

Social Theory, East Asia, Science Studies

John Lie

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When I tried to buy a bottle of white flower oil (*baihuayou*) recently at a Taipei pharmacy, I was given a box of Viagra instead. Noticing my grimace, the old man behind the counter thrust a pencil and a paper at me, and I dutifully wrote down the Chinese characters. I got the white flower oil. Such a small incident may illustrate only my inadequate command of Mandarin, or my apparent diminution of vigor, but what interests me more is the resolution of miscommunication. This interaction surely has been replayed endlessly in East Asia over the past millennia. Yet, it is symptomatic of the times that a Taipei pharmacist should hear an Anglophone word when a Chinese one is spoken. Why not? Just as billboards carrying English-language brands and catchphrases dot the Taipei skylines, so are East Asian scholarly journals published in English. Perhaps more noteworthy for the present context is that the quintessentially “western” phenomena of science and technology should require concentrated scholarly attention by East Asian scholars largely located in East Asia and that their primary intellectual tools should be the “western” theories of Science and Technology Studies (STS).¹

I teach “western” social theory at a US university, but I also assume another role as an administrator of “area studies.” The two functions strike many of my colleagues as paradoxical, even contradictory: on the one hand, I am teaching supposedly universal, abstract knowledge; on the other, promoting particular, concrete knowledge. Moreover, whereas social theory retains some intellectual prestige, “area studies” is often regarded suspiciously and at times even as a term of opprobrium. I find the dual interest neither paradoxical nor contradictory. Only by dialectically transcending the limitations of the two fields can we strive for a more satisfactory social science: “global studies” that offers global knowledge, or the knowledge of the present.

¹See Daiwie Fu’s invocation of Bruno Latour et al. in the inaugural issue of *EASTS*.

J. Lie (✉)
University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
e-mail: johnlie@berkeley.edu

A congenital flaw of social theory, in spite of its universalist aspirations, is its parochialism.² Born in eighteenth-century Europe, it bears the stigma of its social origins. The expanding infrastructural power of the state—from national systems of education and military to national circuits of transportation and communication—produced cultural and national integration. Previously distinct peoples came to share the same languages, beliefs, and cultures. At the same time, the democratic revolution—and the attendant decline in status hierarchy—achieved some degree of status integration. No longer did people of distinct status groups regard themselves as different peoples: transnational aristocrats and local peasants alike became fellow nationals. The coherence of the nation-state persuaded proto-social scientists to regard it as the fundamental and privileged unit of description and explanation. In so doing, they almost inevitably ignored or occluded both supranational and sub-national forces and relations. The commonsense equation of “nation” and “society” systematically downplayed transnational and local connections and differences.

More problematically, the society that formed the basis for social theory was inevitably a European one, usually England. With the partial exception of Max Weber, what eminent social theorist employed a non-European case? For Smith, Marx, and Polanyi, England was the privileged location upon which their intellectual edifice was built. Confronted with undeniable differences in capitalist industrialization and political development, especially in non-European areas, the great theorists rationalized their substitution of the particular for the universal by way of evolutionary metaphors. The use of a single case was justified by asserting that out of diversity will emerge convergence: *De te fabula narratur!* insisted Marx. Particular concrete cases inevitably shouldered the burden of universal validity. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*: we remember only the insights and not the blindness. The fundamental flaw of overgeneralization becomes obvious should any scholar strive to develop a general theory based on a non-European case. It perforce would not be generalizable: such is the fate of area-studies scholarship. Theoretical breakthroughs may be based on a case study of England, but not Ingushetia or Ethiopia.

In this clumsy asymmetrical dance between the universal and the particular, there is a yet deeper flaw, one that early social theory sought to avoid but the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social sciences unreflexively embraced. By creating a distinct discipline for each sphere of life, the universal study of society was fractured. Disciplinary logic mandated the study of “economy” for economists, “politics” for political scientists, and so on. Given that it is impossible to make sense of the human world by focusing only on one sphere, scholars inevitably escaped the artificial prison-houses of their chosen disciplines, their work spilling over into the putative concerns of other fields. Sociologists, who are relegated to studying the “social,” went on to explore the realms of money, power, psyche, and the past in the form of economic sociology, political sociology, social psychology, and historical sociology. Much the same story can be told about other major social science fields. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this development is that each discipline displays the same

² In this paragraph, I draw on my *Modern Peoplehood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), especially chapter 3, and my forthcoming book *The Consolation of Social Theory*.

fractal structure, studying in stealth the entirety of the social sciences while scholars fail to communicate beyond their increasingly specialized niches.

The field of science studies, or Science, Technology, and Society (STS), emerged from the critique of the blinkered outlook of discipline-bound social scientists. Pioneering scholars were often self-consciously interdisciplinary. They excavated spheres of human life that had been systematically neglected by the humanities and social sciences: the worlds of science and technology. If social scientists took too seriously that they study the “social” and not the “non-social,” the invaluable contribution of STS was to recover that world. As early social theorists such as Marx were keenly aware, scientific theories and technological achievements are integral aspects of modernity. Marx’s analysis of machinery in the first volume of *Das Kapital* should be a salutary reminder of the unexplored potential of analyzing the inextricably intertwined spheres of social control and technological apparatus.

Having provided a useful bridge and a corrective to disciplinary chauvinism and chasm—not only the separation of spheres but also the divide between the social and the natural/technological—STS by and large retained the other major flaw of social theory: parochialism. Of course, one hardly can deny the virtual monopoly of the west in the main currents of scientific and technological development since the Scientific Revolution. Yet even a casual glance, for example, at Joseph Needham and his colleagues’ monumental *Science and Civilisation in China* suggests that the story of science and technology—even if one were only interested in Europe—would be incomplete without understanding Chinese developments and achievements. A similar statement can be made about Arabic/Islamic science.³

EASTS is thus a necessary intervention in the unfinished STS revolution. In overcoming the illusions of Eurocentric scholarship, it seeks to remedy a fundamental flaw of the social theory to which STS is heir. This is true in at least two senses. Needham’s great achievement is not so much his somewhat banal and probably bankrupt theoretical apparatus, but rather his (and his colleagues’) aggregation of data. Details, but what details! Social scientists frequently forget that their task necessarily entails data collection and description: the boring, tedious but inevitable task of scholarship. Local and regional variations must be recorded, if only to puncture the pretensions of self-proclaimed universal and general social theory.

Yet there is much more at stake. In recuperating the subnational, transnational, and global moments of scientific and technological development, *EASTS* promises to transcend the original sin of social theory. By sustaining a transnational, interdisciplinary critique, *EASTS* has the opportunity not merely to register differences but also to reconstruct the misrecognitions of the self-proclaimed center. Indeed, our motto should be: generalization within the limits of description. *EASTS* and allied scholars and intellectuals thereby can replicate and extend the great achievements of post-World War II social scientists, many of whom hailed from the “area studies” scholarship: Barrington Moore, Jr., Albert O. Hirschman, and Clifford Geertz, to name only a few. By analyzing “marginal” cases, these scholars both expanded the

³ See for instance Saliba (2007).

parameter of social–scientific descriptions and used them to reconfigure the central theoretical and methodological apparatuses of social theory and the social sciences.

The abdication of this all-too-important task by scholars has generated a burgeoning industry in popular writing, exemplified in the USA by *The New Yorker*'s Malcolm Gladwell. What he and other amateur social scientists offer is what I call “global knowledge” or “the knowledge of the present”: the sort of knowledge that is crucial for even a modicum of democratic governance in our world. And what do we know least but rely on most but scientific and technological knowledge and practice? H.G. Wells was wrong about many things but he was surely right when he wrote: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe” (Wells 1931). And who will educate the educators, much less the global public?

This is a grand challenge, but we should take a leaf from the Taipei pharmacist, who sells the latest western pharmaceuticals but still stocks the local, traditional cures, and who is ready to try spoken English or written Chinese. Being located on the so-called periphery—perhaps even the sense of lagging behind—may in fact turn out to be an advantage, allowing *EASTS* not only to identify more innovative problematics and collect better data but also to criticize the hollow and unjustified universalism of existing science studies and social theory. The proverbial Copernican Revolution may have begun.

References

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