

Decentring 'Western' Sociology? Towards a Conversation Between Postsocialist, Postcolonial and Decolonial Research

An International Workshop

18 June 2021, Location: Zoom-Meeting 9.30 – 17.30

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Critical reflection of 'Western' theories and methodologies has become quite fashionable in the social sciences. Some of the relevant debates presuppose a critical reflection of theories of modernization and globalization. Others, such as those involving postcolonial approaches, pay particular attention to global asymmetries of power and knowledge. Still others, among them more recent contributions such as decolonial approaches, direct radical criticism at 'Western' scientific thought (using, in particular, Marxist theories). While these intra- or interdisciplinary debates increasingly include research on postsocialist relations (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), the conversation between postcolonial and decolonial thought on one side and postsocialist thought on the other does not currently seem to be the focus of social scientific attention in the context of global sociology.

In order to provide more sophisticated analyses of cross-border entanglements of power relations, of the multiple and often interwoven forms of coloniality and of tools for decentring 'Western' methodologies, the aim of the proposed workshop is to intensify and deepen the conversation between post- and decolonial studies and research on postsocialist societies.

Three stances can be identified in this conversation. Proponents of the first, and most controversial, stance (e.g. Todorova, 2009, 2018) mainly highlight the historic peculiarity/singularity of the postsocialist societies. Ignoring insights from the application of concepts such as cross-border entanglements, they emphasize the limitations to attempts of applying the conceptual vocabulary of postcolonial studies for research on postsocialist societies.

The second stance is usually found among – often young – researchers who have been educated in the field of postcolonial studies and who believe that concepts from postcolonial theory offer great potential in exploring the complexities of postsocialist societal orders (Heft, 2018), such as the colonial politics of socialist China and the missionary programme of socialist thought in some Asian and African societies. Researchers who have adopted this stance not only compare theories of postcoloniality and postsocialism but apply ideas from the former area to research tools used in the latter area.

Between these two a third, intermediate stance can be identified (Chari & Verderi, 2008). Instead of completely rejecting the idea that the conceptual vocabulary of postcolonial studies can be applied for research on postsocialist societies (as the first stance does) or completely

affirming this idea (as the second stance does), it suggests taking a balanced position by critically reflecting on concepts from post-/de-colonial studies and identifying their historically specific origins and limitations. It proposes to compare post-/de-colonial theories that appear to be useful and the conceptual tools of postsocialist research (Boatcă & Parvulescu, 2020). In addition, it invites conceptual synthesis between the analytical languages of the two fields.

This third stance appears to be the most promising stance when it comes to promoting the conversation between post-/decolonial and postsocialist thought proposed here, because it allows us to consider the research on global political and economic asymmetries, belonging and citizenship, knowledge, representation and aesthetics, and migration and gender (e.g. Meeus, 2016).

Against this background, the workshop seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the potentials and limitations of post- and decolonial thought in approaching postsocialist settings?
- Conversely, which concepts from research on transitional and transformational postsocialist societies can enrich post- and decolonial studies?
- What is the best way to analyse the entanglements between postcolonial and postsocialist power relations in such spheres as politics, economy and knowledge?
- Which fields of research are the most promising in studying enlargements between postsocialist and postcolonial relations, and why?
- What are the most appropriate tools to avoid/question the dichotomy between 'postcolonialism' and 'postsocialism' in relation to theory and the empirical?
- What methodological innovations may emerge from the conversation between post-/de-colonial and postsocialist approaches?
- What are the most relevant fields of non-academic activism that help to better understand (potential) entanglements between postcolonial and postsocialist power relations and (decolonial and other) forms of resistance?

Sources

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Chari, S., & Verdery, K. (2008). Thinking between the posts: Postcolonialism, postsocialism, and ethnography after the Cold War. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51(1), 6–34.

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