

Postcolonial Specters of STS

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A few years ago, when the editors of *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* pressed me to give examples of what I meant by “Asia as method” in STS, I struggled to illustrate my argument (Anderson 2012). I could only repeat the somewhat evasive statement of Takeuchi Yashimi (2005 [1960]: 65): “It is impossible to state definitely what this may mean.” Like Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Chen Kuanhsing, I hoped, in his words, that “using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point can allow societies in Asia to become one another’s reference points” (2010: xv). Chen envisaged “Asia as method” multiplying “frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward” (223). For me, this suggested a means to reorient STS—in particular, to refigure East Asia as a site of theory making in STS, not just a space for data extraction or a place to which European concepts diffused. I was postulating an Asia that is good to think with, and think from, in STS, rather than a fixed, hegemonic geographical region or essential civilizational entity. I saw this project—the assembling of a deliberately untidy cognitive platform on which to build a different STS—through a postcolonial lens, in the sense that

studies that contest European and North American hegemony in science, situating and thereby dismantling global or universal claims, represent what might be called the postcolonial turn. Recognition of creditable knowledge making beyond North Atlantic shores constitutes a postcolonial approach. So too does the emphasis on hybridity, heterogeneity, and indeterminacy in what once appeared to be sovereign, uncontaminated categories. A postcolonial orientation directs attention to the complexities of relations in any contact zone. It re-examines the terrain that empire has tilled across the world, showing that dominance is never absolute—that imperial or authoritative knowledge, despite colonial fantasy and amour propre, must always adapt to local conditions, mix with other traditions, and incorporate difference. In this sense, the argument that we have never truly been modern is implicitly postcolonial. Thus an analysis that deconstructs imperial binaries such as nature-culture, modern-traditional, global-local builds on a postcolonial, or decolonizing, platform. (Anderson 2015b: 652; see also Anderson 2009)

In the 2012 essay on Asia as method, I primarily drew upon East Asian theorists, but the specifics of East Asian STS methodologies at the time remained elusive, or beyond

my grasp at any rate. Thus I constructed a postcolonial framework for content that was exiguous at best. Imagine my surprise when John Law delivered the John D. Bernal lecture at the 2015 annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science. I learned then that Law and Lin Wen-yuan were giving form and function to Asia as method in STS (see their article in this issue).

Law and Lin are responding critically and constructively to a profusion of Asian case studies in STS that choose to deploy “global” or at least Euro-American theory. That is, they are reacting to the way Asian data are fed into an ostensibly “universal” North Atlantic conceptual apparatus. “STS might do well to explore a . . . *postcolonial* version of the principle of symmetry,” they write (214, emphasis mine). This would mean “treating non-Western and [Euro-American] STS terms of analysis symmetrically” (ibid.). The appeal to symmetry is a nice touch, reminding readers of the heady early years of STS, only now giving the prescription a postcolonial twist. Even more appealing is their effort to show what such postcolonial analytic symmetry might look like in STS. Following Judith Farquhar (2015), Law and Lin sketch a Chinese explanatory sensibility in contemporary medical practice, revealing a curiously hybrid epistemological space. Then they take a Chinese “theory,” *shi*, and mobilize it as an analytic term, or method, to explain an English case, the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (see Law and Lin 2016). While these studies are still tentative and exploratory, they open up a passage that might get us around the impasse I encountered some years ago. In my view, their efforts represent a breakthrough.

“The white man takes his own mythology,” wrote Jacques Derrida (1974: 11), “his *logos*—that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason.” For several decades, postcolonial scholars have sought to displace or situate or relativize the “white mythology,” a mythos that Derrida regarded as inherently unstable and self-defeating anyhow. That is, they are trying to render visible, and make local, the European metaphysics or ontology that “has effaced in itself that fabulous scene that brought it into being, and yet which remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest” (ibid.; see also Latour 1993). Accordingly, standard reason and method in STS and other disciplines can mask abiding alterity, mute plurivocality, and scramble supplemental codes. A major task of postcolonial STS is to make visible this process—to show, as Law and Lin do here, how in practice “the field is crossed, the fences endlessly shifted, the line confused, the circle opened” (Derrida 1974: 75). That is, they reveal how epistemic things necessarily are already spatially and temporally otherwise.

This is the kind of problem that scholars in critical, or postcolonial, area studies have been contemplating for some time (Anderson and Adams 2007; Anderson 2015b). Social theorist Michael Dutton (2002: 495) deplored the apparent “impossibility of writing a work that is principally of a theoretical nature that is empirically and geographically grounded in Asia rather than in Europe or America.” Why, he asked, “is it that . . . whenever ‘theory’ is invoked, it is invariably understood to mean ‘applied theory’ and assumed to be of limited value only insofar as it helps tell the story of the ‘real’ in a more compelling way?” Similarly, Indonesian scholar Ariel Heryanto (2016: 161) observes that the West “is primarily expected to collect empirical data from the non-West that would validate the universalizing theorization in social science and humanities” (see also Heryanto 2007 [2002]). According to Peng Cheah (2001: 49), we generally operate in a conceptual matrix in which the “subject of

universal knowledge becomes isomorphic with the West and all other regions become consigned to particularity.” “Asian studies,” he writes, “presupposes that Asia can fully know itself only through the more developed structures of self-consciousness of the West” (53). Thus “Asian materials or data are ironically processed through the concepts and methodologies of (Western) theory” (54). In effect, such dependency, or even imitation, might mean, as [Meaghan Morris \(1990: 10\)](#) puts it, that the modern too often is understood as “as a known history, something that has already happened elsewhere and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content.” But critical or postcolonial area studies pose the “methodological problem of how to think about matters comparatively, without dogmatically privileging the North Atlantic as the main point of theoretical reference, or taking it for granted as a world-historical *telos*” ([Cheah 1999: 17](#)). This seems to me the pertinent context in which to read and appreciate Law and Lin’s work—even if they appear, curiously, to eschew it.

Law and Lin, like other postcolonial critics, take issue with the universal assumptions and global claims of the disciplines, especially those embedded conventionally in STS, until recently mostly another deterritorializing method. [Timothy Mitchell \(2003: 163\)](#) laments that outside Europe “the object of study remains defined and grasped only in terms of its relationship to the West and only in terms of its place in a narrative defined according to the global history of the West” (see also [Chakrabarty 2000](#)). [Mitchell \(2003: 170\)](#) continues, “Any reference to the ‘global’ carries with it a reference to some motor or energy that drives history forward and gives it its logic, its principle of expansion, and its trajectory. With such formulations, the ‘local’ comes to stand for everything that does not possess this energy, this principle of movement, this underlying logic. The local is therefore secondary, reactive, and non-original.” Or, as [Cheah \(2001: 37\)](#) puts it, conventionally “an area is precisely that which is not capable of universality.” Thus he urges us perversely to make Asia, whatever that might mean, occupy part of the space of the “universal.” That is, theorists and global claims makers need a “radical openness to contamination by alterity” of one sort or another (58). “The challenge that lies ahead for Asian Studies,” Cheah writes, “is to exorcise the spectre of a specifically western universality so that they can be spectralized by the call of the universal as such” (62). This is not a matter of positing some alternative modernity, or an entirely separate ontology—rather, it means recognizing hybridity and tuning in to actual heteroglossia. [Harry Harootunian \(2004: 47\)](#) suggests a similar move when he argues for living with “uneven temporalities” in a kind of everyday spectrality. This multiplication of difference “allows us to envisage an everyday that is genuinely the spectral, where the shadows of another life constantly act upon and are acted upon by the ever new, the modern” (49). It seems to me that such a program in STS—Asia as method in this case—must be predicated on the postcolonial analytic symmetry that Law and Lin advocate.

In recuperating subjugated practices in science, technology, and medicine, it is important to guard against what [Itty Abraham \(2006: 210\)](#) has called a default to “the clash of knowledges and the formation of alternative modernities” (see also [Anderson 2012](#)). Abraham was referring to the appropriation of science to *Hindutva*, but in East Asia the appeal of Chinese essentialism, or the lure of “Asian values,” or even an Orientalist strut, can be equally disturbing. Although they focus on China, Law and Lin seem wary of treating this case study as synecdoche for a homogeneous Asia. Rather, they imply that it serves as an exemplary instance, just one part of a mosaic of

knowledge (James 1912). They assume a greater diversity of subject positions and object relations in Asia than any single case study can encompass. As Chinese historian Wang Hui (2007: 27) argues, the idea of Asia is “at the same time colonialist and anticolonialist, conservative and revolutionary, nationalist and internationalist, originating in Europe and shaping Europe’s image of itself, closely related to visions of both nation-state and empire, a notion of non-European civilization, and a geographic category established through geopolitical relations.” According to Wang, the imagined Asia is “neither self-sufficient subject nor subordinate object” (27)—that is, neither definite and self-contained nor simply relational. Its multiplicity keeps bursting out of any number of essentialist straitjackets. Thus we need many more studies of “edge effects” in science, technology, and medicine, surveys of boundary habitats and contact zones, investigations of conceptual range margins—in Asia and elsewhere (Anderson 2015a). We should be grateful to Law and Lin for revealing one part of this vast, and perhaps incalculable, mosaic.

In the last few passages I have traced what might be imagined as new geographies of knowledge and practice, figuring STS as lighting out into other territories, and perhaps going to pieces in the process—but I have scarcely touched on how projects such as Law and Lin’s can destabilize the conventional temporality of the disciplines. We should consider the different historicities conjured up through postcolonial analysis, which starkly reveal the weedy historicity we tend to take for granted in STS as usual (Anderson 2016). Thus I wonder what may be, using James Clifford’s (1992: 101) terms, the “constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction” revealed through the studies of Law and Lin? This is a way of asking again how engaging with more dispersive logics could mess with notions of modernity, futurity, and progress (Koselleck 1985; Chakrabarty 2000, 2011). As François Hartog (2015: xviii) observes, “The West has spent the last two hundred years dancing to the tune of the future—and making others do likewise.” Presumably, postcolonial STS will productively distort this tune, perhaps in contrapuntal mode, perhaps offering discord and dissonance. We should be making more of a racket. I am intrigued to know what sense Law and Lin will make of the disparate, or at least crossed and irregular, temporalities emerging from their work.

Lin and Law have stimulated me to rethink STS through more recent postcolonial debates in Asian-area studies. But the potential of their approach is hardly exhausted in my brief rumination here. Their work, as they say, is still tentative and exploratory, but it shows us an enticing prospect—and there are many more leads to follow.

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