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INVITED REVIEW

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Dwelling in epistemic disobedience: A reply to Go

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Abstract

In *Thinking Against Empire: Anticolonial Thought as Social Theory*, Julian Go continues his vital work on rethinking and redirecting the discipline of sociology. Go's piece relates to his wider oeuvre of postcolonial sociology – found in works such as his *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (2016) as well as multiple journal articles on epistemic exclusion (Go 2020), Southern theory (Go 2016), metrocentrism (Go 2014), and the history of sociology (Go 2009). In this response article, my aim is to think *alongside* some of the central themes outlined in Go's paper rather than offering a rebuttal of any sorts. In particular, I want to think through how the recent work on 'decoloniality' may play more of a central role in Go's vision of sociology and social theory than he acknowledges. In doing so, I hope to engage in Go's prodigious scholarship through centering discussions of the geopolitics of knowledge, double translation, and border thinking. Before proceeding to this discussion, I will offer a brief review of my reading of Go's paper.

KEYWORDS
decoloniality, postcolonialism, social theory

In *Thinking Against Empire: Anticolonial Thought as Social Theory*, Julian Go continues his vital work on rethinking and redirecting the discipline of sociology. Go's piece relates to his wider oeuvre of postcolonial sociology—found in works such as his *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (2016b) as well as multiple journal articles on epistemic exclusion (Go, 2020), Southern theory (Go, 2016a), metrocentrism (Go, 2014), and the history of sociology (Go, 2009).

In this response article, my aim is to think *alongside* some of the central themes outlined in Go's paper rather than offering a rebuttal of any sorts. In particular, I want to think through how the recent work on "ecoloniality" may play more of a central role in Go's vision of sociology and social theory than he acknowledges. In doing so, I hope to engage in Go's prodigious scholarship through centering discussions of the geopolitics of knowledge, double translation, and border thinking. Before proceeding to this discussion, I will offer a brief review of my reading of Go's paper.

1 | "IMPERIAL" AND ANTI-COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY

In order to appreciate the contributions of Go's paper, one has to also acknowledge the history of sociology that he develops—both in this paper and in his wider scholarship. As Go points out: "disciplinary sociology, and social science more broadly, as we know it today was born in, of and for empire". As it developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, sociology both contributed to, and buttressed a wider "imperial episteme"—in Go's terms—a mode of thinking and expression of power which rigidly created a hierarchy between "us" (white Europeans in the metropoles) and "them" (the colonized in the peripheries). This meant that as it became institutionalized as a formal discipline, sociology reproduced myths of scientific racism, the civilizational backwardness of the colonized, and in some cases also theorized colonization as a civilizing process (Meghji, 2020). Go's argument is that this imperial sociology was not just a moment in the discipline's emergence, but that it was a vision of the discipline that continues into the present day. As Go argues, this imperial episteme:

> […] is seen in sociology's persistent essentialism, its analytic bifurcations, its metrocentrism and other operations. It is also seen in the objects of sociology's theorizing, which still includes issues like 'assimilation' and 'social order.' It is also reflected our epistemology and methods which often universalize from European experiences or distinct 'model cases' taken from Europe.

A central argument in Go's paper is that while we had the development and consolidation of this imperial sociology, there were anti-colonial intellectuals who were *also* theorizing "the social", and who were doing so in much more critical ways. Some of these intellectuals were academics—such as W.E.B Du Bois, Radhakamal Mukerjee and Abdelmalek Sayad—but others may have been political revolutionaries (such as Amilcar Cabral), or journalists (such as Mabel Dove Danquah). Regardless of their professional status or occupation, the important point is that these anti-colonial intellectuals, writing from within the metropoles just as much as from the colonial peripheries "offered views of society from the ground up, in the dark underside of empire". As Go clarifies, in these anti-colonial sociologies, the intellectuals unearthed "important ideas and knowledges about the world that imperial sociology either ignored or completely overlooked"—such as in Du Bois' retelling the story of modernity to includes its dark side of coloniality (see Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020), or Suzanne Césaire's work on structure and agency explored via a focus on colonization and Martinican identity. It is these anticolonial expressions of sociology, Go concludes, that he hopes we take "more seriously" across the discipline as we strive to make sociology more critical and—ironically—more sociological.

2 | WHERE DOES DECOLONIAL THEORY FIGURE INTO ANTICOLONIAL SOCIOLOGY?

A central takeback from Go's piece, therefore, is that sociology does not have a monopoly on the sociological. There are plenty of streams of critical thought and theorizing which, while not necessarily coming from "cardholding sociologists" offer critical expressions of sociology. Indeed, the argument developed here is at least in the same grounds as the argument developed by decolonial thinkers about the coloniality of knowledge (see Fúnez-Flores, 2022) and epistemicide (see Santos, 2014). Just as Go highlights the hegemony of imperial sociology, so too do those from the decolonial school offer critiques of the coloniality of knowledge and epistemicide to highlight how colonial relations

of power devalue or entirely erase whole epistemic worlds which fall outside the confines of imperial visions of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2013). In this context, knowledges and social theories that derive from various subalternized positions—whether that be indigenous people in settler colonies, those living in former colonized spaces, or those racialized downwards within the metropoles—is instead recast as "belief", tradition, superstition, or mysticism (see Connell, 2007; Mignolo, 2000).

In contrast to this epistemicide, part of the decolonial project is to work from and between those forms of devalued knowledge which can help delink from the colonial world system in the hope of creating alternate ecologies of being (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The response to this epistemicide and coloniality of knowledge thus involves an "epistemic disobedience"—a refusal to accept the hegemonic rules of knowledge valuation and a commitment to thinking from and between other positions of exteriority (Meghji, 2023). Thus, just as Go brings our attention to anti-colonial thought as social theory, so too do decolonial theorists center anti-colonial revolutionaries—from Waman Puma in the 1500s to the Zapatistas in the present day—as exemplars of critical theorizing. Further, just as Go highlights how anticolonial sociology overcomes many of the limitations of imperial sociology, so too do decolonial thinkers stress how these devalued knowledge systems offer more critical ways of thinking about the world: whether that be in rethinking humanism and agency (Meyer, 2008), race, capitalism, and the climate (Darrah-Okike, 2020), multiculturalism and state formation (Cusicanqui, 2012), or political economy (Grosfoguel, 2008)—to name a few topics. To an extent, therefore, I think there are already traces of similarity which exist between Go's project developed in his paper, and the call for cognitive justice from the decolonial side.

The conversation I want to develop in this response to Go centers on some of the contributions of the decolonial tradition. In particular, I want to focus the conversation around three particular points: 1. Go's critique of geo-epistemic essentialism as contrasted to the decolonial critique of the geopolitics of knowledge; 2. To think between decolonial thought's project of double translation alongside Go's critique of relativism and call for an anti-colonial "critical engagement with the Anglo-European empires, their standpoint, and discourses"; 3. To think more precisely about how decolonial theorists are doing precisely what Go calls upon us to do, in terms of centering contemporary anti-colonial thought as the basis for social theory.

3 | GEO-POLITICS VS GEO-EPISTEMIC ESSENTIALISM: ROOM FOR A DIALOG?

While I have suggested that Go's project has some similarities with decolonial thought, Go does suggest a distance between himself and the latter. As he comments "the project of recovering anticolonial thought is partly inspired by but also distinct from other adjacent sociological knowledge projects seeking to overcome the "Northern-centrism" or Eurocentrism of social thought and social theory", including those projects such as "'non-Western' sociology, 'alternative' discourses, 'Southern theory,' 'decolonial' or 'global social theory'". Go's critique is that such projects are prone to falling into a trap of essentialism, in virtue of bifurcating the world into 'distinct essentialized geographical spaces—such as North and South or "West" and "non-West"—and that those spaces map directly onto cultures and knowledge formations'. This raises problems, Go claims, because it creates incredibly simple visions of knowledge whereby anything enunciated from the North/West is seen to be polarized to what is enunciated from the non-West/South. By contrast to this essentialism, Go argues that his "interest in anticolonial thought is grounded in an ontology of global hierarchy forged by histories of colonialism and empire" whereby "the space of the anticolonial does not mark an essential position of geography (or race, for that matter) but a *relational* position of experience, of subordination and of erasure". In this context, Go argues:

> While imperial sociology embeds the experiences, interests and concerns of metropolitan elites in the Anglo-European center, anticolonial sociologies embed the standpoint of subjugated peoples whose voices and minds have been marginalized as lesser, inferior; as not offering valuable social knowledge at all.

My contention is that decolonial thought ought not to be lumped in with other epistemic traditions which run closer to the geo-epistemic essentialism Go describes. In the call for "alternative discourses" (Alatas, 2000), or the connected projects of indigenous (Akiwowo, 1999) and autonomous (Alatas, 2010) sociologies, for example, the very foundation of the approaches deliberately rely on fixed geographical locales. When Akiwowo (1999) called for indigenous sociologies, he was calling to look "inward" away from the West and—in their case—to prioritize Yoruban systems of knowledge. Likewise, Adésínà's (2006) call for an autonomous sociology in South Africa centered around prioritizing the social thought of South African figures such as Steve Biko, Goven Mbeki, Bernard Magubane, Archie Mafeje, and Fatima Meer. In these cases, there is a clear demarcation of "the Western" versus "the local", much in the way Go describes, without sufficient attention being paid to either the various links that exist between them, nor their internal diversities (for more discussion of the indigenous and autonomous traditions, see Bhambra, 2014, Connell, 2007, Patel, 2021).[1]

Decolonial thought, however, does not create an epistemic hierarchy on the basis of geographical essentialisms, and neither does it advocate a simple turning to the non-West. In fact, the project decolonial theory embraces—that of border thinking—is incredibly akin to what Go describes when he refers to how anticolonial sociology is developed from relational positions "of experience, of subordination and of erasure".

Border thinking necessitates that we engage with those epistemologies that may have been "affected by genocide/epistemicide but not fully destroyed" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 87). However, the "borders" from where we are thinking are not simply geographical spaces that others may simply refer to as the Global South or non-West. The border, as outlined by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), can certainly be a geographical space, but it also refers to a metaphorical space of exteriority in the world system. These border perspectives, importantly, are themselves created as "border" perspectives in virtue of extant power relations (what the decolonials would refer to as the colonial matrix of power); they are epistemologies that exist on "(the) outside invented by the rhetoric of modernity in the process of creating the inside" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 472). The border, in this sense, is not a physical space inasmuch as a relational position in the colonial world order.

Within this context of border thinking, importantly, decolonial thought does not reify essentialisms between the *geographies* nor the *epistemologies* of the North (the center), and the South (the border). In fact, decoloniality is presented as being a third option that transcends the two options of Western modernity and dewesternization (Mignolo, 2011). Dewesternization, it is argued, is not on its own sufficient to delink from the colonial matrix of power. This is precisely the point Mignolo (2011), for instance, makes against the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century: they may have advocated for a dewesternization of culture, politics, and economy, but they did not necessarily detach themselves from the coloniality of knowledge and power, as seen in the cases of the Soviet empire, China, and India. In other words, within decolonial thought there is a suspicion of socio-political movements which argue that because something is based in the Global South it is inherently superior to the West, and that any knowledge system that exists in the Global South is inherently anti-colonial. Instead, there is a recognition that this West/non-West binary occludes how—as Satnam Virdee (2019, p. 6) puts it—there has always been "an East within the West and a South within the North" (and indeed, a West in the East and North in the South).

The border thinking which decolonial theory advocates, therefore, seems very similar to what Go describes at the end of his paper when he claims that "the space of the anticolonial does not mark an essential position of geography (or race, for that matter) but a *relational* position of experience, of subordination and of erasure". Rather than embracing an essentialist West/non-West binary—what Go refers to as a geo-epistemic essentialism—decolonial theory merely analyses the *geopolitics of knowledge*. Just like Go's argument, decolonial thought holds that all knowledge is enunciated from *particular positions in the colonial world order*. Within this colonial world order, the positions from which we find more critical theorizing are those border perspectives—those relational position in the world system, much like what Go describes.

Q1. In light of this, my first question to Go is to expand upon how his project connects with, or differs from, the decolonial project of border thinking.

4 | THE ANTICOLONIAL "CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT", PERSPECTIVAL REALISM, AND DOUBLE TRANSLATION

In advocating for the project of border thinking, decolonial thought does not hold that each border perspective is wholly separate from others. Instead, through the logic of what they term pluriversalism (Escobar, 2020), the aim is to engage in horizontal dialog between different border epistemologies and worldviews to create "a world in which many worlds fit".[2] Through calling for horizontal dialog, rather than vertical hierarchies, decolonial thought actually ends up developing another similar argument to what we see in Go's work. Go advocates for a recovering of anticolonial thought which avoids semblances of relativism; as he states:

> We do not need to claim that a theory, concept or sociological claim is necessarily truthful just because it comes from an anticolonial thinker, any more than we must assume conventional sociology developed in imperial metropoles necessarily offers untruths […] we can recognize all knowledge as partial yet potentially truthful, rooted in particular standpoints but nonetheless possibly objective […] The epistemic commitment of my project is to consider a standpoint (heterogeneous though it may be) that has not yet been considered. The goal is not to replace one standpoint for another but to reflectively proliferate them.

Translating Go's point into the terms of decolonial theory, the two approaches share the mission to reject ideas of inherent superiority of epistemic systems, to unearth the geopolitics of knowledge—that is, the standpoints that arise from different relational positions—and to engage the differing standpoints into dialog with one another. Go calls this perspectival realism, decolonial thought calls this double translation.

Double translation, or "diversality", is an embracing of epistemic humility. It is an ethics of knowledge making that turns our attention away from vertical hierarchies, toward horizontal dialog. While there may be sceptics who claim the decolonial tradition is absolutist in its west/rest vision of the world (e.g., Lehmann, 2021), the emphasis on double translation lucidly displays how the decolonial project is not too dissimilar to Go's desire to "not (…) replace one standpoint for another but to reflectively proliferate them". Mignolo (2002) expresses this logic of double translation when he discusses the origins of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, 1994. As Mignolo points out, when Rafael Guillen helped form the Zapatistas, he came to Indigenous people of Chiapas as a Marxist. Yet, he realized that the Indigenous groups already had their own cosmologies, and their own concepts and desires of revolution; simply, he realized that "his Marxist ideology needed to be infected by Amerindian cosmology". In this realization, Guillen embraced a humility in the way that:

> In contrast to sixteenth-century missionaries who never doubted that converting people to Christianity was the right thing to do [Guillen] understood that aiming to convert Amerindians to Marxism was just a reproduction of the same logic of salvation, albeit with a different content.

Through this epistemic humility, Mignolo argues we see Guillen's practice of double translation. Guillen—later named Subcomandante Marcos upon the formation of the Zapatistas—encountered Indigenous people in the Lacandon Forest, formed a social movement with them involving horizontal relationships between epistemologies and cosmologies, creating a powerful blend of Marxist–Leninism and Indigenous philosophies. While maintaining its critique of neoliberal capitalism and land expropriation through a Marxist framework, Subcomandante Marcos' philosophy also transformed from its commitment to vanguardism toward a Tojolabal notion of "commanding by obeying, and obeying by commanding".[3] There was no supposition of the superiority of Marxism, but instead a dialog between different epistemic standpoints which became essential as the Zapatistas fought not only for their own self-determination, but also for subalternized people across the globe.[4]

> Q2. In light of this emphasis on double translation, therefore, I am interested to read how Go thinks his project relates to, or differs from, the decolonial project of double translation.

5 | WHO IS RECOVERING ANTI-COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY?

I briefly used the example of the Zapatistas when exploring double translation because they are a group around which decolonial theorists dedicate a lot of theorization. The Zapatistas may have made many intellectual contributions, but we must remember they are also an anti-colonial armed rebel group. They struggle against the processes of settler colonialism, returning land back to indigenous people in Mexico, just as much as they struggle against neoliberal globalization (which, in their words, constitutes a 'new world war against humanity'[5]); they stood against NATO interventions in the Balkans in 1999, just as they campaigned for Palestinian rights in the 2014 National Indigenous Congress. They are an anti-colonial group, who have become foundational to decolonial thought. I say this, because I wonder the extent to which Go identifies the decolonial tradition as doing precisely what he calls for in terms of recovering "anticolonial sociologies" which "embed the standpoint of subjugated peoples whose voices and minds have been marginalized as lesser, inferior; as not offering valuable social knowledge at all".

The relationship between Go's and the decolonial projects interests me because I see a clear relationship between the two. Go draws upon Aimé Cesaire to reflect upon the relationship between universal and particular, much in the same way that the decolonials use exactly the same work as an example of pluriversality; Go draws upon Fanon to discuss colonialism, the self, and society (i.e., structure and agency) just in the same way that Mignolo and Walsh (2018) use Fanon to help us understand the concept of "colonial difference"; Go, foundationally, calls for a valuation of those forms of anti-colonial sociology which have been erased and devalued in the same way that the decolonials advocate for border thinking and a delinking from the coloniality of knowledge.

My aim is not to suggest that the works of Go are synonymous to the work of decolonial theorists (especially given the diversity within the latter epistemic cluster as it has developed since the 1500s). Neither am I suggesting that Go's projects are synonymous to the projects one finds in the decolonial tradition. Instead, I am interested in asking:

> Q3. Whether Go himself sees any overlap, similarity, or connection with the decolonial tradition, and whether the project of centering anticolonial sociologies may require sociology's fuller engagement with the 'decolonial'?

6 | CONCLUSION: MAKING SOCIOLOGY SOCIOLOGICAL

By means of a conclusion, I will reiterate my admiration for Go's work in his BJS address and elsewhere. I want to finish this piece by just considering our status as educators of sociology in the classroom. When one looks at multiple sociology programmes across the world, one sees a discipline with multiple subfields of study: political economy, cultural sociology, political sociology and so on. In some cases, one may also encounter courses on postcolonial sociology, the sociology of empire, or something along those lines. An underlying message of Go's BJS address (if I have read it accurately), and a message I strongly advocate, is that the various anticolonial sociologies ought not to be sectioned off from "mainstream" (i.e., imperial) sociology in their own specialist journals, monographs, courses, colloquia and so on. The question, or project, therefore becomes one of how we can recover anticolonial sociologies so they are centered across various subdisciplines of sociology, and how we can attain this in a context where generations of academics have only ever been trained in putative imperial sociology. Indeed, one may even question whether this is the task we ought to assign ourselves, or whether—to borrow the words of Martin Luther King Jr—this is tantamount to integrating into a burning house. Regardless, the central point remains: as long as sociology ignores anticolonial sociology, it remains a fundamentally anti-sociological discipline.

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There is no data used in this paper.

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ENDNOTES

[1] As Go presciently reminds us, most of Du Bois' intellectual production came from the US, but it would be foolish to equate him to "Western" or Northern theory simply for existing in that geographical space.

[2] A philosophy espoused by the Zapatistas.

[3] Or, as expressed elsewhere "walking while asking questions" (see Grosfoguel, 2017).

[4] Indeed, the Zapatistas still advocate for this pluriversality in the present day; since 2020, they are engaged in what they are naming the "Zapatista invasion", where they are traveling across the five continents in order to "carry out meetings, dialogs, exchanges of ideas, experiences, analyses and evaluations among those of us who are committed, from different conceptions and from different areas, to the struggle for life".

[5] Marcos 2002, p. 117.

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