

## EPILOGUE

### Travelling Theory

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In her *Southern Theory* (2007), Raewyn Connell problematises the canonical works of metropolitan theory – from the so-called classics of Marx, Weber and Durkheim to the contemporary theories of James Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Their silence on the Global South, Connell argues, portends a distinctively Northern perspective, albeit disguised as universalism. In reaction to Northern theory, Connell presents us with a ‘counter-hegemonic’ project that foregrounds social thinkers from the South who have not made it into the conventional sociological tradition – from the Middle East, three Iranian thinkers: al-Afghani, Al-e Ahmad and the more contemporary Ali Shariati; from Latin America, the Argentinian economist Raúl Prebisch, the Brazilian sociologist Fernando Enrique Cardoso and the Mexican anthropologist García Canclini; and from South Asia, subaltern thinker Ranajit Guha, anthropologist Veena Das and public intellectual Ashis Nandy. From Africa, she chooses the Dahomeyan philosopher Paulin Hountondji and the South African writer, politician, historian and newspaper editor Sol Plaatje. He was the first general secretary of the ANC and author of *Native Life in South Africa*, a denunciation of the 1913 Natives’ Land Act. Around such forgotten or overlooked thinkers, Connell proposes to build an alternative social theory.

There is no doubt about the importance of her intervention – the latest in a long history of challenges to the hegemony of Northern sociology. Connell perhaps goes further than others in combining an assault on ‘classical theory’ with a global search for alternatives to Western and Northern

social theory. She thereby underlines just how narrow are the geographical origins of ‘recognised’ or ‘legitimate’ sociological theory, both in their canonical and contemporary incarnations. Theory building appears to be the monopoly of the few, situated in elite universities of the Global North.

Important though her critique of the canon is, her sketch of ‘Southern theory’ is not without problems of its own. How feasible is an alternative Southern theory in the face of the unevenness of the distribution of resources – the concentration of the most lavishly funded universities and research establishments in the North, where working conditions are incomparably superior to anywhere else? As the more privileged nations in the South seek to develop their own ‘world-class’ universities, they reinforce existing global prestige hierarchies, channelling faculty publications into ‘world-class’ journals that are also generally located in the North and that publish in English, and thereby exacerbate the divide between centre and metropolis, both globally but, no less importantly, within countries. Poorer nations are increasingly dispensing with their own universities, and instead are sponsoring the training of their own scholars and experts abroad, i.e. usually in the North, or simply importing them from the North. Apart from anything else, the risk is that they will never return to their home countries. In the global division of knowledge production, can theory challenge and run ahead of the material conditions that it expresses? However tempting it may be, to opt out of this unequal world order is to risk invisibility, poverty and isolation, reproducing rather than challenging the selfsame hegemony.

To transcend the dominance of the North is a Sisyphean task, so we must avoid illusory solutions, the substitution of dream for reality. There is no easy escape from domination – that is the meaning of both hegemony and symbolic violence. So, even Connell’s chosen Southern theorists, if they were not trained in the North, spent a lot of time there. As post-colonial theory has insisted, between Global North and Global South, just as between metropolis and colony, there has always been a circulation of social theory. Thus, Bourdieu’s social theory is inspired by his experiences in Algeria and by his collaborations with Algerian intellectuals, just as many of the Indian subalternists got their degrees in the North, and, later, even settling into academic positions there, especially as their thinking became fashionable the world over. Furthermore, the distinction between North and South, or West and East, overlooks the underdeveloped regions within Northern academia, just as it overlooks the divide between centre and periphery within the South, especially within countries. The hierarchy of higher education in South Africa is but one example of the

increasing knowledge divide *within* countries, drawing elite sectors into a global conversation that is ever more divorced from the weight of massified higher education and from the population at large.

Moreover, divisions within regions and countries refer not just to status and resources, but also to the content of social theory itself, so that we can say that Northern theory contains multiple strands, many of which contest dominant tropes – Connell herself has made major contributions to feminist theory that challenges mainstream orthodoxy. Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu was very much the critical sociologist, attacking pillars of hegemonic thinking in France and elsewhere. In placing all Northern sociology in the same rubbish bin, Connell risks committing the very error of which she accuses Northern sociology, namely false generalisation. Equally, in the South, the field of sociology, like other academic fields, is a terrain of conflict, reflecting serious divisions within nations and within regions – terrains that Connell ignores as she plucks her chosen theorists out of their historical and political context.

While resurrecting Southern theorists demonstrates that the soil of Southern theory is not barren, Connell's focus on individuals leads her to overlook the truly distinctive bodies of social theory that have developed deep roots in the South, social theory that grounds the work of an institute like SWOP.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, SWOP's distinctiveness lies in the way it appropriated Northern theory – even the more conservative social theory associated with the functions of conflict – in order to deploy it against the apartheid state. Edward Webster, for example, spent a lifetime arguing that violence can only be constrained if institutions, such as trade unions, are created to channel grievances. Thus, apparently innocuous Western theory about the institutionalisation of conflict became, in the hands of South African sociologists, a radical challenge to apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the defence of such theories proved so subversive that the state would place Webster on trial. Others were assassinated for their adoption and dissemination of critical Western theories. When theories travel, as Edward Said noted long ago, their meaning can be transformed in a radical or conservative direction, depending not only on the theory, but also on the context of reception. Indeed, when Southern theories travel north they often lose their radical edge, becoming domesticated in the jaws of the metropolitan university. This suggests that the real battle is not *against* reigning hegemonies but *on the terrain* of these hegemonies, appropriating, reordering and reconstructing them in new contexts. The problem is not so much with Northern theory, but with what we do with it once it arrives in the South.

In this regard, the spread of Marxism – a mobile theory if ever there were one – is especially interesting. Just think of the role of Marxism in South Africa: how a century ago it became a vehicle of a white supremacist labour aristocracy and later the supporter of a 'Native Republic'. Then it developed theories of internal colonialism and of the relation between race and class, as well as original theories about the articulation of modes of production and the elaboration of the formation of dominant classes. There was always tension between the orthodoxy emanating from the Comintern and the demands of the South African situation, and it was this tension that gave rise to an original Marxism. Indeed, Marxism became a field of productive contestation not only within the South African Communist Party, but no less so outside, within the ranks of the black and white working class. To be sure, there has always been an orthodox Marxism-Leninism that mechanically applies Marxism to the South African context, a Marxism of ritual incantation that dispenses with the dynamic interaction of theory and practice. The present period, in particular, calls for novel theorising. Bringing Marxism into dialogue with sociology, not least with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, is intended as a contribution to the revitalisation of Marxism not just here in South Africa, but elsewhere too, just as the dialogue with Weber, Simmel, Freud and Croce earlier revitalised Western Marxism.

All of which is to underline the importance of the dialogic moment and to suggest that struggle can as well take place on the terrain of Northern hegemony as in overturning Northern hegemony. In the context of our conversations with Bourdieu, we recognise, therefore, a dual dialogue – with the Marxism from which Bourdieu's opus draws its meaning as a silent antagonist, but also with the material context of its reception. I have dwelt on the first, while Karl has dwelt on the second, even as we simultaneously created our own conversation.

As Bourdieu himself insists, theories position themselves in relation to other theories within the same 'field'. So I have tried to elucidate a particular lens on Bourdieu by bringing his writings into dialogue with Marxism, especially the Marxisms that engage the three central pillars of Bourdieu's work, i.e. symbolic domination, social reflexivity and public engagement. Bourdieu and Marxism clash most fundamentally over their divergent understandings of domination and the possibility of the dominated recognising and contesting their subjugation. Notwithstanding internal inconsistencies, in the final analysis, for Bourdieu, cultural domination is deeper than it is for Marxism. The former denies the possibility of the working class achieving an understanding of its subjugation,

let alone acting on its imperative. This has consequences for divergent understandings of the intellectual: in Marxism, intellectuals do not themselves form a class, but are the allies of classes, whose class consciousness they foster, whereas for Bourdieu, intellectuals are best viewed as universalising their own interests in reason.

My conversations between Marxism and Bourdieu set the stage for Karl's adjudication of the two bodies of theory as applied to South Africa. Instead of seeking an alternative Southern sociology, Karl's approach is to critically engage Marxism and Bourdieu on the terrain of South Africa. He challenges Bourdieu with the lived realities of South Africa, problematising what he takes for granted – assumptions that then also reverberate back into a critique of Bourdieu's understanding of France. As Karl says, ostensibly Bourdieu's concern with social order cemented through symbolic violence sits uneasily with a society like South Africa. There is not the stable symbolic order that Bourdieu claims for France; rather, we have a society in which the symbolic order is in perpetual crisis. But it is in crisis not only because different fractions of the dominant class are fighting for supremacy within the field of power (Bourdieu), but also because there are insurgent symbolic orders emanating from below. Karl describes the culture of resistance in townships, where many residents see all too little difference from the old apartheid order and so turn the old rituals, songs, dances that were so effective in the previous era against the new administration. Nor does the state have a monopoly of legitimate means of symbolic violence, as Bourdieu presumes. Karl shows only too clearly how the state crumbles from within as it becomes an arena of struggle between proponents of racial justice, on the one hand, and bureaucratic and professional expertise, on the other. While Bourdieu makes much of the idea of classification struggle, he rarely gives the notion any empirical support. For that he would have needed to come to South Africa or some such country undergoing transformation. Karl gives flesh and bones to the notion of classification struggle.

The continuity of social order, at the heart of Bourdieu's theory, presumes a dovetailing of habitus and structure, which is difficult to make sense of in a country like South Africa that has undergone such an upheaval in the last 30 years. Indeed, observing insurgencies from below, Karl asks whether apartheid inculcated a *habitus of defiance* as much as a habitus of submission – a habitus that still flourishes in the New South Africa. Here Karl finds more useful the Marxist analysis of dual consciousness found in Freire, Fanon and Gramsci, where domination creates competition between an inner authentic self and an outer inauthentic

self, or between Gramsci's good sense and his bad sense deriving from ideology. In combing Bourdieu's culminating theoretical work, *Pascalian Meditations*, for a habitus of the dominated that produces not shame and humiliation, but defiance and rebellion, Karl finds very little. The concept of habitus may be necessary, but it has to be revamped if it is to explain the abiding struggles of the South African working class. The Arab uprisings of 2011 give ample support to the idea of a habitus of defiance, a habitus that today seems to spread with astonishing speed.

In South Africa, where physical violence is so commonplace, how can one justify the Bourdieusian focus on symbolic violence? Here Karl makes a brilliant move, informed by his research, which insists on examining the *interdependence* of symbolic and physical violence. He shows how displays of symbolic domination by new elites inspire township residents to react with physical violence. Perhaps even more than under apartheid, residents show their displeasure by burning down symbols of their new-found dispossession – libraries without books, clinics without medicine, community centres without communities. Their rage is uncontrollable as they confront a new order that violates their hopes and their sense of justice. In other words, physical violence is necessarily bound up with symbolic violence. Such eruptions – simultaneously physical and symbolic – easily spread to other localities, regions or even countries as the life of the dominated becomes more precarious in both North and South, as wage labour shrinks so that being exploited becomes a privilege of the few, and as the majority not only become, but also recognise themselves as, 'the wretched of the earth'.

Karl pursues this linkage of the physical and symbolic into the realm of masculinity, pointing to the existence of a progressive constitution and a wide array of laws protecting women, alongside pervasive brutal male physical violence. Indeed, it seems that when the symbolic domination of earlier patriarchal orders is threatened – for example, when they no longer command access to material resources – men often resort to physical violence. Again, this calls into question Bourdieu's presumption that symbolic violence works smoothly without leading or having recourse to physical violence. When the symbolic world is in crisis, physical violence all too easily fills the vacuum. Democratisation can unleash physical violence when it closes rather than opens institutional channels for self-expression and grievances – when it dashes the very hopes it nurtures.

At the heart of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination lies education. Here again Karl tries to work with and against Bourdieu. Thus, in his critique of Freire and in his endorsement of Gramsci, Karl insists that

effective education requires more than symbolic violence, but a structural violence – an ongoing discipline of the body as well as the mind, a discipline that is necessary for the development of a critical consciousness. Bourdieu not only sees no alternative to conventional education – the inculcation of legitimate culture – but, even more bleakly, he cannot conceive of education as a realm of meaningful contestation. By contrast, drawing on the example of missionary education, Karl shows how legitimate culture can be turned against the domination it purportedly serves. Many of the leaders of the liberation movement, not least Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, learned how to turn legitimate culture to their own advantage and in this way furthered the struggles against apartheid. When the apartheid regime replaced missionary education with Bantu education, it liquidated those opportunities and fomented violent student revolt, as in Soweto in 1976. If education fosters symbolic domination, it can also foster rebellion against that domination. If it can happen in South Africa, it can happen in France.

Extending his examination of education to the tertiary level, Karl takes up the second pillar of Bourdieu's edifice, namely reflexivity, i.e. the importance of examining the conditions of the production of knowledge. Here, Karl notes the continuing domination in South Africa of white academics who have an interest, not necessarily conscious, in their domination through the continuing supremacy of Western canonical thinking. Karl warns that they may be in for a shock as students begin to challenge the hegemony of Western thought, and this will be all to the good, so long as dialogue continues to be possible. We had better sharpen our critical tools when reconstructing Northern theory if sociologists are not going to become irrelevant.

Equally, Karl interrogates Bourdieu's conception of the public sociologist as someone who pursues the Realpolitik of reason, engaging in rational, enlightened discourse in some public sphere. Bourdieu clings to the potential of such discourse as denaturalising and defatalising the taken-for-granted, 'spontaneous sociology' of the people. His commitment to the progressive rationality of reason is not deterred by the imperialism of reason – reason deployed to both mystify and advance the interests of the dominant. Bourdieu wants to have his cake and eat it too – for him, reason is both emancipatory and justificatory. He is able to hold on to this contradictory position because his conception of public sociology is a traditional one – one that does not engage pre-existing conversations, that does not engage discourses that are firmly held by partisan publics. This is consistent with Bourdieu's separation of the logic of theory from

the logic of practice, but it leaves the sociologist in the stratosphere. Karl argues that by standing aloof from their constituencies, public sociologists or public intellectuals condemn themselves to irrelevance. If they are to communicate, public sociologists have to take seriously existing political currents and their carriers, and also learn to compete with other voices in the public sphere. South African academics learned this lesson early on – they had a choice to be in direct conversation with various publics and compromise their independence or defend their independence by retreating behind academic walls, where they might nonetheless educate the organic intellectuals of tomorrow. There is a place for both traditional and organic public sociologies – indeed, they have to be interdependent, as Karl suggests.

Here, indeed, we might take Karl's insistence on dialogue between theory and practice even further. We have noted time and again the gap between Bourdieu's theory and his practice: how he warns others against direct engagement with publics, yet frequently does just that himself; how he recognises the role of culture in symbolic domination and in establishing distinction, but nonetheless vigorously defends that same culture against the market; how his call for reflexivity leads him to deploy it against others by reducing them to their position in an intellectual space, but refuses to analyse his own position as a source of his own sociology. Theory and practice never come together – they are always out of kilter, the one outpacing the other – but this is no reason not to place them in dialogue. Even if one believes, as Bourdieu does, that there should be an epistemological break between the two, this is still no justification for not attempting a conversation of mutual enlightenment, as he did in *The Weight of the World*.

Indeed, Bourdieu's separation of the logic of theory and the logic of practice places the theorist above the people being theorised. In bringing Bourdieu to South Africa, we are making him earn his distinction, forcing him to restore the connection of theory to practice. By putting him into conversation with both Marxist theories and South Africa's social reality, we are unsettling his foundations, while pointing, perhaps, to rebuilding his edifice. Just as Bourdieu's first visit to Africa turned a philosopher into a sociologist, we now have to see how his imaginary passage to Africa – this time to South Africa, not Algeria – will transform his writings, and what visions will be sent back to the metropolis. But we will see, first, whether he can survive the journey, whether he can flourish in the southern tip of Africa as he did on its northern coast. There is no meaningful Northern theory insulated from Southern theory,

but only theory that circulates between North and South – and the best critical theory transforms itself as it traverses the globe, turning itself against itself.

#### NOTES

- 1 Society, Work and Development Institute at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, which has a history of engaged social research going back to 1983. Edward Webster was its founder and longtime director.

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