. First, the bearer of historical progress, the agent of the development of *Weltgeist*, is a collective form of self-consciousness, which is ontologically bounded within a nation. Second, the development of *Weltgeist* can be temporally divided into various distinctive stages. And third, each of these temporal stages ontologically correlates to a spatially bounded, localised configuration. To this end, Hegel infamously distinguishes the Oriental *Volksgeist*, the multitude of self-consciousness of "Asia", as one that does "not know that the spirit or man as such are free in themselves" and that "are lacking – indeed completely lacking – in the essential consciousness of the concept of freedom" as the transcendence of the particular (Hegel 1980: 54, 145).

Now that the universal comes to be ontologically grounded in a particular place, in "the West", "the West" becomes the locus of universal enunciation. Though our scholarly consciousness today is such that this Hegelian ontology has come to be seen as rather derogative and obsolete, those scholarly attempts discussed earlier to relativise "Asian" experiences by arguing for the uniqueness of "Asia" are, as it seems to me, haunted by the folds of Hegelian claims, and by extension, by the spectre of "the West". Insofar as the claims of local contingencies and uniqueness of, say, "Asian" urbanism, or "Asian" modernity are the inverted mirror-image of universality derived from and claimed by "the West", these studies that articulate "Asia" as the locus of

10 Thus, Hegel claims that "the nation to which such a moment is allotted as a *natural* principle is given the task of implementing this principle in the course of the self-development of the spirit's self-consciousness. This nation is the *dominant* one in world history for this epoch. [...] In contrast with this absolute right which it possesses as bearer of the present stage of the world spirit's development, the spirits of other nations are without rights, and they, like those whose epoch has passed, no longer count in world history" (Hegel 1991: 374).

enunciation, as the locus of authentic being, are a priori deterred from accessing the universal. Further still, these attempts to establish “Asia” as an alternative locus of enunciation have resulted, albeit paradoxically, not only in a repositioning and remarking of “the West” as a locus of contestation and dispersal in theory development, but also in a reaffirmation of “the West” as a prevailing locus of power and centrality. The fact that universality is an exclusive commodity form that some possess and some others do not – the very problematic of Hegelian ontology, and the very foundation for justifying the separation between the universal and the particular, between “the West” and the rest – remains unimpaired.

Thus, as I have indicated through my discussion so far, *partaking* in the universal does not entail elevating “Asia” to, or else articulating “Asia” as, the locus of enunciation of the authentic. What is required instead is, first, to challenge the ontological grounded-ness of the universal, thereby expatriating the universal from a spatially bounded location. Central to such an undertaking is to conceptualise “Asia” – for that matter, any spatially and temporally bounded location – not as an enclosed and stable site for history, culture and social progress, nor as a mere object of comparative studies, but rather, as a perception, as a temporal category, as an epistemic space that is characterised by its hybridity, by its liminality that defies any notion of ontological enclosure.

In this instance, I take a cue from the modalities of decolonial imagination that emerged from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions in general,¹¹ and from Bhabha’s intervention into “liminal” or “interstitial” space more specifically. Notwithstanding the potential pitfall of these intellectual traditions,¹² their undertakings in occupying “exteriority” constitute a useful point of departure. Here, “exteriority” entails not necessary an ontological outside, but “an outside that is precisely constituted as difference” (Escobar 2007: 186; see also Dussel 1999, 2000), whereby it becomes possible, by occupying such “exteriority”, to “think otherwise, from the interior exteriority of the border” (Mignolo 2001: 11). For Bhabha (1990), as I read it, this exteriority constituted as difference is precisely the space-in-between, the space of liminality, or of interstice, that exists between competing cultural traditions, historical periods and critical methodologies, and that enables narrative constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of various cultural constituencies. In shed-

11 These include, but are not limited to, Mignolo’s notion of “border thinking”, “border epistemology” or “pluritopic hermeneutics” (2000), Quijano’s articulation of the coloniality of power (2000), Spivak’s “planetary thinking” (2005, 2008), Dussel’s “transmodernity” (2012) and Roy’s “worlding” (2014).

12 For example, normative calls for displacing “the West” by claiming other distinctive positionalities embed within themselves the very Hegelian ontological problem I have discussed earlier. Therefore, Jabri (2011) argues that “so powerful is the legacy of colonial rule that the subject of the postcolonial condition is always already somehow predetermined, somehow stamped, indeed inscribed by the colonial experience. Viewing [...] from the vantage point of the non-West is hence to do so through a lens that is already prescribed and shaped by coloniality and the desire to resist its continued economic, social, political, and epistemological domination” (Jabri 2011: 11).

ding light on the liminal negotiation on modalities of “being in the world” across racial, gender, class and cultural differences, Bhabha (1994) effectively suggests that “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition, [...such that] the social articulation of difference [...] is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 1994: 2). And thus, “it is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (ibid.).¹³

That the Other, and by extension the self vis-à-vis the Other, is articulated through such continuous liminal negotiation, is precisely the point upon which I want to expand further, for the purpose of expatriating the universal from the bounded place of “the West” and directing us towards a possible way of *partaking* in the universal. More specifically, Bhabha’s articulation of the liminal space allows us to view various experiences and phenomena, which are said to be specific to “Asia” or to “the West”, not in terms of being either marginal or central to the universality, but as things that *together* constitute and reconstitute the universal. From this perspective, it becomes possible to comprehend “Asia” or “the West” not necessarily as a bounded, stable and fixed locus of enunciation, wherein history, culture and social progress occur independently from the external, but as a form of hybridity emerging from or defined through constant negotiations of differences and sameness. This means that no *Volksgeist* exists as such, and thus no *Volksgeist* (the particular) alone can embody the *Weltgeist* (the universal) as such. In the moment of understanding thus, the universal can be expatriated from a concrete individual body. In so doing, the universal is no longer understood as the transcendence of the particular, of the finitude of our being, but grasped in its aporetic nature, as the manifestation of the multitude of alterity, as something which is open to any spatially and temporally defined bodies, articulated through the interactions of such bodies, and shared among them. This normative shift is precisely what I mean by *partaking* in the universal.

Thus, in conclusion, I suggest that a truly decolonial theory from “Asia”, which escapes the ontological trap of Hegelian enunciation, should be one that not only takes incommensurability seriously, and differences as imaginatively as possible even if we cannot translate them into our own categorical

13 Bhabha’s writings are not spared from criticism. Perhaps potentially one of the most serious problems of Bhabha’s formulation of liminal space between cultural and national constituencies is that it fails to engage effectively with the material conditions of the global south, privileging in turn what Said describes as a “liminal intellectual” who has exclusive access to the textual and discursive space. Another issue is that, while Bhabha gives more credit to the agency of the colonised subject by arguing for the hybridity of colonial subjectivity and mimetic subversion of things “Western” (Bhabha 1994: 102–112) – indeed, more credit than Spivak gives in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1998) – the mode of resistance available for the colonised subject seems to be delimited by the language of the dominant.

imperatives (on incommensurability, Deleuz 1994 writes that it is a feeling formed prior to the explanation of how exactly differences are constructed, and thus cannot be presented as a specific difference between entities or cultures). It should be one that embodies the liminality of “Asia”, and by extension of “the West”. It should be, therefore, one that addresses the idea of the universal as infinite interactions, as a hermeneutic circle articulated through the interactions among diverse ways of being in the world, expressed and experienced in various spatially and temporally defined locations.

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